Virtual Learning Environments: More Than a Virtual Classroom

When learning and development (L&D) practitioners examine the most effective way to deliver their critical training and learning initiatives, they consider many delivery mechanisms including off-the-shelf e-learning, custom instructor-led and a complex blended solution. Selecting a delivery mechanism is more than a “finger-in-the-wind” approach. It includes an analysis of factors such as audience, content, budget, timeframe and anticipated outcomes. Current research points to virtual learning platforms as a robust delivery method to maximize all factors. This research shows that almost 90 percent of L&D practitioners project an increase in popularity and use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) during the next three years.

Even the phrase “virtual learning environment” is misleading. It’s not “virtually learning,” it’s authentic learning in a virtual environment with a blend of formal, informal and even social learning options. One advantage of VLEs for adult learners is they offer experiential learning. That is, the learner is engaged in the content at a more personal level by actively participating and learns via direct experience. For instance, instead of reading a manual about a new product or listening to a lecture about a leadership strategy the learner actively engages in the content. The question remains: What is a virtual learning environment and how is it used by today’s organizations?

The Human Capital Media (HCM) Advisory Group, a division of MediaTec Publishing Inc., partnered with InterCall’s Virtual Business Group to conduct a study assessing the features, current use, perception and benefits of virtual learning environments. A recent survey yielded responses from 370 global learning and development organizations. It was critical that virtual learning environment be defined at the onset of the study to ensure a common framework for the respondents.
“We noticed that more L&D practitioners are using virtual learning environments to align with strategic initiatives and not just learning initiatives anymore. For example, we noticed a considerable increase in the amount of partner training, sales training, customer education and global product launches that L&D practitioners are conducting.”

– Eric Vidal, Senior Learning Strategist, InterCall

For the purpose of the survey, VLE was defined as:

*An interactive platform designed to deliver training and allow instant access to content, subject-matter experts and peers. These virtual learning environments can be customized, with multiple rooms, classrooms, resource libraries, forums, networking rooms, and integration with social media.*

Of the 370 L&D practitioners responding to the survey, 188 (51 percent) employ VLEs in their organization, and the balance are very familiar with VLEs. Anyone who did not have experience with VLEs as defined was eliminated from the study.

As seen in Chart 1, 70 percent of the L&D practitioners who have experience with VLEs have a positive overall impression and about one-fourth were indifferent, while only about 2 percent have a negative impression.

**Virtual Learning Environment**

A virtual environment designed to support learning includes tools for an interactive learner experience while providing administrative tracking features. A VLE can have any combination of tools and features. When L&D practitioners were asked which features are most important for VLEs, one in five responded that virtual classrooms are the most important (see Chart 2). About 15 percent thought a connection with learning management systems to enable administrative tracking was the most important. The
A majority of L&D practitioners commented that all of the features listed in Chart 2 are important for a VLE, but 55 percent prioritized virtual classrooms, LMS connection, assessments and webcasting.

Administrators want virtual learning environments to be part of the strategic evaluation of L&D. With measuring learning impact and business performance results being integral to all organizations, users want VLEs that connect to learning management systems and also contain or integrate with learning assessment tools. L&D practitioners do not perceive VLEs as merely a piece of technology, but a real asset that should integrate with learning delivery, management and assessment. They want an integrated solution with tracking capability.

**Best Use of Virtual Learning**

Virtual learning is not a panacea for all learning initiatives. Chart 3 reveals the broad applicability of VLEs. L&D practitioners indicated that VLEs were most beneficial for on-boarding initiatives (51 percent). More than 40 percent of the practitioners indicated that both product and technology training are also highly beneficial applications of VLEs. Clearly, L&D practitioners believe VLEs have a broad applicability for various types of learning. It is important to note that 4 in 10 respondents chose core competencies and compliance training, and 3 in 10 chose leadership and general business skills.

“Organizations like IBM, Intuit, ACS and others are looking for ways to provide an “always on” virtual environment for learning. These same organizations are using these learning environments as a strategic approach to change the way their companies do business. For example, one company was able to use virtual environments to increase paid attendance to their learning event, actually generating revenue for their group, and technology leader CA was able to train 2,000 partners in two days across 81 different countries.”

– Brent Arslaner, VP of Sales, Virtual Learning Environments, InterCall
62% of learning practitioners believe virtual learning environments are the best delivery method for a global audience.

The survey respondents strongly believed virtual learning solutions had a greater appeal to a younger audience (75 percent agree) than an older audience (8 percent agree) as illustrated in Chart 4. There is a belief that a younger audience prefers a more technical solution and this group of practitioners familiar with VLEs agree with that notion. It seems VLEs are preferred as a global delivery solution (62 percent) rather than a local delivery solution (18 percent). There are benefits for a local audience, but there seem to be more benefits for a global audience. Based on data in Chart 4, VLEs are an effective delivery solution for training small and large groups.

Respondents saw benefits of virtual learning environments being deployed at the enterprise level (63 percent) and believe VLEs are the best delivery method for large number of learners (64 percent), but still beneficial for a small number of learners (47 percent) across a global audience. Thus, VLEs are an effective delivery solution for audiences of any size. As L&D organizations look to on-board more millennials it is advantageous to consider incorporating VLEs into the delivery mix.
Benefits of Virtual Learning

Respondents trumpeted the benefits of virtual learning environments. As seen in Chart 5, not only do more than 70 percent of L&D practitioners who actively employ VLEs report that they should be a part of any blended learning solution, 1 in 4 of them felt strongly about it. This echoes other findings that speak to the broad learning applications of VLEs. More than half of the respondents thought virtual learning environments reduce the learner’s time to productivity (61 percent) and promote content retention for the learner (58 percent). Overall, VLEs will find the best success if shown to be part of a fully integrated blended solution.

Approximately 32 percent agreed that VLEs result in greater interaction than other delivery methods, and 33 percent disagreed that VLEs result in less interaction (see chart 5). The juxtaposition of these items was intentional to tease out the perception of learner interaction in VLEs. Clearly, 1 out of 3 respondents thinks VLEs provide more learner interaction than other delivery methods. There is a perception that VLEs don’t offer opportunities for learner interaction; however, research has shown that L&D practitioners who employ VLEs find learner interaction to be at an acceptable level.
With virtual learning environments, we have been able to expand upon the online elements we already produce, and deliver an engaging and effective training program for a fraction of the cost of physical training.

– Stephanie Morris, Training and Event Delivery Manager, Intuit

Also, more than 80 percent believe instructors can deliver information just as well through VLEs as other delivery methods. More than three-quarters of the L&D practitioners surveyed believe VLEs receive the same or higher satisfaction ratings as other delivery methods, suggesting VLEs are a viable delivery solution.

According to Chart 6, more than 50 percent of the L&D practitioners surveyed thought VLEs were more cost effective than instructor-led training alone, with 1 in 5 respondents feeling strongly about this. VLEs do not require a greater investment than e-learning or on-the-job training. Thus, L&D practitioners who employ VLEs are finding they are a cost-effective solution compared to other popular delivery techniques.

In summary, virtual learning environments have proven to be a popular, efficient and cost-effective solution for many learning and development organizations, which have seen organizational impact as a result of employing them. The proof of impact is in the fact that many organizations employ virtual learning environments and project even greater future use. The ease of use and appeal to large and small global audiences have made VLEs sound delivery solutions.