The role of e-tutors in the e-learning training paths: the experience of the Italian Revenue Agency

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A great number of studies and researches shows how crucial the role of tutors in the e-learning formative paths is to ensure both the obtainment of the formative objectives and the limitation of the dropout rate.
But what strategy should an enterprise or authority adopt to select, train and support the tutors in order to allow them to exercise their assigned role?
A potential answer is found by analyzing the experience of the Italian Revenue Agency, gathered in collaboration with CATTID-LABeL of the Sapienza University of Rome, which was aimed at introducing e-learning in the formative offering addressed to its employees.

1 Introduction

Since 2000 Gilly Salmon, based on research on the Open University, has highlighted the importance of e-learning tutors in promoting the success of e-learning formative paths and learners' satisfaction; these facts call, in Salmon's point of view, for the need to "place the e-moderating roles firmly and significantly into the online learning environment" (Salmon, 2000).

In her work the author makes a distinction between the subject matter expert, who is in charge of preparing formative contents, and the e-tutor who, even with a basic knowledge of the subject, is mainly in charge of supporting and motivating learners, as well as tracking their activities. From the author's point of view, e-tutor's characteristics and competencies should include: knowledge of the distance interaction dynamics and of online communication; technical competencies; basic understanding of the subject. The need for this knowledge and these characteristics is widely confirmed by the majority of successive researches.

The learners' feel for the quality of the learning experience is strongly influenced by the tutor's activities as well. Insung Jung (Jung, 2010) highlights the fact that, in evaluating the quality level of an e-learning path, the support activities addressed to learners and staff personnel and the interactions between learners, tutors and teachers are both matters of the greatest importance. The active role of the tutor as a facilitator and moderator is, in both cases, the key to success.

According to a European research (Ehlers, 2004), which pinpoints the seven key-factors in the delivery of e-learning courses, the support provided by e-learning tutors comes in first place.

The research is based on data gathered with both quantitative and qualitative techniques and has investigated thirty dimensions that represent the perception of an e-learning course's quality from the learners' point of view. The interviewed users have been divided into four typologies: the individualists, the focused on results, the pragmatics, and the technologists. The research emphasizes how learners from all the groups, in percentages varying from 74,4% to 97,7%, consider as "important" or "very important" the e-tutor support activities.

The importance of the e-tutor's role in company training is also underlined by the "Learning while working" research (Cedefop, 2011), which stresses the importance of the guidance activities throughout the formative path, as well as learners' motivation and adaptation of the formative path to the needs and expectations of the single user. The guidelines of DigitPA (ex Cnipa) also stress the importance of the e-tutor and e-facilitator, especially in a situation of collaborative learning and, in general, in animating learning communities and in content or technical support to learners (Cnipa, 2007).

2 Features, competencies and tasks of e-tutors

Depending on the carried out functions and on the competencies possessed, the e-tutor can be considered an e-facilitator or a subject expert e-tutor.

The former is one who assists and supports users in the usage of technological instruments and formative material, monitors their whole formative path, sustains their motivation and tracks the fruition of the materials, thus representing the first reference point for the single learner and/or for the classroom.

The latter is a subject matter expert who is in charge of answering learners' questions about the course's content.

Therefore, the e-tutor's role appears to be really complex and multi-faceted, including the functions of:
- moderator and promoter of discussions between users in the forum;
- facilitator of the formative path, especially from the point of view of time management and support of the learner's motivation;
- technical helpdesk, which enables users to exploit the instruments at their disposal, getting over difficulties in their usage;
- middleman between teachers and learners.

E-tutors' competencies are also useful in the evaluation of the formative path and in assessment.

In order to be suitable for the described role, a tutor must have technical knowledge (helpdesk, LMS and electronic communication instruments), course designer competencies, and be able to moderate and promote communication and interaction through the net (Rotta & Ranieri, 2005); moreover, the tutor should be capable of monitoring course progress, the degree of goal attainment, as well as users' satisfaction.

The e-tutor should also have specific socio-communicative skills in the fields of teaching-learning, meta-cognitive work, conflict management and leadership (Rivoltella, 2006).

Such competencies correspond to the requested requisites for achieving CEPAS' professional quality certification, which allows to be admitted to the tutor register.

According to CEPAS' specifications, the e-tutor must be a subject "acknowledged with professional experience of process management, obtained with continuous work within authorities and/or training societies", in the fields of online teaching, learning and supporting (CEPAS, 2004).

The acknowledgement of the complexity and richness of e-tutor's role also comes from the Italian Trainers Association, which, within the process of training figures certification, identifies four distinct profiles: basic e-tutor; subject matter expert e-tutor; didactic management e-tutor; community management

e-tutor.

Based on such considerations, the Italian Revenue Agency decided to saddle tutors with a role of the greatest importance in its e-learning and blended-learning training offer. Subsequently, we will describe the adopted tutoring model and the achieved results during both the first pilot course "Automatic Inspection of Tax Returns", delivered in 2010, and its second edition delivered in 2011.

3 The Italian Revenue Agency experience

In 2009 the Italian Revenue Agency started to test the introduction of e-learning courses in its in-house formative offer. The didactic model and production process have been defined and refined in collaboration with LABeL-CATTID of the Sapienza University of Rome, a research center active in the design and evaluation of e-learning and blended-learning training courses and their didactic systems.

For the pilot experience the "Automatic Inspection of Tax Returns" course has been selected for re-designing; in previous years the face-to-face version of the course was addressed to approximately 150 learners per edition.

The delivery of the pilot course involved 52 classes for a total of over 1700 learners distributed throughout the entire national territory. Learners have attended the course through the Docent e-learning platform, managed by Sogei S.p.A. within the ASP (Application Service Provider) service that Sogei runs for the Financial Administration.

In order to ensure a constant monitoring of the formative progress of the learners and to provide a personalized, effective organizational and methodological support, the in-house Communication and Training Department selected and trained 33 e-tutors.

3.1 The choice of the e-tutors and their assigned role

The selection of the e-tutors for the pilot course took place from the Revenue Agency personnel, who had already worked in the training area. This permitted to rely on people with experience in both typical Financial Administration organizational dynamics and formative paths dynamics. Taking into account the fact that the Revenue Agency is spread throughout the entire territory, the e-tutors were graded in all the Regional Offices.

The decision to rely on training process expert (but not subject matter expert) e-tutors depends on the need to have at disposal professional figures with specific competencies on training dynamics, capable of monitoring and facilitating the e-learning formative path, in coherence with the needs of the single learners. Moreover, the articulated, complex and specialized work processes

in which the Agency personnel is involved would have required e-tutors with specific subject expertise for each training course; this would have made building up a stable group of e-tutors able to grow together through comparison and experience sharing really difficult or impossible.

However, subject matter experts have been involved in supporting e-tutors in the resolution of content-related issues highlighted by users in the forums as well as teachers of the virtual classrooms of the training course.

The high level of professionalism showed by the e-tutors and their position in the Agency allowed to saddle them with broader and varied tasks when compared to the ones generally assigned to e-tutors, including an active role of sponsorship toward the executives of their own Regional Offices, in order to support the understanding and diffusion of e-learning in the company training offering.

E-tutors also provided a central contribution in the evaluation and assessment phases for both the editions of the "Automatic Inspection of Tax Returns" training course, submitting the semi-structured survey to the learners of the classes entrusted to them.

The sample of users interviewed consisted of 35 individuals for the first edition and 53 for the second, selected as representatives of the whole group of enrolled users.

The interviews took place by telephone or in person, lasting about 15/20 minutes each.

The survey conducted after the first edition highlighted the following strengths:

- the course content, which resulted to be immediately applicable on the job and easy to understand;
- the didactic model, for the flexibility it ensured to the formative path;
- the adopted graphic solution, which resulted to be pleasant for the users and challenging from the learning point of view;
- the opportunity to exchange experiences with other colleagues through the discussion forum;
- the support provided by the e-tutors.

The main criticalities, instead, resulted to be of organizational and logistic nature, most notably related to the difficulty of accommodating the training with the job activity.

In order to face the criticalities and capitalize upon the strengths highlighted by the learners, the second edition was redesigned to:

- reduce the duration of the single self-learning didactic units, so that the learners could better find adequate time for training;

- increase the number of comparison and collaboration opportunities, introducing exercises to be executed in the classroom forum;
- provide printable versions of the didactic materials, available at the end of the unit; these printable versions highlight the most important contents of the course, representing useful support instruments during the actual job time.

The experience of the e-tutors during the first edition was of vital importance to appropriately communicate to learners the changes made to the didactic model and to monitor its efficacy during the delivery phase, providing support and stimulating participation to the collaborative activities.

The satisfaction survey conducted after the second edition, while confirming the strengths highlighted after the first edition, also highlighted the appreciation for the changes made, particularly referring to the increase of comparison opportunities; the survey also emphasized the positive feel towards the tutor's role in facilitating the adaption of the training path to the workload of the single learners.

3.2 Training activities addressed towards e-tutors

Before starting the delivery of the pilot course the e-tutors were involved in a training path, planned and refined by the in-house Communication and Training Department together with LABeL-CATTID, in which the objectives, procedures, instruments and timings of tutors' activities were clarified and shared.

The first purpose of the training path was to explain the multi-faceted role of e-tutors within the Revenue Agency training courses:

- motivational, to assist learners with becoming autonomous in the organization of their training course, to encourage them in overcoming difficulties and to recognize personal achievements;
- orientation, to clarify course goals and to help correlate training with their working activities;
- technological support, to explain the platform and its tools (forum, virtual classroom, etc.) in clear and simple terms to users;
- liaison between learners and subject matter experts, to facilitate in-depth examination of specific topics, clarify doubts regarding course content, or suggest personalized learning approaches suitable for specific users' needs;
- communication, to facilitate exchanges and knowledge-sharing among users.

A lot of time was also dedicated to introduce the teaching approach, fo-
cusing on the specificities of the delivery method, on the course content and
organization of the pilot.

A series of instruments were made available to e-tutors to support their
activity: an agenda that shows the main activities to be performed, models for
treatment and analysis of the reporting data, examples of standard messages to
be customized and used in specific moments of the training path, a text version
of the course content and the solutions for the self assessment tests.

Lastly, the e-learning platform was presented, allowing e-tutors to get accu-
stomed, through practical exercises, with its functions and instruments.

3.3 The e-learning tutor community and "on the journey" support

After this initial training session, tutors were provided (through the LMS)
with a virtual communication and cooperation area, the e-learning tutor com-
munity, which included a dedicated forum and a sharing area for reference
material.

Throughout the whole course, the e-tutors used the community to share
problem-solving approaches for common problems, discuss opinions and sug-
gestions, share work documents and, in many cases, find common behaviors
and class management, thus creating a standardization of behaviors.

The Communications & Training Department, which coordinated the com-
munity's activities, was also actively involved in the community by clarifying
doubts, providing operating information, publishing reference materials and
sharing the results of the ongoing monitoring.

Moreover, the community represented a place for exchange that allowed e-
tutors, thanks to the mutual support, to get through the feeling of isolation and
to discuss positive experiences (as well as criticalities) related to both design
and organization of the course and the tutor's role.

The discussions regarding the training path and the e-tutors' activities allo-
wed for the gathering of experience, awareness and competencies that represent
the basis for future e-learning initiatives within the Revenue Agency.

The tutor community was quite active and lively throughout the whole
course, but also during the subsequent period of gathering and analyzing eva-
luation data: more than 700 messages were posted on the forum.

By way of further tutor support, numerous virtual classroom sessions were
organized by the in-house Communications & Training Department in order to
monitor progress of the pilot course, analyze nationwide attendance data, and
share problem-solving approaches for common problems.

3.4 The evolution of the e-learning tutor community

The e-tutors who attended the first edition of the "Automatic Inspection of Tax Returns" training course recognized that, even with the obvious difficulties in approaching a completely new activity, being a member of a group that grows through sharing and exchange, represented an important propulsion for their professional growth.

These comparison and peer sharing dynamics are the starting point of various initiatives started by the Communications & Training Department to support the development of the e-learning tutor community.

More specifically, in order to exploit the rich know-how acquired by the e-tutors in the didactic field, various sessions of peer teaching will be planned throughout 2012: in these sessions the e-tutors will hold seminars addressed to the whole community through virtual classrooms. The contents of these seminars will be suggested by each e-tutor and agreed with the in-house Communication and Training Department. Moreover these contents will be part of a broader training program aimed at increasing both the efficacy and professionalism of the support provided to learners by the e-tutors and the range of activities in which the e-tutors could be involved in the future.

Conclusions

The "Automatic Inspection of Tax Returns" training program, in both its pilot edition delivered in 2010 and its second edition in 2011, surpassed 80% of enrolled users who completed the course.

The attendees expressed, through the user satisfaction survey, positive opinions about the constant support during their training, thus confirming the effectiveness of the design choices made while pinpointing the e-tutor's role.

This is the reason why the Revenue Agency has chosen to confirm the key role of tutors for all the e-learning training paths planned for 2012 and has also chosen to further invest in training initiatives addressed to the e-learning tutor community in order to increase the qualification and efficiency of the support provided by the e-tutors within the courses delivered to the Agency's personnel.

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