Online vs. In-Class Success

E-learning can be an inexpensive alternative to classroom training, but does it yield the same results?

BY LORRI FREIFELD

A *Training* reader sent me an article about a study done at Washington community colleges, which showed that more students drop out and fewer get a passing grade when they take a class online than when they take it in a classroom. And students who already were struggling do worse when a course is changed over to online delivery than when it was delivered in a classroom setting. He wondered whether this might indicate a change in the training field, while I contemplated whether the results would carry over to the workplace.

That led to further speculation about corporate online vs. in-class success, including whether e-learning is as "sticky" as classroom learning when it comes to changing behavior, topics best suited for e-learning, tips for moving classroom courses online, and criteria for measuring success. So we asked a few of our Training Top 125 winners, Training Top 10 Hall of Famers, and other experts to weigh in on the topic.

NEED FOR FACE TIME

"If you review the findings of the Washington community colleges study more closely," says CypherWorx, Inc., Founder and President Paul Cypher, "you will see the researchers assessed how 40,000 students performed in approximately 500,000 online and classroom courses. They found there were additional variables at work, including a finding that when a student struggles and doesn't seek help in a course—especially when there is access to teachers, as well—then the fault can't lie solely with the switch to online courses."

Adds Verizon Wireless Staff Vice President of Workforce Development Lou Tedrick, "The results of the study don't surprise me, given the 'face time' that is needed for success for most students. If you take that away from a struggling student, his or her performance is likely to be worse. In the workplace, we try to determine what would be best learned online vs. in the classroom and go from there. If we don't think online is the best possible solution and bringing folks into a classroom is not feasible, we try other means such as a manager-led module or virtual instructor-led training (viLT), so there is time for 1:1/group interaction."

That's why it's so important for Learning professionals to conduct a thorough needs analysis and determine the "right" training delivery method, says Mary Beth Alexander, AVP, Organizational Development and Corporate Marketing at Economical Insurance. "That involves educating key stakeholders and subject matter experts on the benefits and risks of each solution to make the 'right' decision. Training technology and high-quality instructional designers who possess strong skills and competence greatly contribute to learners' success. We also regularly communicate to our leadership to ensure they make time for their employees to participate in and complete e-learning courses without interruption, just as we would in an instructor-led classroom."

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COST-EFFECTIVE BUT NOT STICKY?

E-learning has the reputation of being more convenient and cost-effective than classroom training. But is it as effective when it comes to learning "stickiness" and changing behavior?

"That's a question we hear a lot, and the answer is that it varies from person to person," says Don Spear, CEO of online training marketplace OpenSesame. "However, one of the reasons our customers find e-learning particularly effective for retention is that learners can revisit the courses as much as they want at any time for refresher purposes. Plus, students can choose the best time for them to take the online course, according to their timeline and commitments."

Spear says courses that are "bite sized" (meaning they run from a few minutes to 15 minutes long) help those who might otherwise struggle to stay focused for a longer period of time, as can happen in a classroom setting. "And online course designers increasingly are integrating 'gamification' techniques and more engaging mid-course exercises, quizzes, and post-completion summaries to help the information more easily take hold."

The key is to make it interactive, says Jiffy Lube Manager of Learning & Development Ken Barber. "More graphics, more videos, more voiceover, more knowledge checks, and fewer word slides will make the course engaging and fun for the students."

If learners know why the information is important to them and the course is designed well to engage learners, then there

A LOOK AT THE OPTIONS

By Randhir Vieira, Vice President, Product and Marketing, Mindflash (www.mindflash.com)

When Web conferencing services such as WebEx, GoToMeeting, Live Meeting, and Google Hangouts went mainstream, companies gained a way to conduct trainings and meetings without spending thousands of dollars on airfare and hotels for employees. On-demand courses delivered even more flexibility by allowing users to dictate when, where, and at what pace they learn. Yet trainers know that sometimes there's just no substitute for the energy and personal connection of a physical classroom. There are distinct pros and cons among classroom training, Web conferencing platforms, and on-demand e-learning. Here's a look at the options, and how to blend them for effectiveness and affordability.

CLASSROOM

Classroom trainings are most ideal for small groups and especially in cases when interaction, team bonding, and/or nonverbal communication are vital to achieving learning objectives. Role-play and simulations, often used in sales and management trainings, are perfect activities for live classroom trainings. On the downside, classroom training is expensive if you need to scale from 20 people to 500. It's also difficult to coordinate and schedule among people who are living in different places and across different time zones.

LIVE INTERNET

Live online training offers a flexible and cost-effective alternative, and is achieved by using a Web conferencing platform. This method is ideal for broadcasting messages across a large population of users, such as the CEO announcing a new executive or the HR director discussing a revamped benefits program. Such trainings are easy to scale and distribute, and by incorporating video, the trainer becomes alive for participants. However, all participants must log in at the same time for the session (although they typically can access a recording after the event);

there is limited opportunity for interaction; and you cannot speed up or slow down the training to match a user's learning needs. Therefore, avoid highly complex or technical topics when using this method.

SELF-PACED ONLINE LEARNING

As a third option, there is on-demand e-learning, offered through on-premise or cloud-based software where trainers can upload existing content into templates and quickly develop multimedia courses. Participants can run the training when it is convenient for them and in sections instead of all at once. Users can adjust the pace, by replaying a chapter or slide if needed. They may run the training off of any device. With e-learning, you can teach complex subject matter, such as software training, and include quizzes to test knowledge. Compared with classroom training, e-learning is affordable. Unfortunately, there's virtually no opportunity for nonverbal communication or interaction, and obtaining feedback from users can be difficult.

BLENDED LEARNING

With blended learning, companies get the best of all worlds by incorporating physical, live Internet and on-demand training into their curriculum. Consider using the on-demand platform for delivering foundational knowledge prior to a live training session. The Edmonds, Washington Police Department did just this when teaching its officers how to use Tasers. They use an on-demand platform for learning about proper safety and scenarios for using Tasers. Live classrooms are used for the tactics on how to operate the Taser.

In another example, Yammer, a social enterprise software company, provides an on-demand platform for delivering prerequisite courses for its certifications; the classroom for users to apply the knowledge; and the on-demand platform again for issuing final exams.

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will be less "going through the motions" says Chesterfield County, VA, Performance Support Coordinator/Instructional Designer Sherri Dosher. "If an organization simply puts PowerPoint bullets online, the end result will still be death by PowerPoint. It'll just be DOA at the computer versus the classroom."

Dosher believes e-learning can be just as effective as instructor-led training if the following conditions are met:
- Content is appropriate for online delivery.
- The course is designed well (includes context, challenge, activity, and feedback).
- A solid communication plan is in place, including WIIFM (What's In It For Me?)
- Supervisory support is present for e-learning in the work environment.

Tedrick agrees. "I know we have learners who just 'click through' online training, and it's frustrating, but it does show in their results typically. So we often supplement online training with manager-led reinforcements and assessments for reinforcement/tracking. Getting the leaders—who are

CASE STUDY:
ECONOMICAL INSURANCE

Through a partnership with SkillSoft, Economical Insurance completed a Value Impact Analysis on one of its successful leadership programs that was implemented a few years ago. The purpose of the survey was to measure satisfaction with the organization's Leadership Development Channel, determine motivation for using this learning tool for leadership development, and determine job impact. Economical Insurance's corporate leaders generate results that have monetary value to the organization, and the Value Impact Analysis demonstrated that if productivity increases as a result of participating in this leadership training as opposed to attending an in-person leadership conference, there is business value associated with that increase. The work completed in the analysis allowed the company to translate the productivity gains into monetary terms. Based on monetary value, Economical Insurance achieves an overall productivity gain by using the Leadership Development Channel; that gain per survey respondent translated to approximately $1,700.

Through the Impact Analysis survey and subsequent analysis, Economical Insurance was able to demonstrate the value of the product and the return on investment the learning asset has provided. The Impact Analysis Report looked only at benefits derived from program participation. Approximately 25 of 45 participating leaders completed the survey; the savings for Economical Insurance for only these 25 leaders' participation was approximately $5,500. The estimated productivity gain with only these 25 of the company's licensed audience represented $45,000. The estimated ROI for these 25 leaders was also $45,000. Comments from participants echoed the data provided in that this learning tool is viewed as an effective solution to obtain one form of leadership and management development.

with the employees daily—to show the value of the training is really key to success."

Economical Insurance's Alexander notes that new authoring tools are more robust than in the past, which allows for rich media to be incorporated into e-learning modules to enhance learner engagement. Economical Insurance recently developed a safety procedures course for risk control inspectors that contains embedded simulations created in Flash. This allows learners to virtually practice each step by using the mouse to emulate various hand movements. Alexander says all learners achieved 100 percent on the mandatory testing, and 96 percent indicated the simulations were effective in understanding the process, ultimately leading to a change in behavior.

BEST-SUITED TOPICS

Some topics do lend themselves more naturally to comprehension and "stickiness" in an e-learning format, such as compliance-based courses (e.g., sexual harassment) or software/technical skill-building courses such as Office Suite, Windows, and JAVA, says OpenSesame's Spear. "These courses are often video-based, allowing employees to pause the recording at any point to apply the lesson on their own computer."

Barber notes that "repetitive content, especially for new employees in a high turnover environment, is ideal for e-learning." He offers an example that speaks to the e-learning versus ILT option:

"For our store managers and assistant managers, we have two certifications available as part of their development journey. The first is Management Training certification, which is made up of 13 e-learning courses. The courses cover topics conducive to e-learning such as 'Opening & Closing,' 'Scheduling,' 'Time Management,' etc. While these could be taught in an ILT class, the information is easily communicated in an interactive e-learning course."

"The second certification," he continues, "is Leadership Training certification, which is taught in an ILT class. Topics for Leadership Training include building blocks of a successful team, performance management, and change management. These topics benefit from the interaction within a classroom where students can discuss, collaborate, solve problems, and role-play. By limiting the content that has to be taught face to face, we can maximize the quality of the instruction in all areas and minimize the cost in time and money for ourselves and our students."

Verizon uses online training for knowledge-based courses where it can deliver consistent information, broadly (global, large nationwide groups), at the end-user's pace. "We also often use online as a 'primer' or 'pre-requisite' to an ILT or vILT experience that is more application/skills focused, so everyone comes in with a common base," says Tedrick.

Cypher likewise believes there is a place for both online and in-person learning in every organization. "Most often,

we recommend a blended approach," he says. "Utilize the online modules and training to provide core learning and communities of practice and then host classroom sessions for employees to share their learning outcomes and methods for instituting what they learned."

TIPS FOR A SWITCH

As more and more Training departments continue to do more with less, and new generations of workers clamor for just-in-time training on their devices, companies increasingly are converting classroom courses to e-learning—or least implementing a blended approach. Some things to keep in mind:

"One of the most important things to evaluate when making any changes related to training is how training aligns with an organization's business goals, and the specialized learning needs of its employees," OpenSesame's Spear says. "For many organizations, the move to online training can meet a real business need—relieving an over-extended operating budget. E-learning can save organizations real budget dollars while not compromising on

quality of training. And many of our customers are using online courses to reach workers who may not have access to in-person training—e.g., their schedules do not allow; they are remote workers; they cannot travel to the in-class training, etc."

Development time is another important factor to consider, Alexander says. Over the last five years, Economical Insurance successfully reduced its e-learning development time by using the latest training technologies and platforms. "Many

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learning organizations consider a best practice of ILT to be eight hours of development time for one hour of instructor-led training. With e-learning, that number can go as high as 200 hours or more depending on the complexity of the module or course that is developed."

It is critical to conduct thorough due diligence in assessing the impact and value of the investment, Alexander stresses. "One critical question is: Why we are making this decision?

Is it because it is the latest trend or is it adding business value through productivity and performance gains? And from a technology standpoint, you need to have a robust LMS that can track learner metrics, which are critical to success. The late Peter Drucker said it best: 'What gets measured gets managed.'"

Besides the business perspective, it's important to think about the human aspect. "Starting a new approach to workplace learning is daunting for some, so it's important to educate employees about the 'why' and 'how' at the onset of the process," Spear says. "First, let them know why e-learning is now a part of the training curriculum and how they can use it to meet their individual goals and professional objectives. Then, teach them how to use the platform to find the courses they need and make the most of the experience."

Many people are naturally resistant to change and technology can add another barrier, notes Alexander. "With a multi-generational workplace consisting of four generational cohorts, every adult learner has a personal preference. It is hard to shift habits and behaviors, and some learners are reluctant to use training technology, while others encounter challenges in navigating through the technology."

Chesterfield County's Dosher offers a few additional questions to ask and tips:

- **Is the content appropriate for online delivery?** Some content requires a physical environment delivery (i.e., CPR, presentation skills, etc.).

  Tip: Partner with subject matter experts to determine if content can be delivered effectively online.

- **How technology savvy is the organization?** Do most learners work with computers in their job? Do learners have the appropriate technology for the course (i.e., players for video, speakers for audio, Internet connection and browsers capable of handling course requirements)? Does the organization have technology assistance to provide support for large-scale deployment?

  Tip: Do a needs assessment to determine where the organization is on use of technology and partner with the IT department to identify technology support it can supply. Understand and be able to respond to the requirements for the hosting process (LMS requirements) and the specifications for the software used to author online courses.

- **Do learners know why this course is going online,** why it is important to them and that it is a legitimate form of learning just like going to a classroom?

  Tip: Create a communication plan that includes leadership with the end result of support for the online course beginning at the top and including every level of supervision within the organization.

MEASURING RESULTS

Aside from learner engagement, completion rates, behavior change, and expectations/goals achieved, experts say there are a few other factors organizations should evaluate when

CASE STUDY:
SAN DIEGO ZOO GLOBAL ACADEMY

In September 2013, San Diego Zoo Global Academy and its e-learning partner, CypherWorx, Inc., announced the preliminary results of their efficacy testing for the online animal care training certificate series. This study looked at the training provided to zookeepers and other animal care professionals in zoo settings. This was training that always had been required of employees and traditionally was delivered in a classroom. However, when learners transferred from a classroom setting to an online environment, the results showed that knowledge retention rates were significantly higher.

The study involved the first four animal care courses, and professionals from four organizations across the U.S. served as the study participants. Some 155 individuals completed one or more of the academy courses. Pre- and post-tests, aligned with each course's designated outcomes, were administered just prior to, and immediately following, training.

Gains in knowledge were recorded for each of the four tested courses. Average gains ranged from a low of 7 percentage points to a high of almost 23 percentage points. While pre-test scores varied by course, recorded post-test score means ranged from 93.8 percent to 96.8 percent.

Two of the pilot testing organizations agreed to conduct a follow-up assessment. Participants completed a follow-up test for the Zoonosis course 90 days after post-test administration. Results indicated that, following an initial gain of 15.7 percentage points and achieving a post-test mean of 96.5 percent, students maintained 10.2 of the original point gain. This equates to 67 percent retention of the gained knowledge, relative to post-test performance, and exceeded previous retention rates for classroom training.

When building the courses, instructional designers at CypherWorx focused on the following design aspects to bring the content to life:
- Case studies
- Rich visuals to convey content
- Illustration of facts and concepts
- Variability
- Feedback
- Learning guidance through examples, advance organizers, and mnemonics
- Elaboration theory and advance organizers
- Relevance

comes to measuring training success. "Other important measures in the real world are cost, institutional knowledge retention, and lost on-the-job time," notes Cypher.

And accesses of an online training course can be important data because it can determine if learners are accessing the course for specific content they need in the work environment, notes Dosher. "The online course then serves a double purpose: initial delivery of the entire course and also as a job aid for just-in-time knowledge or skills. You can't go back to a classroom whenever you need a piece of information from a class, but you can go back online to a course and get what you need when you need it."

Feedback loops are essential in any training program, Spear adds. "Direct employee feedback, as well as aligning training with an individual's overall performance, promotion, or attrition, can help determine the effectiveness of the program when evaluated at a holistic, organizational level, over time."

At the end of the day, Alexander says, "the learning method—whether online or instructor led—must support the strategic objectives of the organization in order to compare the results. "The learning curriculum must provide the development of skill and competency of the employee to transfer on the job." **t**

CASE STUDY:
GREYHOUND LINES INC.

Greyhound's business model requires its employees to be geographically dispersed and operate 24/7/365. As a result, Greyhound Lines Inc. moved from classroom-only training to e-learning only for leadership and customer service courses, and has seen a dramatic reduction in customer service complaints.

More than 600 Greyhound employees—from supervisors and field reps to counter staff/customer service reps and bus drivers—have received training from OpenSesame via courses on leadership development, business skills, soft skills, and customer service. Greyhound uses the Skillport learning management system (LMS), which allows it to track assignments, participation, and progress in courses. Assignments can be made, with automated reminders for the student, and it is simple to pull statistics and reports on course usage and progress.

Greyhound is a big believer that the "just-in-time" module provides training when students are ready, wherever they are. Mobile courses make it easy for Greyhound's "nomadic" workforce to take courses on the go. In fact, in 2015, Greyhound plans to roll out iPhones to its driver workforce, and they'll be able to access OpenSesame training from there, as well.

Because of the cost reduction for e-learning, Greyhound now can commit to training its workforce regularly. It is now a paid benefit, which has had a positive impact on engagement, morale, and productivity.