

E-learner experiences: learning from the pioneers

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Abstract

Purpose – To share the experiences of e-learning pioneers with regard to the cultural change necessary for e-learning to be successfully adopted in an organisation.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on 29 research case studies.

Findings – A cultural change needs to take place in organisations for e-learners to engage in the process. Blending e-learning with other forms of learning can be a useful introduction to the discipline, but enthusiasm soon wears off. Common resistances to the concept are explored including lack of time and the loneliness of e-learning, and how the “any where, any time” element of the provision can be as much of a hindrance as of a help.

Practical implications – Suggestions given for ways of overcoming the difficulties encountered by the case study organisations.

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

Keywords Computer based learning, Organizational change, Organizational culture, User studies

Paper type Research paper

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. Many of them were early pioneers into e-learning country, others engaged more recently in e-learning initiatives. This article, the first of four, draws on the results that articulate the organisations’ experiences in adopting e-learning in some form or another in their organisation seeking, in particular, to understand current approaches to e-learning with regard to their implementation and the value they add. Many of the experiences were mirrored in different organisations suggesting that much more can be learnt from the early pioneers than is currently being taken on board by organisations moving more recently into the e-learning field.

During the 1990s and up until the end of 2002 there was a good deal of enthusiasm, some would say “hype” for e-learning and it seems no coincidence that the rise of e-learning closely followed the boom and busting of the dot.com industry itself. Note also that many of the organisations predicting an e-learning boom were those who had a vested interest in such market growth. Some universities, for example, invested heavily in developing e-learning courses that have not yet really recruited enough students to justify their viability (e.g. the Global University Alliance, Universitas 21), although the market in some areas is buoyant (e.g. the University of Phoenix). Media companies have also moved into the territory and have failed as yet to establish a worthwhile market (e.g. Worldwide Learning). In organisations as well, the e-learning bandwagon started to roll, picked up monumental speed, and then came off the rails. While many people working in organisations may now think of e-learning as a failed idea, this is far from the case. The initial numbers predicted to

be engaging in e-learning may have been way in excess of reality, but the fact remains that e-learning does still have the potential to reach them.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the current state of e-learning. Firstly, there are difficulties surrounding the definition of e-learning itself. The term is used to refer to many different approaches, from an electronically delivered training material, to a more advanced media-rich content such as video-streaming and sophisticated “classroom tools”. Secondly, there are the difficulties stemming from media-hype raising expectations unrealistically. Early e-learning in particular, often took the form of text on screen rather than text in a textbook. The education and training sector have been slow to integrate the creative opportunities that e-learning affords them. Learning could be made as exciting as a play-station, but so far, it hasn't been.

Thirdly, in many companies it was taken for granted that if the e-learning system was provided, people would use it. This has not turned out to be the case. It is like taking a horse to water but not being able to make it drink. E-learning needs to be branded, marketed and introduced to the people in an organisation, rather than thrust in front of them with them being left to get on with it.

There have also been problems with the technology itself. Despite the existence now of efforts at standardization, compatibility between all courseware and learning management systems is far from achieved. Hence organisations have had to narrow down course selection in order to keep customization costs down (Gold, 2003). Once standardization has been achieved, Singh and Reed (2002) see content becoming portable between learning management systems, granularity (e.g. learning object methodology), interoperability to allow different learning applications to share content and tracking data, and linkages between e-learning and knowledge management approaches. In the meantime, many organisations have found it hard to match technology across different sites and different business units, falling back on the lowest common denominator in order to be able to reach the intended audience. Undoubtedly, this has an effect on the design.

Despite these difficulties, there have been a number of e-learning successes. Shell have a global system available any place, any time and anywhere that the company intranet is available (Docent, 2002), and Deloitte Consulting claim that e-learning now accounts for 85 per cent of training provided in-house (Weekes, 2003). Findings from the Ashridge survey support such case studies and show that 86 per cent of companies believe e-learning to be an effective training approach. However, 82 per cent agreed that it was difficult to introduce into their organisations, and the issues being confronted were not those commonly associated with other types of training. As well as the general difficulties outlined above, the Ashridge research indicated some general trends across Europe. The poor quality of e-learning content was reported by Massy (2002) as affecting more than half of UK respondents, while respondents in Germany, Spain, Italy and France were even more critical.

In order to ensure that the content is up to scratch, some companies opt to pilot an e-learning initiative before launching it throughout the whole company. Coca-Cola Enterprises GB opted for a pilot programme first to test the waters. As they had no in-house expertise back in 2001 they were completely reliant on external suppliers. They found that one of the major difficulties for their pilot group was finding the time in which to do the learning. Despite being asked to commit four hours a week to the project, they found that actually two to three hours was all the time that they could afford to give. Baldwin-Evans (2004) found that even this can be broken down into smaller chunks with 34 per cent of their sample spending 30 minutes or less in an e-learning session, and 23 per cent engaging for between half an hour and an hour.

Piloting e-learning has had many benefits for organisations. Coca-Cola found it gave them understanding of what helped and what got in the way of e-learning, and it clarified some key issues around the role of the manager. The BBC had a rethink after their pilot programme did not create the level of interest expected, and decided to actively market and promote e-learning. Had they not discovered this when they piloted, they would have been less successful in their company-wide introduction than they were.

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There is a temptation in planning e-learning to design on a grand scale; something that a number of companies warn against. One interviewee explained “before we began our own project we heard about an organisation with a large – but unsuccessful – e-learning programme. That was proof to us that it was better to start small and build from a solid base.” The advice therefore is that especially in the early stages “small is beautiful”.

A huge amount of cost can be spared this way also. Gartmore invested around £50,000 in a year buying e-learning content and services for an initial “big bang” launch which did not create the desired effect. This has now been replaced by their present approach of “project by project” which involves individual discussions to determine learning needs in different parts of the business. Not only does this mean they are closer to what the business needs, but they are also delivering what will be used.

A key message from the Ashridge research is to make sure that e-learning drives the technology and not the other way round. IT and HR departments need to be partners in the development of e-learning, not adversaries, and IT need to be involved very early in the process.

The time taken to develop e-learning content in-house (rather than off-the-shelf) is often underestimated by companies. The quickest time to develop a programme at the Ministry of Defence was three months, and the content for Volvo’s induction programme took nine months to develop. Even companies with considerable training experience have found it hard to develop quantity and at the same time maintain quality of e-learning. Quality is not just about the content detail. It also includes the visual user-friendly issues and, as the BBC discovered, diagnostics, colour and humour help to make a programme more popular.

Although content and intellectual issues are important, there is a parallel need to influence and persuade others about the value of e-learning. Marketing e-learning is especially important in some organisations as it often 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. Training in many organisations is an accepted part of what happens and invariably is linked to HR and/or business structures such as performance management and competency frameworks. E-learning on the other hand is still new; it often does not have these links and requires individuals, and trainers, to change how they learn. In addition, the loneliness of e-learning is well documented and many organisations could do more to address such problems and provide support to e-learners. Deutsche Bank, for example, use online discussions and provide individual coaching to participants on their leadership programme.

There appear to be few rules about “where” and “when” e-learning takes place. A number of organisations use learning centres or “cyber cafes” as they are known at Lloyds TSB, while others are moving away from the idea of central learning centres to a more “learn at work” approach. Baldwin-Evans (2004) found that 68 per cent of his sample undertook their e-learning at their desk, despite most having a home PC, and a third of these did their learning either before or after work itself. Not all companies offer access at home, although this may grow in popularity in the future as there are fewer distractions. One organisation in the Ashridge survey reported around 20,000 hits each month made from home. However, this practice is likely to be challenged by those concerned with work/life balance, as the primary reason for doing e-learning at home rather than at work is because there isn’t time to do it at work. Indeed, one of the biggest problems for e-learning is lack of time.

The busy working environment reported by many companies makes it harder for training to take place and whilst this affects all training, e-learning is more vulnerable as it relies so heavily on individual motivation. It is significant that this is as likely to be mentioned by those just starting e-learning as among companies where e-learning has been established longer. Some companies have taken drastic measures – Cisco, for example, an acknowledged leader in e-learning, found it necessary for staff to cordon off their desks with yellow police tape to stop colleagues interrupting them (Galagan, 2002).

So what does make for successful e-learning? The Ashridge research concluded as to a gold standard of six key factors that seemed to be critical success factors for most of the organisations involved in the study:

1. Delivering what the business needs.
2. Putting the learner at the heart of e-learning.
3. Providing high-quality content and technology.
4. Gaining support at senior levels for e-learning.
5. Providing pro-active support for e-learners (and their managers) through communication, promotion and marketing.
6. Creating an organisation that genuinely values learning.

At the top of the list is delivering what the business needs; a fundamental issue for any HR and/or IT department. One interviewee observed that trainers may run through a quick check-list in response to “are we delivering what the business wants?” but this is unlikely to be sufficient. “In my experience” he added “it is far more useful to have face to face meetings and discussions with the relevant business divisions or departments.”

Other critical success factors seem equally as obvious: putting the learner at the heart of e-learning; providing high quality content and technology; and gaining support at senior levels for e-learning. Where e-learning was introduced without such senior support, the companies reported that this was a critical factor contributing to their lack of success.

Providing pro-active support for e-learners (and their managers) through communication, promotion and marketing was identified as critical, as was creating an organisation that genuinely values learning. This may seem a little ambitious to some readers, but if the first five are achieved, then you are at least half way to achieving the sixth. E-learning must be seen as relevant to the success of the business.

While these key ingredients may seem obvious, the evidence suggests that in practice they have not generally been adhered to, and the results have been less than successful. As such, e-learning now faces an uphill struggle in some organisations as any initiative is starting from a negative rather than neutral position. Piloting e-learning projects appears an essential step in ironing out any teething problems while slowly building some positive interest in the project among its champions. No matter what measure are taken, however, there will also be the time hurdle to clear. Because e-learning does not require the learner to “attend” a course at a certain time in a certain place, finding the time to actually engage in the e-learning process is difficult in most organisations. Short chunks that offer some “light relief” to the workload may be the answer, but as yet not many e-learning provisions offer such options. How the learners view the e-learning is of paramount importance. If they don’t view it as worthwhile and stimulating, the excuses underpinning the lack of time to engage with it will become more flamboyant. How the provision itself is introduced and presented to

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potential learners has a huge impact on its success and take-up rate. The second article in this series focuses particularly on this issue, examining the marketing and branding of e-learning in-house.

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