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Why do Learners Withdraw from the Online
National Certificate in First Line Management
Course?

Michael Winter

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Ultralab South
PO Box 13678
Christchurch

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Abstract

The present report summarises reasons given by public sector employees for their withdrawal from the online programme leading to the National Certificate in First Line Management. Findings are discussed in the light of literature reports. Some suggestions are made which could lead to lower withdrawal rates in future.

Executive Summary

The online pilot programme leading to the National Certificate in First Line Management, which is produced and run by the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand in conjunction with the Public Sector Training Organisation, has suffered from a lower level of enrolments and a higher learner withdrawal rate than anticipated. The programme started in August 2004. 89 learners enrolled compared to a target of 120, and 22 had withdrawn by early November.

Learners who withdrew from the course came from many of the organisations which were involved. However most were from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The most common reason contributing to learner withdrawal was time pressure within the workplace. Other reasons included inappropriateness of the course, technical and learning management system problems, aspects of course design and change of individual work circumstances.

A survey of the literature showed that these issues are frequently encountered in online workplace learning initiatives, along with personal and cultural factors. Literature findings and consideration of the present data led to the following suggestions for improvement to enhance retention in the future:

- Ensuring that learners receive accurate information about the course, and the time, effort and commitment needed to complete it successfully
- Clear communication to learners of infrastructure required to access the course at home
- Effective technical support
- Assessment of learner readiness for e-learning in terms of computer skills and provision of training to remedy inadequacies
- Helping learners to develop their independent learning skills
- Compulsory face to face introductory and component course workshops
- Setting up learner groups based on workplaces
- Working closely with managers to ensure effective learner support
- Ensure that the first course is sufficiently challenging and relevant to engage learners and to indicate the general level of the programme.

Introduction

The present programme leading to the National Certificate in First Line Management is a pilot initiative funded by the e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund. It is designed to support the development of skills of junior managers in public sector organisations, and is run by the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand (a cooperative group of Polytechnics) and the Public Sector Training Organisation. Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology is the tertiary institution developing the programme.

The training, which is mainly online, also includes complementary face-to-face workshops, and is scheduled to take 18 months to complete. Participants in the programme are drawn from a range of public sector organisations, including the Departments of Corrections, Internal Affairs, the Fire Service and from Local Government. The design and execution of the programme draws on the lessons learned during the delivery of a similar programme to Meat Inspector Supervisors during 2003-2004. (Winter 2004)

The original target for the number of learners for the present programme was set at around 120 learners. The number of learners who eventually enrolled in the programme was 89 (CPIT 2004a). However, by early November 2004, 22 learners had withdrawn from the programme, (CPIT 2004b) and a considerable number of the remaining learners had not taken an active part in the programme, or had fallen behind in completing assignments. At least one of the inactive learners has since withdrawn.

The high level of withdrawals is a cause for concern to the programme organisers. In order to gain some insight into reasons for learner withdrawals, the author was asked to carry out a brief investigation as part of his evaluation research into the online NCFLM project. As a result of his findings, the author will make suggestions which may result in reduced levels of withdrawal in future programmes.

Several authors have written about dropout rates from e-learning courses. The literature has been reviewed by Rossett and Schafer (2003), and by Frankola (2001a). Rossett and Schafer quote statistics of only 69% commencing mandatory online courses and 32% starting those that were voluntary. They also give figures indicating a 25% completion rate of online study courses. Frankola (2001b) has published tips for increasing e-learning completion rates. Some of the reasons given by her for high dropout rates are:

- Students don't have enough time
- Lack of management oversight
- Lack of motivation
- Problems with technology
- Lack of student support
- Individual learning preferences
- Poorly designed course
- Substandard/inexperienced instructors

It is of interest to investigate whether the same reasons are given by learners in the present study.

Methodology and Data Sources

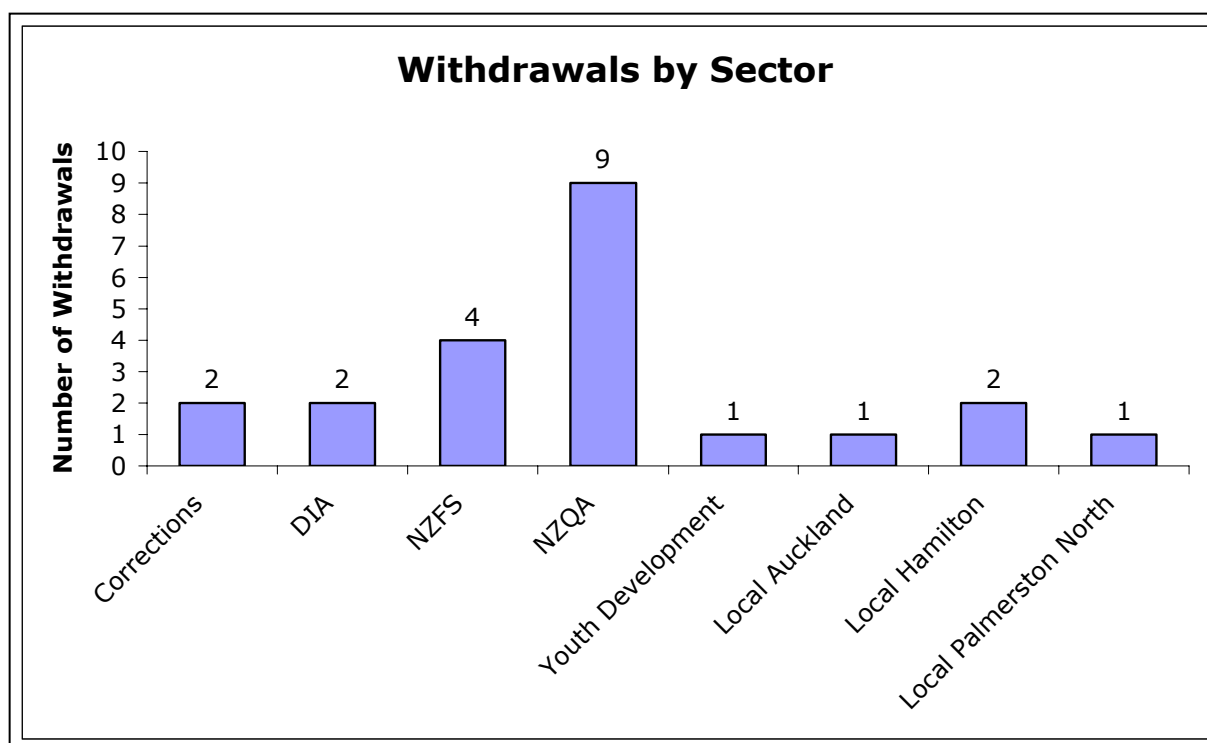
The methodology is that of a limited case study. Data sources include relevant documents provided by staff of Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology and the Public Sector Training Organisation, e-mail transcripts, transcripts of phone interviews carried out with learners, and data collected from a learner entry questionnaire carried out at the beginning of the programme.

Findings

Numbers of Withdrawals Across Sectors

At the beginning of November, the total number of withdrawals numbered 22 – or close to 25% of those enrolling. They were distributed over a wide range of organisations (Figure 1). Since this data was collected, the author is aware of at least one other learner from a local government organisation who has withdrawn.

Figure 1 Learner Withdrawals by Sector November 2004



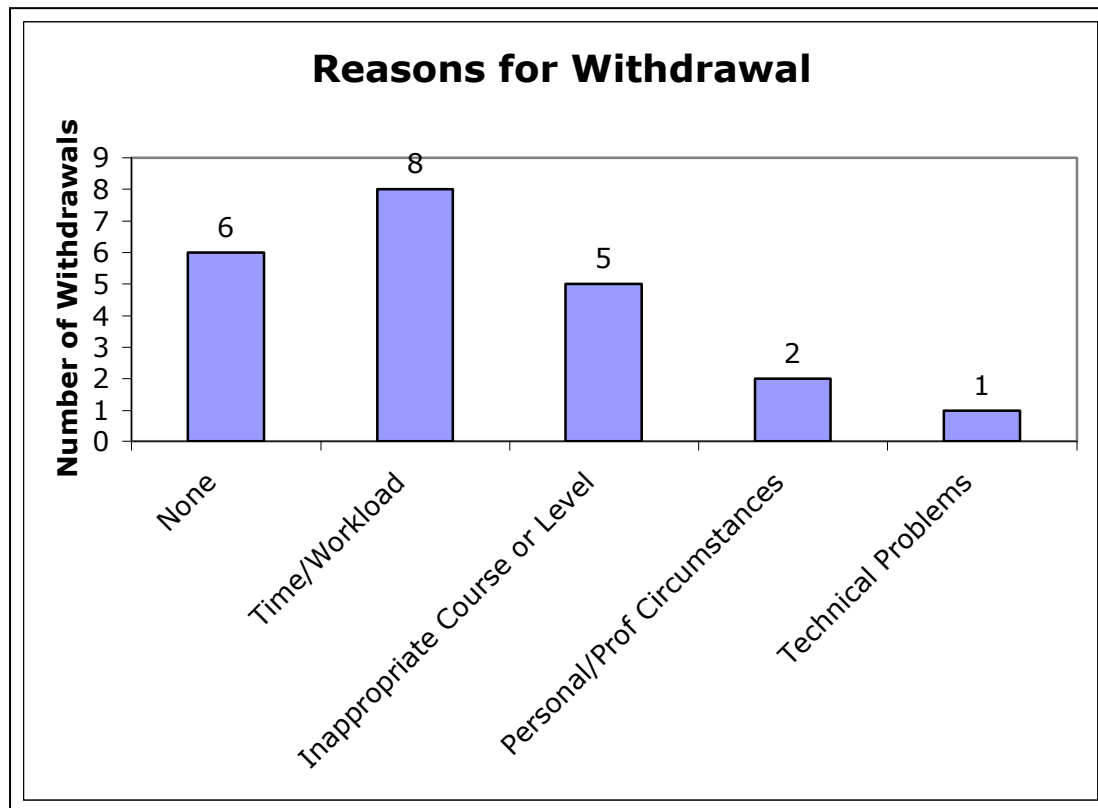
It is clear that withdrawals have occurred across a wide range of organisations. NZQA has by far the highest number of withdrawals.

Reasons Given for Withdrawal on Notification of Withdrawal

Learners notified the programme administrators of their decision to withdraw by e-mail. In several cases they gave reasons for their withdrawal. These reasons are summarised in Figure 2.

The most common reason given by learners were related to time and workload issues. The first course in the programme covered time management, and it is interesting to speculate whether involvement in this course helped learners wake up to the fact that they could not realistically fit the programme into their busy schedules. The second most common reason related to perceived inappropriateness of programme content. It appears that one person who wrote *'I know nothing about this – can you please clarify for me?'* was enrolled by her ITO in the wrong programme!

Figure 2 Reasons Given by Learners on Notification of Withdrawal



Attrition of NZQA Participants

As a result of concern regarding the high withdrawal rates amongst NZQA staff (nine withdrawals out of 20 enrolled – 45% of the total), a meeting was set up on 11 November 2004 between NZQA, the PSTO training advisor and one of the tutors to discuss the reason for this attrition. Notes on this meeting were forwarded to the author by the PSTO training advisor. (Cudby (2004)) Three relevant points emerged from this meeting:

- ‘Workload peaks and troughs vary greatly between business units within NZQA making it difficult to meet course deadlines at specific times of the year’
- ‘Some participants have already had considerable training and experience in the role of FLM and as such would have been better suited to a RCC (Recognition of Current Competency) type process. One expressed a reluctance to invest time in the Blackboard activities as she felt with her experience she would not gain much’
- ‘Distribution of the workgroups was not helpful – it would have been better if all NZQA people were in the same workgroup then they could support each other’

Data Obtained by Phone Interview of Withdrawn Learners and by Direct e-Mail Communication

Phone interviews were carried out in December 2004 with three people who had withdrawn from the programme in early November. These people represented NZQA, the Fire Service and a Local Government organisation. Another member of a Local Government organisation who had been inactive for some time was also interviewed. He said that he too had withdrawn from the programme.

After the interviewer had established that the interviewee had indeed withdrawn from the programme, he asked why the person had withdrawn, and focused on time/workload, course appropriateness, infrastructural and other issues. Focus questions for the interviews are given in Appendix 1. Changes in circumstances tended to emerge early in the interviews.

A fifth person, who was a member of the Department of Corrections, was unwilling to be interviewed. However, he did e-mail his reasons for withdrawing. The reasons contributing to these five persons' decision to withdraw from the programme are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Interviewee and e-Mail Respondent Reasons Contributing to Withdrawal

Reason	Number of Responses
Time Factors	4
Infrastructure Issues	3
Learning Management System Issues	3
Aspects of programme Design	2
Change of Individual Work Circumstances	2
Other	2

The most common factor contributing to withdrawal was related to time. Two of the people who mentioned time had recently had changes in their employment situations. They found that the requirement to adapt to their new situations left them insufficient time for the programme. One of these respondents reported that she felt misinformed by her sector's HR department about the time needed for the programme. She had been told that she could do it in *'half the time'* recommended for the programme, because it *'was only a level 4 course.'*

Another respondent mentioned problems with the Blackboard learning management system. He found difficulty printing off material, saying that each page had to be printed separately, and that he did not have the time to go through the process. The fourth respondent reported excessive pressure from other aspects of his work, having *'17 other projects.'* This person also had problems navigating the Blackboard site, and compared the experience unfavourably with other online learning experiences he had in the past. He thought that e-mails giving information designed to help navigation should have been available before the material to which it referred was posted on the site. One other respondent found the online material confusing, especially the instructions as to how to proceed.

Two respondents, coming from very different sectors, had difficulties with the way the work groups and discussion forum were designed. One of them found her work group did not function because of lack of involvement of some members: *'if your work group isn't on to it, it's pointless.'* The other did not appreciate being put into a work group with people from other sectors: *'I thought it didn't make sense to hook us into groups without considering it might have been helpful if (those of us at this site) could have worked together rather than on a notice board with people we didn't know.'* This person also *'didn't like the format of the message board system, at my age it is difficult to understand.'*

Computer issues were reported by two people. One had difficulty with his home computer which *'would not download the program which made things a little tricky.'* The other reported that the computers at his workplace were not the most up to date and were quite slow.

Three respondents commented positively about the programme content, and would be willing to start the programme again when the factors causing them to withdraw had been resolved. However, one person thought the programme had been oversold, saying that there had been a large number of enthusiastic participants at her former workplace who had been sold the programme as free and valuable. She thought that there would have been a large number of dropouts amongst her former colleagues. The person who responded by e-mail was clear about his experience: *'to be honest this was my first attempt at education, and if this is the way of the future to be honest I will stay dumb'*

Discussion/Conclusions

Time constraints were common factors reported by interviewees in the present study, in withdrawal e-mails and during discussion with staff at NZQA. They were also the most common reasons reported by Frankola (2001a) in her review of the literature. This paper also highlights lack of managerial oversight and lack of motivation as two factors in learner withdrawal. These factors were not directly addressed in the present study, although managerial support in terms of making time available for e-learning, encouragement, rewarding success, and providing a dedicated e-learning environment have been suggested in other studies to support learner success. (e.g. Rossett and Schafer (2003))

The second most common factor reported in the withdrawal e-mails was inappropriateness of the programme. Three of the five learners mentioning that the programme was inappropriate were employed by NZQA. This is consistent with the comment on the meeting with NZQA staff that some of the participants had *'already received considerable training and experience in the role of FLM and... would have been better suited by a RCC type process.'* An interview with a learner who had persisted with the programme revealed that she perceived the first constituent course, time management, as containing little of value to her, but subsequent courses being more challenging. Most of the withdrawing learners dropped out early, and probably based their judgement of inappropriate level on their experience of the time management course alone. In any event this seems to reflect participants' receiving inappropriate prior information about the programme. This conclusion is borne out by one of the individual interviews.

There is some evidence that the programme may have been oversold to some learners. Comments that learners should be able to complete it in half the time because it is only a level four course trivialise the programme, and leaves students unprepared for the time and effort required for success.

Interviewees reported problems with aspects of the programme structure and/or with the Blackboard system. The difficulties in printing out material have been resolved, and issues of workgroup composition addressed by restructuring the workgroups for the second and subsequent courses. However, the new workgroup structure does not necessarily place all learners from a given workplace in the same group.

Some learners in the present study commented on technical issues. Problems with technology have been mentioned by other authors including Frankola (2004a) and Lawless and Allen (2004). These latter authors reported that technical problems were mainly at the user end. They also commented that students' lack of skills with the software can create learner anxiety. Many reports suggest ways of helping learners when they encounter technical problems. These include a call centre approach, and the provision of course managers who can handle technical issues. (Hitch L and MacBrayne P (2004), Frankola (2004a)) The latter paper reports that '*it doesn't work for instructors to do this kind of handholding because they want to get to content.*' In addition, Stewart (2004) has commented on problems encountered by learners who were online out of office hours when no technical support was available.

Rossett and Schafer (2003), in their article *What can we do about e-Dropouts* focus separately on e-learning and e-learners devoted to e-learner success. The factors involved in designing learning programmes include providing meaningful, tailored content which includes opportunities for action. Experiences need to be tailored for learner success. Successful online experiences also '*touch the heart.*' The authors discuss providing content which meet the priorities of users '*not the passions of subject matter experts.*' Opportunities for action which the authors mention include seeking, trying, deciding, comparing and communing. It is interesting to note that the authors go beyond asynchronous discussion forums in the range of ways learners may commune. In order for experiences to be structured for success, learners need to be kept away from situations where their confidence will be dashed – both as regards content and ease of use of the interface. The authors also describe ways of engaging learners' minds and hearts. Some of these involve communicating why the learning is important, making the experience authentic and relevant to the learners' experience, and ensuring that the learner can access information and support when back on the job.

Rossett and Schafer (2003) also suggest ways that the e-learner can help themselves take advantage of e-learning. It is suggested that e-learners should consider whether they are able and willing to undertake e-learning, whether they are happy to try new approaches, how honest they are with themselves, whether they are willing to take responsibility for their own learning and whether they can anticipate problems they might encounter. The authors also suggest that learners will benefit from talking to management about online learning. They could clarify what relationship there is between the course, career and work group goals, the level of support, including time, what alternatives there are, and whether there are others in the organisation who have previously succeeded in e-learning.

Frankola's *Tips for Increasing e-Learning Completion Rates* (2004b) emphasises the need to develop an organisational culture that takes online learning as seriously as classroom teaching. She provides suggestions for achieving this, including holding managers accountable for learner success, managers acting as role models by taking the courses, providing formal rewards for achievement and tracking employee performance on courses. These suggestions boil down to providing clear and effective managerial support for online learning.

Several of the issues emerging from the data considered in this report have already been addressed in the design of the second and subsequent courses in the programme. These include efforts to employ the learning management system in a more user friendly way, for example by making it easier to print out course material; and reorganising the composition of discussion forum work groups. However, as mentioned above, the work group reorganisation did not include ensuring that groups included learners from the same site. It will be interesting to discover learners' responses to these changes.

Other changes could be made to improve learner retention for the remainder of the course, and in future presentations of the programme. These include:

- Ensuring that learners receive accurate information about the course and the time and effort commitment needed to complete it successfully
- Clear communication to learners of the infrastructure required to access the course at home
- Effective technical support
- Assessment of learner readiness for e-learning in terms of computer skills and provision of training to remedy inadequacies
- Helping learners to develop their independent learning skills
- Compulsory face to face introductory and component course workshops
- Setting up learner groups based on workplaces
- Working closely with managers to ensure effective learner support
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Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Focus Questions

Note – These questions form part of a wider interview of learners. A ‘withdrawn’ response to the first question of this interview leads to the second question and sub questions below.

1. How are you getting on with the NCFLM course?

2. Withdrawn			
Would you mind telling me the reason you withdrew?			
Time	Wrong Level	Infrastructure	Other
Could you elaborate on that?	Did you get all the information you needed?	What problems did you have with the infrastructure?	Ask for information
How could the time issue have been resolved to help you continue with the course?	What information did you lack?		

Interview Notes:

Time

Wrong Level

Infrastructure

Other

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