
The nine myths of e-learning implementation: ensuring the real return on your e-learning investment

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Abstract

Having a great e-learning strategy and having great e-learning programs are just no guarantee of success. Without a clear and well-thought-out implementation strategy and plan, one's e-learning efforts will most likely fall far short of one's goals, learners' needs and management expectations. What often gets in the way of successful implementation are the myths that have seemingly become e-learning folklore. In this article nine of these myths are explored, along with how they impact one and one's organization. Ensuring the real return on one's e-learning investment requires not only that one dispels these myths, but also that one clarifies what can and should be expected. Expectations, although less measurable than hard investments, are most often far more important. Expectations drive decisions. Expectations drive behavior. And expectations drive results.

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Introduction

Having a great e-learning strategy and having great e-learning programs is just no guarantee of success. Without a clear and well-thought out implementation strategy and plan, your e-learning efforts will most likely fall far short of your goals, learners' needs and management expectations. What often gets in the way of successful implementation are the myths that have seemingly become e-learning folklore. Let's explore nine of these myths.

Myth 1: everyone knows what you mean when you talk about e-learning

The truth is that the term "e-learning" means different things to different people. When the phrase was first popularized in 2001, it most often referred to computer-based training (CBT) delivered over intranets and the Internet. E-learning replaced "Web-based training" (WBT) which, during the high-flying dot.com days, was just not sexy enough. It was a time when we were putting an "e" in front of everything: e-letters, e-toys, e-commerce, e-banking, e-pets – the e-list goes on and on. But, the constant was a reference to delivering courses online or over the Internet or intranets, "over the Web".

By 2002, many of the industry's experts were offering a more robust definition of e-learning. E-learning is "... the use of technologies to create, distribute and deliver valuable data, information, learning and knowledge to improve on-the-job and organizational performance, and individual development". And, by 2004, we had begun to play with the "e" and extend the definition even further. One of the definitions I came to like was "enabling, enhancing and extending learning through the use of technologies". So, it is no wonder that learners, managers and executives are confused about what we do mean when we talk so confidently of "e-learning".

Myth 2: e-learning is really no big deal

The truth is quite the opposite. E-learning is a big deal because it represents a change that ripples through an organization. And change is always a big deal to adults! In addition, organizations are complex systems that balance culture with technology, management, competencies and business processes. Visualize a diamond with these as the points and one at the center. If you connect the points it becomes clear that change in one will



have an immediate and direct impact on every other point.

With e-learning we are changing the process of learning in an organization. And, by definition, the technologies, management systems and structures, competencies and culture will be changed. Our choice then is whether to try to manage these changes, or ignore them and just let them happen.

Myth 3: the “hard-stuff” – the technology – is what’s really difficult

There exists more than ample evidence that in fact it is the “soft-stuff” – the human issues – that are really the most difficult. After all, technology itself has no emotions to respond to or feelings to be hurt. It’s a world of ones and zeros. Where we humans are one complicated species!

Much has already been written about the change process and how humans move through their own personal change journey so I won’t go through that again here. (Of course, you can also check out the chapters in our book, *Implementing e-Learning* – Cross and Dublin, 2002.) But, I do highly recommend that every e-learning professional acquaint him/herself with these models and theories. We are in the change business whether we like it or not.

Once you understand change, you can then make a plan to manage your implementation. Over many years, my colleagues and I at Dublin Group developed the “Ready-Willing-Able” model for implementing large-scale change. This model works well to ensure your e-learning is accepted and used by the learners, and embraced and supported by the organization as a whole.

Myth 4: the learners are who really count

Yes, learners count. But so do a much wider range of people within the organization. Stakeholders also include the “C” level types (i.e. CEO, CIO, CFO, EVPs), middle and line managers, and Human Resources/Training staff (i.e. trainers, instructional designers, training managers). Add all these people up and you realize this is a large number.

The good news is that you don’t have to get all of them onboard and embracing your e-learning at the same time. Through the work of Everett Rogers (1995) we have learned that people adapt to new innovations (and change) along a bell-curve. There are some percentage of each stakeholder group who are “innovators”, while others on the other end of the bell-curve are

“diehards”. In between there are “early adopters”, the “early majority”, the “late majority”, and the “late adopters”.

The fact is it only takes 5 percent of each stakeholder group to embrace your e-learning for it to eventually become imbedded in the organization. And, once you get 20 percent of each stakeholder group – the early adopters – supporting your e-learning efforts, the momentum increases and your implementation becomes virtually unstoppable!

Myth 5: learners know what to expect

Actually, learners typically don’t know what to expect from your e-learning. One of the root causes certainly is that there isn’t one accepted definition for e-learning and therefore we don’t have a common understanding to begin with. But, another factor is the poor job we do of marketing our e-learning to all our stakeholders, especially the learners.

The purpose of marketing today is to maintain profitable long-term relationships with customers, or in our case, stakeholders. The critical elements of an effective marketing strategy and approach are positioning and branding.

So, stop and think. How have you positioned your e-learning? Is your e-learning to be used for professional development, or on-the-job support, or infotainment, or enter-training? Unless you have a clear position defined and communicated, your learners and the organization will not know what to expect and why.

And, what’s your e-learning brand? What is the promise you are making to the users? What do they have the right to expect? Put another way, if your e-learning were an automobile, what brand or make would it be and why? And, are your hopes aligned with your stakeholders’ perceptions?

Myth 6: communication is about telling

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1985) defines communication as: “the exchange of thoughts, messages or information”. The key word in this definition is “exchange”. Exchange implies a two-way process, not a one-way flood. All too often organizations develop communications plans which in reality are marketing communications plans. Their purpose is to tell a story in a convincing way rather than foster true two-way exchange.

To implement e-learning effectively you need both a change communications plan and a

marketing communications plan. A marketing communications plan needs to tell all of your stakeholders about the vision and mission for your e-learning initiative. It needs to clearly communicate – in all forms – the messages you want your stakeholders to hear.

A change communications plan is necessary to support your change management efforts. Its purpose is to support the learners and the organization as a whole as they move through the three phases of change adoption: awareness, engagement and involvement. For each of these phases, the plan must present specific activities, messages and timing for each key stakeholder group.

Myth 7: success is getting it to work

Getting your e-learning to work – completing the installation – is really only the first stage in being successful, and is the easiest. It's the next two stages, implementation and, finally, integration that are the really difficult ones.

You know you've succeeded at installation when your e-learning runs error-free. You know you've succeeded at implementation when your targeted audiences are accessing what you've developed. But, getting to the next stage, integration, is the hardest.

You know you've succeeded at this stage when your e-learning is invisible. You are no longer absorbed with the technology or even talking about e-learning. Your focus is on your organization and e-learning is just another part of any business process. And, your e-learning has been absorbed into the fabric of your organization.

Myth 8: once is enough

Oh, how we all wish this could be true! To be successful you need to be in continual and overlapping cycles of preparing, launching and sustaining. And, within each of these cycles you must be in process of learning-planning-developing-implementing-supporting-learning.

Almost as soon as you have done the preparation and launched Version 1.0, you should begin the preparation for Version 2.0. And, in parallel, you need to be working within the organization to sustain the initial momentum. This is then repeated with Version 2.5 or 3.0 and on and on.

Think of e-learning as if it's organizational software that is in a continual process of improvement and refinement. Plan regular reviews

and conduct what I've come to call "tune-ups". In these tune-ups, you might decide to look at some of all of the following:

- learning/e-learning strategy;
- business case (including ROI, if established);
- e-learning architecture, components, and delivery mix;
- content and instructional design;
- tools, technologies, and infrastructure;
- marketing;
- change management;
- evaluation and metrics;
- supporting organization and processes;
- sponsorship and governance; and
- roles and responsibilities.

Myth 9: it's magic

Clearly, being successful with e-learning is not magic. And, there is no one model or formula to follow that will guarantee your success.

E-learning enables you to change your current learning processes to be more efficient and more effective. And, if done right, it becomes a critical force to improve the performance of your workforce and your organization as a whole. This is not the same as 'converting' an instructor-led course. This is big stuff and therefore requires the best thinking from the best people inside and outside your organization.

Ensuring the real return on your e-learning investment requires not only that you dispel these myths, but also that you clarify what can and should be expected. Expectations, although less measurable than hard investments, are most often far more important. Expectations drive decisions. Expectations drive behavior. And, expectations drive results.

The initial stage in demonstrating this return on expectations is to focus on installation. You must make sure that technically and organizationally, your e-learning works. Adults have a very low tolerance for technologies and new processes that just don't "work". The second stage is to focus on implementation, on getting learners to use it and the organization to support it. This has been the focus of this article. The third and final stage is to focus on integration. It is through integrating with the business of the business that your e-learning efforts become interwoven into the fabric of your organization's culture and activities: in effect, your e-learning becomes invisible.

One-minute summary

In order to ensure your e-learning is used by your learners and embraced by your organization, remember:

- it's about business and providing a business solution;
- it's about providing a "return on expectation", not just a return on investment;
- it's about enabling learning and driving performance, not training;
- it's about people – learners, managers and executives – not technology;
- it's about motivating learners and energizing organizations; and
- it's about becoming invisible; interwoven into the very fabric of your organization and its culture.

For further information, contact Lance Dublin at ldublin@pacbell.net or visit www.lancedublin.com

Good luck with all of your e-learning endeavors!

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