Book review

E-Learning: strategies for delivering knowledge in the digital age

Paula Elizabeth Sanderson*

E-Learning and Consulting Philips Medical Systems North America
70 Pilgrim Road, Torrington, CT 06790, USA

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1. Overview

Marc J. Rosenberg's book titled *E-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age* is a high-level, enterprise-wide strategic approach to e-learning in today's organizations. Although focused on corporate organizations, the concepts and strategic tools presented in this book are applicable and appropriate for any type of organization. Organizations desirous to investigate the benefits of building a "learning architecture" (p. 33) and to understand why e-learning needs to be an integral part of this architecture, will benefit from the information in this book.

The organization of this book is focused on three global themes:

- "The Opportunity" (p. 3) is the basis for comprehending the current learning environment in most organizations and the dramatic changes in the business environment, which contribute to the competitive requirement to become a learning organization.
- "New Approaches for E-Learning" (p. 41) discusses the history of e-learning and the need to change current approaches by implementing an integrated learning strategy that encompasses instruction, knowledge management, and performance support.
- "Organizational Requirements for E-Learning" (p. 151) is the 'how to' section that demonstrates the critical success factors to implementing e-learning and effective strategies to eliminate the barriers to e-learning success.

* Tel.: +1-800-722-7900x4523; fax: +1-860-489-0930.
E-mail address: paula.sanderson@philips.com (P.E. Sanderson).

Each major concept is clarified and demonstrated with case studies and "E-Learning Journeys" (p. 35) from companies such as AT&T, Cisco, IBM, Dell Computers, and others that understand the importance of becoming learning organizations and how they are accomplishing this goal.

2. "The opportunity"

Rosenberg defines learning as "the process by which people acquire new skills or knowledge for the purpose of enhancing their performance" (p. 4). He explains that the perceptions of learning in organizations are undergoing a distinct transformation. First, training should no longer only focus on the act of training but must demonstrate a positive impact on performance or outcomes. Widely dispersed employees are demanding access to learning anytime and anywhere and on their terms. There is a migration of information to the online environment, which can be updated continuously. Although classroom learning continues to have a strong role, more people are coming together in digital classrooms. Lastly, there is growing recognition that learning is a continuous, life-long process.

Rosenberg defines e-learning as a networked phenomenon allowing for instant revisions and distribution. In addition, it is delivered using standard Internet technology. E-learning goes beyond training and instruction to the delivery of information and tools to improve performance. The benefits of e-learning are many including cost-effectiveness, enhanced responsiveness to change, consistency, timely content, flexible accessibility, and providing customer value. The discussion emphasizes the need for organizations to build a strategic foundation for e-learning, addressing the emerging approaches to e-learning in addition to synthesizing other learning efforts of the organization.

3. "New approaches for e-learning"

Access to information is as essential for learning as instruction. According to Rosenberg, "knowledge management supports the creation, archiving, and sharing of valued information, expertise, and insight within and across communities of people and organizations with similar interests and needs" (p. 66). The benefits include the facilitation of learning with specific information needed at a specific time for a specific purpose and the ability to leverage and grow the collective knowledge of the organization. An important component is the inclusion of performance support components designed to enhance performance. Rosenberg stresses the research on the importance of using communities of interest to support and enhance the learning process. He emphasizes that people learn more effectively when they interact and are involved with other people participating in similar endeavors. E-learning is powerful when both training and knowledge management are integrated, but even more powerful when integrated with classroom training in a "learning architecture" (p. 117). He defines a learning architecture as "the design, sequencing, and integration of all electronic and non-electronic components of learning to derive optimum improvement in competence and performance"

(p. 118). E-learning is not the end to classroom training and, in fact, classroom training will be redefined to focus on those aspects of learning that are best accomplished when there is the requirement for person-to-person interactions, identifying opportunities for improvement, team efforts, evaluative tasks, and the participation of experts with the group.

4. "Organizational requirements for e-learning"

Rosenberg discusses the infrastructure and technology considerations for succeeding in e-learning. Any e-learning strategy is doomed to failure without adequate access to the Internet. In addition, the level or speed of connectivity and the learning platform to be used must be considered. The learning management system (LMS) is another consideration and is essential to allow employees and employers to manage and evaluate the learning process.

An important part of this section is the discussion on the critical success factors that must be considered when embarking on the e-learning path. These factors are "culture, champions, communication, and change" (p. 179). "Organizations that are truly learning organizations, quickly move beyond the where and how of learning, concentrating instead on ingraining it into the work culture" (p. 180). Rosenberg articulates how each of these factors can help or hinder an e-learning initiative and gives valuable strategies for success. For example, culture-building strategies that work includes making managers accountable for the learning of their employees and legitimizing the learning programs so that they become part of the everyday work environment and work day.

Rosenberg discusses how to justify e-learning and measure performance of the initiative using the four major criteria for business performance identified by Hammer and Champy (2001) in *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution*. "Cost, quality, service and speed" (p. 212) become the e-learning value proposition used to build the defensible business case. Understanding how e-learning can cost less than classroom training is based on reducing operational costs by increasing efficiency and decreasing cycle time, for example. Quality is demonstrated by responding to and appropriately acting on employee evaluations of the learning content and by evaluating effectiveness based on improved performance. Service value can include looking at the accessibility of the learning and the quality of the access. The focus on quickly implementing the e-learning initiative or quickly adjusting to changing business needs helps to define the speed component of the value proposition.

Addressing operational barriers to success is the basis for the governance model that Rosenberg presents in *Table 9.1: Converting to a New E-Learning Business and Governance Model* (p. 242). This model is probably the most controversial concept of the entire book. Essentially, the e-learning group should have its own leadership and staff and not necessarily from the traditional training department. The budget is separate and multiyear and the investment is based on programs important to the business and not cost recovery. E-learning should not report to the training department head but to a separate governance board. Accountability measurements for the group are based on the four criteria for business performance: cost, quality, service, and speed.

The section on creating the e-learning strategy is applicable to any major strategic development plan. Rosenberg recommends identifying key stakeholders to be involved in the strategy development, analyzing the current business environment and assessing the alignment of the goals of the initiative with the goals of the business.

He concludes the text with a list of challenges to e-learning that include effectively leveraging the phenomenal explosion in the e-learning industry, understanding that learning effectiveness is critical and good instructional design cannot be underestimated. Knowledge management and performance support are key components to the learning paradigm and must be considered as part of the learning architecture. Critically important is the "people-centric nature of learning" (p. 308) that must be preserved.

5. Conclusions

E-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age, is an excellent resource for any organization investigating the need to implement e-learning and for those organizations with established e-learning programs. The strategies and tools presented offer practical, sound business methodologies to accomplish broad integration of e-learning into the learning organization, in addition to identifying areas where it may not be practical or effective. Two important concepts are presented in this book and are worthwhile to reiterate. The discussion on the justification and measurement model for e-learning using well-established business metrics of cost, quality, service, and speed are important metrics. Critical success factors for implementation of an e-learning strategy including culture, champions, communication, and change are factors that are most important for any new enterprise-wide initiative.

References

Hammer, M., & Champy, J. (2001). *Reengineering the corporation: a manifesto for business revolution*. New York: Harper Business.