What do Employees Really Think About e-Learning?

Kevin Young, managing director of e-learning provider, Skillsoft, reports on the findings of a major international survey into employees’ perspectives of e-learning.

Between July 2003 and January 2004 SkillSoft interviewed employees in 14 countries across EMEA.

Sixteen organisations using e-learning as a critical component of their training delivery agreed to contribute.

The skills and knowledge acquired

The range of expertise and knowledge being acquired covers the full spectrum of IT and business skills.

Employees use e-learning to develop skills relating to a variety of general operating systems and network fundamentals, including Microsoft, Cisco, Unix, SQL and Lotus.

Others are developing more sophisticated skills in web development and programming languages in areas like Java, C++, C#, Frontpage, and Dreamweaver.

Regarding business skills - respondents are using e-learning to help them with their professional and personal development across a wide range of competencies such as customer service; change management; dealing with conflict; presentation skills; project management; leadership and marketing.

Key Findings

Employees genuinely like e-learning and find it effective:

* 93.5% state that they have enjoyed the courses they have taken.

* 87% can give tangible examples of how they have applied their learning.

* 52% pass on what they learn to someone else.

* 98% say they would recommend e-learning to a colleague.

* 92.5% learn what they need even if the course isn’t completed.

Why do employees like e-learning?

The ability of employees to take e-learning at their own pace is key - 93% value e-learning because of this.

Ease of use is also important - 87.5% think it’s easy to use.
The flexibility of e-learning is also highly rated - 85% cite this as one of the reasons they like it.

Its time efficiency is cited by 77.5% who appreciate being able to learn whenever they have time.

While 73% of employees like e-learning because they think it's an interesting way to learn.

**Why are they learning and where are they learning?**

A third (34%) are learning to improve their competency and efficiency in their current roles or want to broaden their skills and knowledge (16%).

Almost 70% learn at their workstation and two-thirds of those do so during the working day. The remaining study before they start work or after 5pm.

In most organisations there is very little formal dedicated time for e-learning.

We found small pockets amongst the sample where individuals were given specific amounts of time by their managers to do some learning, but this seemed to be an informal arrangement rather than any definite policy.

Only one organisation set specific times aside for their employees to learn via e-learning.

In this case, employees learnt in a training room in small groups at a set time each week for two hours.

The benefit of this approach is that employees can share experiences and learn from each other while they are doing their e-learning.

The employees look forward to their learning and their attendance rate at the scheduled training is almost 100%.

**The debate about completion**

The majority of those interviewed are learning in small chunks.

Of the total sample, 34% spend 30 minutes or less in one session and 23% say they spend an hour or less - a combined total of 57% of the sample.

Clearly, therefore, most of the courses being taken aren't being completed all at once.

In fact, of those surveyed, only 23% of the participants say they manage to complete a course in one learning session.

Each participant was then asked whether they learnt what they needed to, regardless of whether they had completed the course or not.

The results are unequivocal; 92.5% of the total said that they had.

This indicates that employees find the learning effective, irrespective of whether or not they complete the course.
Typically, for many of those interviewed, employees are dipping in and out of courses, skipping the sections they don’t need and only learning what they need to learn at that particular time.

This is particularly true where IT skills are concerned, for instance where employees frequently need to improve their skills immediately in just one specific area.

For many of the employees interviewed, course completion is not something they consider to be significant because as soon as they learn the skills they need, they often come out of the course to put the learning into practice at once, demonstrating the benefit of ‘just in time’ learning.

The nature of the learning – is it effective?

Each participant was asked whether they had used any of the skills they had learnt from their e-learning course/s.

An overwhelming majority (87%) said “yes” they had used or put into practice skills and knowledge they had gained from e-learning.

To test the veracity of this, each participant was then asked to give an example of how and where this learning had been applied.

In every case, an example was cited; and in most cases more than one example was given.

How deep does the satisfaction go – would people recommend e-learning?

Recommendation is the best indicator of satisfaction in a product or service so we asked each participant whether they would recommend e-learning to a colleague and 98% said that they would.

The reasons why the users would recommend it are, as expected, in line with the reasons why the users themselves like it.

Where do the barriers lie – and are they easily overcome?

Each participant was asked to give a spontaneous answer/s to what they thought the barriers to e-learning were.

Lack of time was the greatest barrier – cited by 50%.

47% thought e-learning suffered from an image problem.

41% mentioned self-motivation as a barrier; and lack of management support was mentioned by a third.

Poor awareness regarding e-learning and ignorance about what was actually available was cited by 14%.

The most interesting point about the barriers mentioned is that - with the exception of self motivation - the others are relatively easily rectified by HR and management teams.

Given the right reward and recognition framework, it is relatively easy to motivate users - and yet this need remains unidentified by many.
In contrast, one of the organisations surveyed has established a clear correlation between training and salary levels – firmly embedding e-learning into their competency model.

Not surprisingly - this organisation’s e-learning programme enjoys a consistently high level of usage!

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