

E-learning: A Training Panacea (Jun 06)

E-learning has enticed trainers for over a decade and has been an issue of great debate since it first made its mark on the training and development landscape. Annie Hayes spoke to TrainingZONE's members to find out their real views and thoughts on learning the e-way.

What Is E-learning?

Meandering the development waters for some 15 years, members explain why e-learning is more than just a tool that can be delivered over the web.

For Peter Bullivant, Director of his own training and HR consultancy, Intelligent Development and Training Limited e-learning is another weapon in the development armoury with added twists and appealing benefits to be had along the way:

"It has advantages around accessibility, deployment and the ability to use the medium in a 'just-in-time' manner as well as a reference tool to reinforce learning."

The fact that e-learning is clearly delivered through an online means does not however mean that it has to be used as a stand-alone learning and development technique, say members. Buffy Sparks, UK Sales Training Manager and Certified Life Coach for Avery Weigh-Tronix supports this view: "E-learning for me, means a way of developing and learning through the use of information and technology whether it is a purely internet/PC based package or a blended learning tool that is classroom work, followed up with one to one coaching sessions supported with online diagnostics and qualification/research."

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And Bullivant agrees. His experiences of e-learning have taken him from using it to provide background knowledge prior to face to face learning events, to stand alone developments worked over a specified period of time or just in time on a self service basis.

Evaluation also plays its part says Bullivant who says that a key benefit of e-learning is its ability to assess just how much that knowledge is then understood and is used in the workplace.

In essence says Paul Allman, Head of Learning Services for Edgeworks e-learning has truly 'grown up' into a training delivery method that can be used on its own or in conjunction with other training interventions to aid business, training and the individual.

What Do Trainers Hope To Achieve With E-learning?

Cost and time savings, accessibility to learning and a deeper understanding of the material to be digested are just some of the benefits that trainers hope to accrue through the use of e-learning.

Breaking down traditional barriers to learning is a huge advantage. Sparks who coaches individuals on remote islands off the coast of Scotland explains how bringing learning to people is the key: "I hope to entice delegates who would otherwise miss out on the opportunity to learn because of location."

But it's not all about geographical convenience. For many of our trainers, the jewel in the e-learning crown is the time and efficiency savers that can be made.

Allman also notes the way in which it facilitates the changing role of the trainer towards a more strategically aligned and business-focused position. E-Learning can bring about less administration and reporting requirements at the same time as improving evaluation and training needs analysis.

"Recently, the trainers I work with see e-Learning, blended with other training interventions as a great way to achieve their business needs and free their time to deliver additional, added value to the business. For example, one trainer was spending 10 days a month on Induction training. The use of e-learning has altered this balance, four days a month are spent delivering Induction programmes and the remaining six days are used to make a difference to the business. As a result the business wins and so does the trainer as he has a more varied and valuable role."

Paul Allman, TrainingZONE member.

What's the business case?

Allman admits that the basic rationale for using e-learning hasn't changed much for 15 years. So why is it now being accepted more readily? Pointing to culture, business and compliance reasons, he explains:

Culture: Our experience is that people are now more open to new ways of learning that fit in with their busy lifestyles. Large sections of the workforce we currently train are part time – juggling work with children or dependent elderly relatives. Days away from home or changes to their routine are often impossible to accommodate and the use of three, four, five or even 10 day induction programmes may well persuade a potential employee to look elsewhere for employment.

Business: Over the past few years there has been a lot written about training correctly becoming closely tied in with business objectives – with an increased number of Chief Learning Officers being invited onto corporate Boards. This, together with the conditions in the global economy, has led to a closer scrutiny on the value of learning and the returns brought to the business. In turn the majority of businesses are now much leaner, change happens quickly and traditional training interventions are not able to meet the business objectives.

Compliance: For our clients this is rapidly becoming a key area. The ability to prove an organisations competence is now a regular occurrence. In the care industry you need to prove your induction programmes are suitable, that you are training people to the levels expected by the regulators and that you are addressing bad practices in the workplace. In all businesses, insurers are asking for more from health and safety managers and employment legislation is becoming an increasingly common topic, shown by the growing variety of people who are purchasing e-learning for organisations. No longer is it purely trainings responsibility, health and safety, quality, compliance, operations and financial managers can all lead e-learning strategies.

A key driver is clearly cost savings but the business case is not likely to focus upon this entirely says Bullivant who warns that trainers that fall into the trap of regarding e-learning as an end itself will be disappointed.

Beyond the anywhere, anytime draw is also its ability to reinforce learning. Nik Kellingley, Project Manager for the National Day Nurseries Association comments that a key advantage is the way in which material can be accessed again and again enabling very cost effective refresher sessions to take place at the learners' convenience.

What Causes An E-learning Strategy To Fail?

The reasons are varied but not dissimilar to why any ill-thought out business project fails. Lack of senior management commitment, poor communication and failure to align e-learning to business objectives are just some of the reasons why a strategy of this kind might end up on the tried but failed list.

Bullivant blames e-learning failures largely upon a lack of integration with other key business strategies. : "If e-learning strategies support the delivery of the overall business plan, help to

achieve the people strategy for the business and in the end enable people to do their job better than the strategy will succeed. If, however, the strategy is really just the hobby-horse of a particular manager or department then it is doomed to failure. Key to developing the strategy is to answer the question "How do we want e-learning to support the achievement of business success?"

As with any training strategy audience is key. Allman believes that failing to identify, analyse and involve the delegates early enough in the process results in an e-learning strategy that is doomed to disappoint.

"This audience includes not only the people to be trained but also managers and sponsors – all have very different needs and ignoring any can cause your strategy to fail.

"We've also experienced e-learning strategies that are too inflexible. Individuals who have spent so much time writing a complex document and gaining approval for a programme that the needs of the business have actually changed in that time. Then when things go wrong being reticent to alter and react to them."

Sparks believes it's crucial that e-learning is not deployed in place of other learning and development means that would suffice:

"In a previous role, the company I worked with decided to roll out a new performance management strategy. The reason it failed was because the old process worked perfectly well, people didn't see the need for this particular change and there wasn't one! We don't have to use every new trend or tool that comes onto the market, use common sense and apply them where you, your business and the individuals who will be using it can really feel and see the benefits."

For Kellingley failure is more aligned to the use of material. Dull and uninteresting content he says would head his list together with factors including, not selling the concept effectively to learners in the first place and failing to make it part of a broader learning strategy.

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The successful implementation of any e-learning programme it seems is a balance between good thought processes, time to implementation and excellent communication.

Is It A Training Panacea?

Like many of the training and development solutions available e-learning is hard to commit to as a stand-alone resource. No trainer would need to or want to commit to one option in its entirety but for many of our trainers its secret ingredient is its ability to add to the learning mix.

Allman says: "There are very few training requirements that could not benefit from the inclusion of e-learning as part of a solution. For example, imagine conflict resolution and de-escalation in an inner city school – a very specialised and complex skill, something you build through experience."

"And as a preparatory tool it pays dividends, there is no reason why delegates can't arrive on the practical training day having completed pre-course work online, covering the causes of conflict, theory of de-escalation and so on. Then post training further online learning to reinforce the key messages – via video clips, tutor discussion etc. This way the practical training day is just that practical six hours of scenario based learning as opposed to three hours practical, three hours theory."

For Allman it's not a panacea but a tool that should be part of every trainer's toolbox and one that requires careful handling according to Bullivant who says that it requires the same effort if not more in all aspects of the training cycle as any other development intervention.

As a step in the right direction it gets many points for effort says Kellingley who applauds its value in increasing access to learning and making the training offering more rounded and complete than before.

The variety of required learning and levels of ability means that it may never navigate itself to conquer the variety of learning and development demands as a stand-alone solutions and Sparks believes that it's important to put it into context:

"While some businesses will happily embrace e-learning technologies others will be more resistant. It's not a one-size fits all solution." Sparks reminds trainers that it must be used in moderation, "Nothing can replace an excellent trainer, interactive sessions, games, energisers, new faces, different perspectives, discussion and above all incorporating fun and involvement across the board."

What Does The Future Hold?

As a tool for delivering development and learning strategies e-learning is clearly flexible, adaptive and successful but is it just another 'fad' that will go the same way as PowerPoint for example? Clearly trainers are excited but cautious. Bullivant urges training and development facilitators to keep it simple and fit for purpose. Allman looks to the next stage in its history which he predicts will include, 'Blogs, Podcasts and Wiki's.'

With any new technology comes a new set of issues for the trainer. How do you monitor collaborative technologies to ensure that correct information is being given for example? The romance with e-learning continues but most trainers are not too be fooled that it will lead to a full engagement, the training panacea.

E-learning will continue to evolve and trainers will continue to deploy, play and utilise it for different audiences and in different ways. As a facilitator for freeing up the trainer's time it is a resource to be welcomed and may soon become the champion of the training and development professionals' evolution and for that it is surely to be welcomed.

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