TITLE OF PAPER: Barriers to online learning - the experience of the
Scottish Executive Business Development Unit

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Barriers to online learning - the experience of the Scottish Executive Business Development Unit
ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the experience of the Scottish Executive's Business Development Unit (BDU) when the individuals within the Unit were introduced to online learning as a knowledge exchange facility and vehicle for development of both individuals and the professional Unit.

The BDU is the internal management consultancy unit within the Scottish Executive. It consists of 12 business analysts and has a remit to assist in the delivery of organisational change within the Executive. The Unit has undergone significant change itself, individuals within the Unit increasingly working in a devolved environment. Training and development and knowledge exchange are of increasing importance to the Unit, yet the opportunities available via conventional routes are increasingly difficult to create. The Head of the Unit approached Strathclyde Graduate School of Business (GSB) to develop an online learning programme. This paper discusses the methodology adopted, the initial results and the remedial action taken to deliver a working solution.

Individuals within the Unit were introduced to the online learning facility as part of a two day workshop at GSB. The online facility was hosted on the GSB site and accessed by Business Development Unit colleagues via the Internet. The facility included discussion forums, postings of workshop material and papers and access to business databases. After three months of operation, the use of the facility by individuals within the Unit was poor and, at this point, it would have been very easy to blame the teething problems experienced with the technology and the general complaint offered by individuals of 'lack of time'.

However, this point was the **start** of the learning process. Interviews were held with each member of the Unit and their personal views on the use (or rather lack of use) of the online learning facility were recorded and mind-mapped. The result was a detailed understanding of the barriers to online learning within the Unit. Interestingly, although technological and workload barriers were cited, they were overshadowed by cultural, personal and environmental barriers.

The analysis obtained from the interviews and the 'problem' of making online learning a reality were translated into a consulting assignment for the Unit. In summary, individuals (grouped into 2 teams) were asked to develop their own solutions to the problems faced. However, to inject a degree of objectivity, the problem solving was undertaken as a one day consulting assignment with GSB acting as the client.

The teams developed very complementary solutions – one a more strategic look at creating an environment within which individuals would feel able to engage with the online learning vehicle. The second team's solution was more pragmatic, describing a process which would help everyone engage more actively in the online learning process by focusing on the exchange of knowledge and the creation of a knowledge bank. The solutions provided synergy and energy to drive the Unit forward in its online learning journey and are currently work in progress for the Unit.