
Understanding the culture of e-learning

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Abstract

Culture is a vital consideration for businesses. Culture means different things to different people. It denotes civilisation, but also customs, traditions and codes. It is possible to think of culture as everything that differentiates between mere existence and true quality of life. National culture is complex enough, but when you combine it with the unique business culture which defines every organisation you have a complicated riddle to solve. Understanding the cultural complexity of an organisation can help a business maximise the full potential of its e-learning activity – the difference between “mere existence” and “true quality”. The key questions are: how is that happening and how do you adapt this to an e-learning strategy?

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It is becoming generally accepted that in order for an e-learning strategy to succeed there are five main success factors – the five Cs: content, capability, cost, clients – and most importantly, culture. Culture has always been a particularly contentious issue, but as the market matures, and organisations begin to look at pan-continental, and in some cases, global e-learning solutions, this author asks whether it is cultural complexity that is stopping many organisations from achieving e-learning success.

Business is obsessed with developing strategies for improving learner enrolments, completion rates and satisfaction with the latest training delivery method – e-learning. Where the industry has focused on technology for the last 18 months, the move is now towards the development of high quality, custom content. This technological obsession is nothing new; you only have to think of the space race for an example of the ongoing drive to innovate. The Americans wanted to be the first to write in space, spending millions to develop the sealed and pressurised Fisher Space Pen, but the Russians won the race by using a pencil! This example does more than show that innovation is in the eye of the beholder – it also encapsulates those cultural differences that divide audiences.

Understanding culture

Culture means different things to different people. It denotes civilisation, but also customs, traditions and codes. It is possible to think of culture as everything that differentiates between mere existence and true quality of life. But these are recent interpretations – the classic dictionary definition does not stress the training and improving nature of culture “refining the moral and intellectual nature of man”, as Webster’s would have it. What more appropriate definition could the e-learning industry want?

If culture means improvement and training, then the critical strategy for effective e-learning must surely be to recognise the different cultures of learning between and within organisations. This seems more relevant than considerations that merely address the national, religious and political differences of an audience. It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that traditional



culture should be dismissed, as unimportant and irrelevant, when developing engaging and compelling content – these issues still have great importance. The point is that these are often already being addressed effectively within the organisation. The key question is: How is that happening and how do you adapt this to an e-learning strategy?

Learning that fits

What LINE understands is that in any pan-continental or global roll-out, the primary consideration has to be the inherited culture of learning, and the development of e-learning to fit into that specific corporate cultural environment. The industry must come to terms with initially high drop-out rates from courses. There are many reasons for this – as we are all too aware – with quality being one of the main challenges for business leaders. An aspect of quality in a business context has to be relevance. Part of that relevance has to be cultural fit to the organisation, but in the rush to complete implement, many large organisations have chosen to roll-out catalogues of “off-the-shelf” courses. Whilst there is no doubt that for some aspects of training this is the perfect solution – particularly where IT is concerned, extending this model to other forms of training is prone to fail both from the perspective of national culture, and the company culture.

Global programs

Fitting programs into the existing company culture they will be welcomed and accepted, leaving business free to concentrate on a strategy for greater enrolment and course completion and retention for tangible performance improvement and return on investment. Some of LINE’s experience of developing culturally astute learning content is based on our work with one of the world’s largest professional services firms, where we designed, developed and helped implement a global e-learning strategy – which had more than 20,000 enrolments in 2001 alone. We are now developing one of the most ambitious e-learning implementations to date for one of the world’s most forward thinking organisations – Volvo Car Corporation.

Volvo has a strong sense of corporate identity, embedded in the very core of the business and running through almost every aspect of operations. We are helping Volvo to deliver a uniform induction training program to a culturally diverse global workforce numbering more than 50,000 that will take on every aspect of the Volvo culture from national and learning to language and business ethic. This drive towards achieving a common culture has been one of the keys to developing an effective multinational company, through which all learning and training is delivered.

Avoiding elephant traps

If culture is starting to look a more complicated topic – it is, but addressing some of the basic issues that will make e-learning more effective is not. Think about some of those basic questions:

- What is the culture of learning?
- What is the age of the target audience?
- How much time do people have?
- What tone of voice does the company use?

On a recent project for a major oil company we researched the age of the audience and found that well over 90 percent were between 30 and 40. This was not what we, or the client, had expected – the expectation had been that the audience would be between 20 and 30. In the context of e-learning the age difference has an effect on the type of program that is produced. This ten year gap between those who grew up with computers and the Internet through education, and those that did not and the user testing we conducted shows that it makes a subtle but important difference to what people will find intuitive.

On a financial training project we realised that the very busy and pressurised audience would never find the time to sit in front of their computer screen to learn, so we have developed whole courses for personal digital assistants (PDAs) to be taken in 15 minute chunks over a four month period. When training 35,000 management consultants in different industries we have used short 30-40 minute courses; not because there isn’t always more to learn, but as a result of being short (and stimulating) they get done. It also makes

them effective (87 percent saying they help them do their job better).

For the Volvo project we are tailoring the program to different parts of the company both regionally and functionally, but using the same core program. None of this is rocket science; but all of it is about being sensitive to the needs and culture of the audience that is being addressed. This must be said because the e-learning industry seems to have “unlearnt” some of simple basics about delivering learning itself.

Where next?

This is the point at which corporations themselves need to wake up and understand that the power of e-learning will be only be

realised when it is seen within an overall vision of learning which fits the company culture. This will require designing a well thought through “blend”, using the ideal tool, at the best time, for a relevant subject, to the right person.

So here is to a future where trainers and communicators, media developers and subject matter experts, instructional and interactive designers who are all culturally aware and understand their audience, work for enlightened and forward thinking clients who are prepared to invest the time and money to really get this right. Needless to say we like to think it has been happening at LINE for years – and to a large extent it’s true – we have had some great successes. But – let us face it, despite all our experience, this is still just the beginning.