10 WAYS TO...

make e-learning a must for staff

Far too many organisations struggle unnecessarily to introduce e-learning. Tom Lloyd outlines some key steps to ensure success.

You've just spent a fortune on the latest learning management system, you've overseen the creation of hundreds of hours of top-notch e-learning content, you've told your boss this is going to revolutionise training in your company — and now no one is using the stuff.

The problem is a common one for learning managers. A recent report from Ashridge Business School, *E-learning: the Findings and the Future*, found that 82% of organisations struggle to introduce e-learning.

This isn't because e-learning is a poor way to teach — 86% per cent of the organisations in the survey thought it an effective tool — rather it is difficult to change the way people learn.

"We've all learned in a classroom," says Steve Dineen, the chief executive of e-learning company Fuel. "Learning from a PC is not a natural evolutionary step for you."

So how do you get people to use the e-learning you've spent so much money on?

**1. Content is king**

The first thing to get right is the content. It must be tailored to the needs of the business, and to the requirements of the individuals taking the courses. Superb content might not be enough to get people learning on its own, but if the content is wrong no amount of cajoling will get people to use it.

Cable & Wireless has been implementing a Learning Management System carrying e-learning content on a variety of subjects, and has seen course take-up rates increase dramatically over the past two years.

"The biggest driver is to make content relevant and specific to the user, so that, rather than us imposing e-learning on people, they want to do it themselves," says Mike Booth, director of e-learning strategy at Cable & Wireless.

**2. Promotion, promotion, promotion**

If people don't know content exists, they aren't going to use it, so you have to market your e-learning. A lot of companies do this by creating an e-learning brand, which is then promoted on posters, by email, at launch events and at roadshows.

BT managed to reverse the way its staff preferred to learn by running a series of roadshows demonstrating its content from Thomsen NETg. Beforehand, 70% of staff preferred instructor-led training; afterwards, 60% preferred e-learning and 80% used the courses.

Keep promoting the material to continue to drive usage. It is tempting to think that word of mouth will keep the ball rolling, but this is not always the case. "People need to get the same message at least three times before it starts to have an impact," says Steve Gunn, senior communications manager at ICI company National Starch & Chemical. "It's no good just sending out a launch email and then expecting to come back in a year's time and find that you've got fantastic usage figures."

**3. Use a carrot**

Companies have tried a variety of incentives to get people to use e-learning, even offering rewards such as gift vouchers, but the most common technique is to tie e-learning to a personal development plan. Staff can then see that courses will ultimately lead to promotion and salary increases.

This approach has been particularly successful at Siemens in the UK, which uses e-learning extensively, including content from SkillSoft. "People won't participate in e-learning, or any kind of learning for that matter, unless there is a compelling reason," says Nick Shackleton-Jones, the e-learning manager at Siemens. "Making it part of the competency model is probably the best way of ensuring that people have a clear understanding of the relevance of the learning that they do."

**4. Use a stick**

If all else fails, you can resort to the 'if you don't do this you won't be able to do your job' approach. For a lot of subjects, this can be unproductive, but it does have its place with regulatory or compliance courses.

"I'm very reluctant to force people into e-learning," says Cable & Wireless's Booth, "but for some courses you need to do, for example, compliance or health and safety. Those are very well-subscribed, not because the learner wants to do them, but because they have to."

It can be an effective introduction. "Sometimes one of the best ways to get people used to e-learning is to use it for a subject that needs to be compulsory, like licensing or compliance-type training," says Clive Shepherd, e-learning director of The Training Foundation. "That way they've got to use it."
Teach the boss

Winning the support of senior management is crucial to the success of an e-learning project.

'I often get ideas of new e-learning companies being set up, but if it hasn't got the support of senior management, it will struggle,' says Nige Howarth, director of learning consultancy Inspired Age. 'Ideally, senior staff should put their name to an email or a communication about how important e-learning is, so it has got some political weight behind it.'

When ICI launched its Learning Zone, it went to great lengths to convince managers at all levels that they needed to support e-learning. The initial message was delivered by the global vice-president of HR to regional HR directors, who then filtered it down to their colleagues. E-learning champions were then selected to convince line managers outside HR to support the initiative.

'We explained what we were doing and how it linked with business objectives, and gave them a preview of the Learning Zone to play with,' says Gunn, who was e-learning champion at National Starch & Chemical.

Space and time

One of the advantages of e-learning is that you can do it at your desk when you have a few spare minutes. One of the disadvantages is that, when you are at your desk, you never seem to have any spare minutes. Giving people time to participate in e-learning, and creating an environment that allows them to study, is key to improving take-up.

'The most important thing is to give people time to do it,' agrees Kay Baldwin-Evans, head of research at e-learning supplier SkillSoft.

Some companies allow employees to set aside time for learning. Others use visual indicators that people should not be interrupted, such as signs on PCs or headsets.

Cable & Wireless is trying a combination of methods. 'We are in the process of procuring headsets for all UK staff, and we will give them to anyone who requests them,' says Booth. 'We are also exploring the option of having learning zones on our major sites, where people can go away from their desks and be out of sight and out of mind.'

Blend

Combining e-learning with instructor-led training can be an effective way of getting people to complete both, particularly if passing the e-learning is a prerequisite for taking the instructor-led course.

'If people are told they can't do classroom training until they have done e-learning, then that is pretty motivational,' says Denny King of Telekom.

Telecoms company Colt is using e-learning from fuel to train its sales staff, as part of a drive to improve productivity and cut costs. Instructor-led training is used to practise the principles learned via e-learning, and cannot be taken until the e-learning element is passed.

'We actually put a pass mark on the e-learning tests so we can tell that people are qualified to go into the classroom training,' says Daryl Szebesta, director of data services and systems outsourcing at Colt. 'The classroom training applies the online message in role-play.'

Play Big Brother

Learners don't tend to get up and walk out of the classroom halfway through an instructor-led course, regardless of how tedious or irrelevant it is, because they don't want to be asked why they are leaving.

With an e-learning course, however, they can leave and never return without any fear of being challenged.

The use of e-learning is tracked, of course, but this information is rarely used to encourage course completion. At Siemens, however, the e-learning team is taking advantage of the available data to do just that.

'We are starting to roll out a mechanism where we can monitor how new e-learning users are doing,' says Shackleton-Jones. 'Somebody will give them a call if it looks like they've dropped off a course and just say, "Can we support you better? Are there any reasons you couldn't continue with the course?"'

Start small

It is unreasonable to expect learners to make the jump instantly from learning in groups, in a classroom, to learning at their computer, on their own, whenever they feel like it. To help with the transition, companies often run group e-learning sessions, at set times, and give support and advice on how and when to use material.

'People are absolutely fine with e-learning once they get started,' says Shepherd, 'but they are nervous about getting started. Giving them a bit of a kick-start works very well.'

According to Gunn, one of the most successful methods he has used at National Starch & Chemical is running lunchtime sessions to introduce employees to e-learning. The company also runs online support sessions for e-learning users in remote offices.

Provide access

E-learning is no good to people who don't have computers. The most common way to get round this problem is to set up learning centres where people who don't use computers in their day-to-day work can get access to a PC and to e-learning. A few companies have gone one step further and started leasing computers to employees, which they can use at home.

This needn't cost the company anything, thanks to the government's Home Computing Initiative, which gives a tax exemption on loaned computers. Royal Mail is among a number of companies running such a scheme (see page 31), and its PC comes pre-loaded with e-learning content from Futuremedia, which also administers the scheme for Royal Mail.