



INTRODUCTION

Is this the era of e-learning? If so, why? Why use it? What benefits can it deliver? And anyway, what is e-learning?

If these are your secret, or even shared thoughts then welcome to the vast number of people – H.R. professionals, line managers and employees – who are equally bewildered, and perhaps curious, about e-learning.

The fact is that e-learning is rapidly becoming established as part of any truly blended solution, aimed at achieving the most effective learning experience in the most cost effective way.

But it wasn't always so. When first launched, there were many that regarded it as the training solution that would replace all others. Thankfully that view has been tempered over the years and a much more responsible stance is emerging.

So what is e-learning?

WHAT IS E-LEARNING?

E-learning is quite simply the delivery of learning content via all electronic means. These include the public internet, intranets, local area networks, satellite broadcasts, interactive T.V., digital audio and video devices, and some would say CD-ROM.

Today e-learning programmes include practically every conceivable area of knowledge, process and skill. If a topic has been researched, written-up, trained and tested it can be delivered using e-learning. Whether completion of an e-learning programme leads to a formal qualification, or is part of an individual's ongoing personal development, it is recognised that e-learning is capable of delivering a number of specific benefits.

THE BENEFITS OF E-LEARNING

For an organisation, e-learning can deliver flexible, cost effective and powerful learning solutions which can be simply managed and measured. Using today's technologies, levels of knowledge, applications of skills and usage of processes can all be measured, and the effect on the individual's performance measured. No longer need training inputs and impact on the job be disconnected.

For the manager, e-learning can provide a very efficient on the job training tool, as well as an extremely effective learning resource for his or her people. Learning inputs can be acquired individually, remotely and in small units of time (typically 15 to 20 minutes at a time). Learners can do this at work, at home or whilst travelling. It is now not always necessary to release people for training programmes or tie them up for long periods of time in internal training sessions.

For the individual, the opportunity to learn anywhere and any time, coupled with a less intimidating, self-paced, and

well - structured learning environment, can act as a powerful catalyst for self-development and personal growth.

All in all, the benefits of e-learning, as part of an overall training and development solution, vastly outweigh the two most commonly identified obstacles to it – the ability of the IT department to support it, and the motivation of the individual to undertake it.

In the information age, in which we all currently live, e-learning is a vital component of delivering the intellectual capital equation, and is vital for success in today's turbulent and challenging business environment.

What therefore are the different levels of e-learning available?

LEVELS OF E-LEARNING

In our view there are three broad levels:

LEVEL ONE - -INFORMATION

The provision of performance support, reference materials, web lectures, web books/pages, and videos.

At this level the learner is simply acquiring knowledge and information. S/he reads it, sees it, and hears it.

LEVEL TWO - -INTERACTION

The provision of interactive learning and simulation. The content consists of self-directed e-learning inputs, interactive exercises, simulations etc.

At this level the learner is engaged in an interactive learning process. S/he examines it, tries it, and plays with it.

LEVEL THREE - -COLLABORATION

The provision of collaborative learning. The content includes live virtual, classrooms, collaborative 'group' sessions, live conferences and virtual teaming.

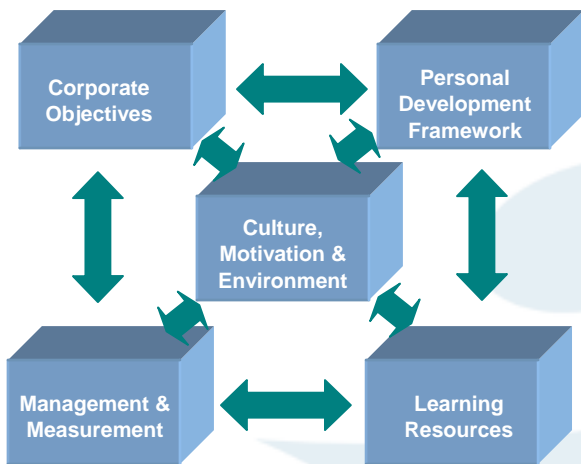
At this level the learner discusses it and practises it with others.

All three approaches can be used in conjunction with conventional instructor led training in which there is a face to face interaction with the trainer and fellow trainees in the same location. Or, they can of course be stand alone offerings.

So where does e-learning fit into the larger, people development picture?

FIT OF E-LEARNING

The following diagram summarises the issues which contribute to the success of e-learning.



Corporate Objectives: E-learning must be aligned to corporate objectives. As a resource it must deliver results in a more efficient and effective way.

Personal Development Framework: E-learning supports performance management, training and development plans, competency frameworks and succession planning, which in turn are shaped by the ongoing development of the organisation.

Learning Resources: E-learning is one of many learning resources available to deliver different levels of learning. It can be delivered as a stand alone resource, or part of a blended solution incorporating instructor led training and other training activities (eg coaching).

Management & Measurement:

E-learning must be capable of being managed and measured. This involves the use of Learning Management Systems or similar systems to track the learner's progress, collate results and create a learning and development profile for individuals.

Culture, Motivation & Environment:

E-learning depends for its success on the learning culture created, the motivation of individuals to undertake it, and the rewards they will gain from it.

How then do organisations go about introducing e-learning?

INTRODUCTION OF E-LEARNING

Follow these five steps:

1. Identify existing material you can convert to on-line delivery.

It is essential to start with training material you already have, which is tried and tested, and which works!

Identify those parts of the material the learner can do alone; those which benefit from interaction; and those which require face to face involvement.

2. Design the blended solution.

Create a learning design that includes both on-line and classroom delivery portions. Use the same instructional design principles you would use for classroom training, but consider also the following:

- How will learners get access to the materials?
- How will you track use and completion of online components?
- How will you format and deliver online components?
- What course content is mandatory and what is for "individual enrichment?"
- What tracking, support, and encouragement will you need to provide to make sure that people complete the mandatory learning modules?
- What needs to happen in the face-to-face session to bridge what people learned online to the classroom and to the job?

- How will people use what they learned on-line in the face-to-face session?
- How will you help people apply what they learn online and in the classroom to the job?
- What access do learners need to additional or “follow on” content?
- Do you plan to make the online course content available as job aids that learners can use after the course?

3. Have the online Content formatted and hosted.

Have the online content formatted according to your design and guidelines. Also have the content and the learner interface placed online where learners can get to it (this is called “hosting”).

You can take one of four approaches to hosting:

- Deliver the content via a learning management system.
- Buy an enterprise solution.
- Use a hosted solution.
- Build your own solution.

Work with your IT group to ensure selection of the best option and to check that your security needs are addressed.

4. Test The Design.

Before offering the new blended solution to your learners, run a thorough pilot test. Try to have people “break” the links and the design. Ask the “What if?” questions, including “What if people show up for classroom training without having done any of the online pre-work?” Test the enrolment, access, and connection instructions thoroughly. Revise and refine the solution.

Ensure that your e-learning specialist provides you with an approach document, a “storyboard”, and a concept demonstrator before embarking on the pilot process.

5. Publicise and Run The Programme.

Provide instructions to your learners on how to enrol and get access to the material. Market the benefits of the course to learners, their managers, and the people who fund the training. Make help readily available for people who get lost in the system. Also, be aware of your organisation’s readiness for e-learning and help people set reasonable expectations. It takes some time to get used to this way of learning, if people have been accustomed to getting only classroom training in the past.

All of the above seems very sensible and straightforward, but many e-learning initiatives flounder and fail because potential barriers are not identified and overcome. What are these barriers?

BARRIERS TO E-LEARNING

The introduction of e-learning can involve both technology and cultural challenges.

The technology challenges normally involve:

- Gaining an understanding of the current I.T infrastructure and policies/procedures surrounding it.
- Assessing the fit of different e-learning media to the I.T. infrastructure, and legacy systems.
- Exploring possibilities with regard to hosting eg Enterprise Systems, LMS, ASP etc.
- Designing a cost effective/workable e-learning solution.

Having designed and created this e-learning solution the challenge is then to ensure its usage with maximum effect. This can be quite another matter and will involve influencing the internal culture to increase people’s motivation to complete e-learning programmes and related activities.

Here are some steps to follow:

- Identify your success criteria for the introduction of e-learning.
- Analyse the current situation.

What are the driving and resisting forces (force field analysis) impacting the successful move towards e-learning solutions?

- What is your strategy for the introduction of e-learning?
e.g.
 - Start with pre-course/post-course modules.
 - Make e-learning a part of the course delivery.
 - Convert existing training material into an e-learning format (eg Induction Material).
 - Focus on instructional manuals/operating procedures and convert them into e-learning modules.
 - Turn product guides into e-learning opportunities.
 - Use external regulations to drive the process.
- It is better to start with small steps and show proof
 - Run a pilot.
 - The best place to start is where your organisation sees the greatest risk/reward, and also the greatest cost/benefit.
- Identify your internal champions/sponsors. Who will support you in overcoming resistance/internal barriers? What's the win in it for them?
- How can you build support (eg. through networking effectively)?
- This is a management of change exercise, so what is your change management plan? Whom will you need to involve in its execution?
- What will be your internal marketing campaign?

SUMMARY

So there you have it – the reasons to introduce e-learning, the fit of e-learning into the broader training and development picture, how to introduce it, and the obstacles you may face.

In reality your first foray into e-learning may appear, and feel, a little tortuous, but can you afford not to be a part of this learning revolution? Probably not. And if you need a partner to help you, you know where to find us!