

E-learning: the best training option?

Feedback from staff who've tried it

A dilemma for managers in today's business climate is that staff need to be invested in but there is less money to spend. To ensure a workforce maintains a competitive edge their skills need frequently updating with advancements in software, relevant core competencies and new approaches to management. Yet training can be an expensive business and when savings are being made it is very often one of the first budgets to get slashed.

Perhaps surprisingly given this situation, e-learning is not always the most obvious solution, despite its potential availability and accessibility to employees in most firms. Indeed, in a recent survey on the subject, respondents said that they thought people avoided e-learning as a training option because of "A lack of understanding of how it works", saying "The main barrier is taking the first step to do an initial course." A total of 47 percent of the 204 people interviewed about e-learning said they thought it suffered from an image problem and 50 percent agreed that it would probably take up too much precious time.

Yet as Kay Baldwin-Evans, head of Research at UK-based SkillSoft, points out, all of these apprehensions are soon overcome when e-learning is investigated a bit more fully. Her feedback from these 204 people from organizations such as AT&T, Hilton Group, Siemens, FedEx and Royal Mail was almost unanimously positive when it came to discussing their experiences of this type of training. Everyone interviewed had undertaken either a full or partial course in e-learning some time in the nine months previous to being questioned, and 98 percent of them said that they would recommend it to other people. A total of 92.5 percent also stated that regardless of whether or not they had completed a course, e-learning had taught them all they set out to learn.

Further encouraging comments came from the 93.5 percent who said they had enjoyed this kind of training, the 77.5 percent who agreed it was an efficient way to learn for people under time-pressures, the 87.5 percent who found it easy to use and the 52 percent who said that they had gone on to pass on what they had learned to other members of staff.

If e-learning is an option for any human resource (HR) or training and development team to consider, then, what is it best used for and how is it best conducted? Baldwin-Evans cites a long list of competencies that can be targeted through e-learning, which split into specific IT skills and softer business techniques. Networks and web-development programs become easier after a course online – e-learning covers all of Microsoft, Cisco, Lotus, Java, C++, Dreamweaver and more. Yet it can also offer motivation, emotional intelligence, teamwork, dealing with conflict, presentation skills, project management, customer services, accounting and finance and a whole host of other such competencies that make up our day-to-day business lives.

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The other big advantage of e-learning is its flexibility in terms of time and place. Of the people interviewed, 68 percent had learnt at their desk, with only 17 percent having had a special learning area. This is good news for companies who lack the space and resource to have a special training department, and similarly the fact that 14 percent also opted to learn at home means that training managers can always offer this option to staff who argue that there are too many distractions in the office.

In terms of time, respondents tended to take the approach that suited them best, with only one of the firms represented having offered a formal time-slot to be taken up with this kind of training. Employees therefore chose to fit in ten to 30 minutes here and there, with some working on it for up to an hour, but fewer with any length of time over that. Although this suited people, who preferred to concentrate in shorter bursts and could fit training in and among the tasks of their day, managers might want to think about allocating flexible training time into the weekly schedule if they want to see a stronger uptake.

Finally, then, why would a company want to offer e-learning and why would an employee want to get involved? Feedback stated that most people decided to use e-learning to make themselves better at their daily job. Respondents said that it enabled them to gain skills needed to complete certain projects such as to build a web site, that it appealed for personal development reasons in broadening skills and knowledge, that it could lead to career development or simply that they used e-learning because they were interested and enjoyed it.

From a firm’s point of view, e-learning leads to tangible business benefits, improved processes, improved communications, personal skills developments and IT and computer literacy, all of which contribute to the successful day-to-day functioning of a competitive organization. With positive outcomes for the business and the employee, as well as the return on investment and flexibility offered as compared to other forms of training, e-learning is a tool that should be on all HR teams’ radars.

Comment

This is a review of “Employees and e-learning: what do the end-users think?” by Kay Baldwin-Evans. The article is a write-up of the feedback from 204 interviews with employees of various organizations who have completed some e-learning training. On the whole, the data suggest that e-learning is an affordable and accessible option for training and development teams to consider, with almost all respondents saying they would recommend it.

Reference

Baldwin-Evans, K. (2004), “Employees and e-learning: what do the end-users think?”, *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 36 No. 7, pp. 269-74.

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