E-learner experiences: a lesson on in-house branding

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of marketing an e-learning provision in-house in order that it should succeed.

Design/methodology/approach – The study was based on 29 research case studies.

Findings – E-learning itself has a somewhat negative image with a lot of people, and hence some companies have rebranded and renamed their e-learning provision to ''disguise'' it as something else for uptake to increase. Money invested in the technology and design will not correlate with success unless implementation includes substantial effort in marketing. Even then it is unlikely to be successful without top level support on an ongoing basis.

Practical implications – It is important to promote the value of e-learning at the early stages and on a regular basis thereafter.

Originality/value – Reflections of early adopters of e-learning highlight areas of success and difficulty in order to help other organizations to avoid the same pitfalls.

Keywords Electronic media, Learning, Learning methods, Computer based learning, Employee communications

Paper type Case study

In May 2004, Ashridge published a research report based on case studies, surveys and interviews held at 29 of their ''virtual learning resource centre'' client companies. This article, the second of four, draws on one of the key messages to come out of the research, which was the importance of branding the e-learning in-house in order for it to be implemented successfully. Reflecting on the experiences of a number of companies in their branding efforts and the impact that this had on the take-up rates of their e-learning provisions, the case is made for a solid marketing campaign to be in place before any e-learning provision is launched in an organization.

How organizations approach e-learning, the first steps taken and the initial reason for using e-learning all affect the way that staff will respond. E-learning was, and often still is, heralded as a way to make significant cost savings. Whilst this may happen, a number of organizations in the Ashridge study advised that this is not the best reason for adopting e-learning. The savings are often likely to be long-term rather than short-term and it may therefore be hard to instantly create returns against what is often a relatively high investment. The case for saving costs may also send the wrong message to staff and create a negative or even cynical response. In reality cost savings may not arise if organizations take a more blended approach – indeed in many instances costs may rise.

A key question that arose in the study was why was e-learning proving to be so hard to implement? One explanation is that a cultural change is necessary about how training and learning happens and in how it is delivered. Many organizations have found to their cost that if e-learning is made available in a passive way, say by distributing passwords and telling people about e-learning programmes, this rarely creates a rush of interest. Critics might say

this also might occur with traditional training approaches, but most of those involved with e-learning say it needs to be more actively promoted and ''sold'' to staff than other forms of training.

Marketing e-learning is especially important in organizations where it represents a new approach to learning, and the idea of self-development may be difficult, especially if staff are accustomed to ''receiving'' training rather than developing their own skills. Smith *et al.* (2003) found that readiness for on-line learning depended on two factors; firstly the comfort with e-learning itself, and secondly, self-management of learning. This was particularly noticeable at Mercer Human Resource Consulting.

Mercer was one of the first UK employers to develop e-learning and therefore has had longer than most to reflect on what helps or hinders e-learning. Bob Hesketh, learning manager, has led the e-learning project from the mid-1990s. The conclusion of his experience is that whilst technology is important, ''technology by itself will not make e-learning successful.'' He explains that although ''it is possible to introduce an e-learning programme that's technically brilliant, the programme can still fail. Other issues such as good communication and PR, and focusing on what the business needs, are critical ingredients for success.'' Experience at Mercer has shown that e-learning is not always going to be people's first choice. Going on a residential programme, meeting and socializing with colleagues is something that is highly valued by some people. They prefer to work with a group, finding it more rewarding than working alone, and the discussion with others often helps the learning process. The challenge for e-learning design is to meet these learning needs and cater for these learning styles within a virtual environment. Alan Mumford (2002) who is well known for his work on learning styles with Peter Honey, believes that ''e-learning needs to take into account the fact that individuals often have strong preferences and dislikes for particular methods.'' Button *et al.* (2002) found that online students were more likely to fall into the category of non-traditional learners, as online studies appealed to students who were not full-time, worked, had childcare responsibilities, and lived further away from campus. Schofield and Rylance-Watson (2002) found that e-learning was best suited to reflectors and theorists, the introvert, the self-starter and for those comfortable with IT. These profiles are not necessarily representative of your average employee that you want to engage in e-learning.

It does not help that a survey of 50 UK organizations in 2001 revealed that the ''driest'' topics are those most likely to become e-learning products (Epic, 2001). E-learning appears to be restricted to certain topics and developing ''softer'' training programmes in e-learning seems to be a problem for many.

A body of research is starting to emerge on the importance of interaction in online learning. Murray (2003) suggests that people are realizing that online learning is not about ever more sophisticated technology but how that technology is used. As e-learning developers realize that the human side of teaching remains as important as it was in the pre-internet era, interactive technologies could still hold the most potential for distance learning designers. In addition, the training of the online instructor is paramount to the success of the online learning process (Gibbons and Wentworth, 2001). They suggest that prospective online facilitators need to learn to transfer the responsibility for learning to the learner through experiential learning and using the same collaborative learning models that they will be facilitating with students, i.e. they should learn to tutor online by studying online. This allows new e-trainers to gain an understanding of the differences in the online learners' experience, the online course delivery, and empathy for the needs and challenges that the learners face. This takes both time and commitment on the part of trainers, but was the approach adopted by Coca-Cola Enterprises GB. They piloted e-learning on their HR team who now understand from first hand experience what helps and what hinders e-learning. However, this in itself is unlikely to be sufficient. The e-learning needs to be ''sold'' to the users.

Terms used for marketing e-learning vary from place to place. Some refer to marketing or promoting, others prefer to talk about ''M&C'' (marketing and communication). Whatever phrase is used, the value of a marketing campaign for e-learning is emphasized by many. Gold (2003) advises that companies do not keep it a secret. They should market the new

system to employees actively. This applies not just at a launch date but on a regular basis thereafter.

Xerox Europe is ahead of most in terms of producing learning materials. However, this has not meant the need to promote e-learning has disappeared. Presentations recently made to senior managers in different European countries are an example of how they continue to promote e-learning. Their experience shows that e-learning content grows so too does the importance of promoting interest at senior levels. Ian Sellers, manager of Xerox Education Support Services recognizes that ''managers are extremely busy so our task as training experts is to understand what the business needs are and how training can address these needs.'' They use e-learning to train their 15,000 employees in Europe as well personnel in over 400 franchise operations.

A company framework linking appraisals and personal development plans with on-line training provision has also helped promote e-learning. They combine training input with on-line content to provide a blended approach to learning, which they find the best way to learn. Introducing e-learning through a blended approach with other training methods can also help people accept the medium of the learning technology.

Xerox found communication to be paramount, indeed ''it is the most important aspect of how you sell e-learning across the organisation'' (Ian Sellers). The message itself is important but so to are the creative ways in which to get the message across. Posters translated in local languages, menu cards, pens, mouse mats, brochures, adverts, e-mail auto-signatures, inserts in pay-slips have all been used at Xerox. They believe that like many change initiatives, the approach needs to be eye-catching and simple, and this can do more than a sophisticated campaign.

Lloyds TSB developed their e-learning provision alongside their corporate university. John Wilson, senior HR manager, Management and Leadership Development, found that they had an issue around stereotypes. He explained that there ''were various perceptions about e-learning in the organization, some of these are less positive. Some people felt it was a 'low-cost' option, others didn't want it to replace face-to-face learning that they preferred and felt comfortable with.'' Their focus on marketing has been stepped up over the last 12 months as they now recognize that they ''didn't do enough in the first couple of years to market the University concept to the rest of the organization. Developing the content and implementing e-learning was the priority and as a result we lost sight of the value of promotion.'' Using the term ''corporate university'' also created some problems for them. Staff who had not been to university felt it was not relevant to them while some junior managers assumed it was designed only for more senior managers to use.

The BBC saw the potential for e-learning as a facility for its 28,000 staff and its 20,000 (approx) contracted freelancers. Initially they piloted online modules and programmes on approximately 160 video terminals placed around the BBC divisions at various strategic places at different sites. They thought that offering ''free training'' would be extremely popular, and that staff would notice and be interested in useing the programmes. However, it soon became evident that this was not happening. A few staff who were curious enough to experiment gave good feedback but there was certainly no flood of interest. A review of the lessons learned from the pilot resulted in a new approach to actively market and promote e-learning to staff. A new learning advisor role was created to help with this. For two years, 12 such learning advisors went out and demonstrated how the tools worked. Dublin (2004) claims that one of the myths that exists about e-learning is that people know what to expect. The reality is that most people do not. Hence, if for no other reason, the e-learning provision needs to be marketed in order to manage people's expectations.

Clearly the experiences of the companies involved in the Ashridge research demonstrate the importance of marketing any e-learning initiative in-house. Simply providing e-learning is not enough. You have to get people to use it. It is clear from the Ashridge study that there is no universal template for e-learning and how e-learning is implemented needs to be carefully tailored to suit each organization. Buying in off-the-shelf products is unlikely to help your

marketing efforts. Several organizations highlighted the lack of marketing and promotional help from suppliers as one of the difficulties they encountered when implementing e-learning in their organizations. This said, all the companies agreed that communication, promotion and marketing were a key feature of e-learning, and that they needed to be creative in their approaches rather than hugely expensive. It is the value of e-learning that needs to be promoted at the early stage, rather than the content, method, or any other feature. This then needs to be reinforced regularly.

Determining what the value of e-learning will be to an individual needs to be established in the planning and design stages. No matter how good your marketing is, if the product itself is not of value to someone, they will not use it. The third article in the series focuses on asking the right questions at the design stage.

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