

E-learner experiences: key questions to ask when considering implementing e-learning

Andrew Ettinger, Viki Holton and Eddie Blass

Andrew Ettinger is Director of Learning Resources, Viki Holton is a Senior Researcher and Eddie Blass is a Research Associate, all at Ashridge, Berkhamsted, UK.

Abstract

Purpose – To draw attention to what experience has shown are the “must consider” areas to be taken into account when considering an e-learning intervention.

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

Findings – This article draws on the experiences of a number of companies which experienced difficulties in taking the e-learning route. E-learning should not necessarily be used to replace classroom training as it is not suitable for everything. You need to make sure that the learning or training needs drive the technology rather than the other way round, and the technology itself can pose a multitude of problems. The time involved is also commonly underestimated, as is the diverse range of people who should be involved in the start-up team.

Practical implications – Attention is drawn to key areas for consideration when venturing into an e-learning development.

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

Keywords E-learning, Learning methods

Paper type Case study

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. A number of themes recurred when it came to the issue of implementing e-learning in the organisation and in this article, the third of four, attention is paid to the questions that need to be asked prior to embarking on an e-learning development. By drawing on the experiences of other companies’ mistakes, insight is provided to prevent organisations who are contemplating going the e-learning route in the near future from hitting the same brick walls.

The planning and design phase of the e-learning can be very time consuming and should not be hurried at the expense of getting it right. At Lloyds TSB they found that 70 per cent of the pre-launch time was spent on planning and development, while only 30 per cent was spent on testing and refining the approach and software. A number of key questions have arisen from the research, the answers to which greatly affect the design of the e-learning project itself. The rest of this article addresses these questions and reflects on other organisations’ experiences.

First is the question of how many staff will need to have access to e-learning at their desks? The challenges of delivering online learning where 50 per cent of staff are remotely based, and therefore have limited access online, are very different to where 95 per cent have their own desk/workstation. Also, if people do use their PCs all the time, they may not want to learn at them. Volvo hit this problem with their Financial Services staff. Because staff were using PCs for the majority of the time for their job, they were less likely to regard their PC as a learning and development tool.

Next for consideration is how will staff be encouraged to use e-learning? Some training may be voluntary while other elements may be mandatory, each with their own cost and resource implications. If it is mandatory, how will you be able to track usage to ensure compliance? Gartmore, an international asset management firm overcame this issue by using a blended learning approach, where part of the learning was done online and the rest was taught face-to-face. This allowed the taught element to act as a means of ensuring that the online element had been completed. Somerset County Council took a different approach to their 17,000 staff and introduced their e-learning project with targeted material to support priority areas. This included performance appraisal and pressure and stress at work where new policy and guidance needed to be delivered to a large number of managers in a relatively short period of time. Whilst they did face both technical and cultural problems, the response was encouraging and it did provide the opportunity to learn quickly and introduce changes that were of most benefit to the Council and the users of the e-learning. The issues around marketing the e-learning provision discussed in the second of this series of articles are also pertinent here.

Depending on the structure of your organisation, the question of whether or not the e-learning will just be targeted at permanent staff might arise. In an electronic world of partnership and strong supplier chains, education may need to extend beyond the permanent staff group. Holstrom (2003) has found that reaching all learners is neither cheap nor easy. It requires a reassessment of assumptions about delivery systems and the learners themselves in terms of IT proficiency, self-managed learning proficiency and language proficiency (both English and technical jargon). This said, the BBC have successfully included freelance staff; GE plans to include contractors; others such as BT and the British Council are using e-learning for their own staff and also offer it to external audiences that they have specifically targeted. If you do go for a wider audience you need to address additional legal issues such as confidentiality, and intellectual property rights and trade secrets.

While the rhetoric of any time, any place, any where might be one of e-learning's appeal, the question of when and where will the learning take place does actually need to be considered. Delivering online learning across different sites and departments has certain technical issues. Delivering it to staff at home presents many others including problems with firewalls as well as the work/life balance issue. Could offering e-learning at home increase the time people spend working? Once you start thinking globally the difficulties multiply further. Both the British Council and Volvo Trucks found that introducing e-learning on a global scale had additional costs and issues in terms of the need for local content and multiple language provisions. While English may be used as the business language, learning is a complex, thinking process and many staff prefer to learn in their mother tongue.

How will the learning take place? There may be an expectation that staff will sit at their desk and learn, but in reality making sure people are not disturbed can be difficult. 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).

What e-learning technology will be used and is it compatible with existing technology frameworks? Many organisations have found it hard to match technology across different sites and different business units. Sometimes it may be necessary to aim for the lowest common denominator in order to be able to reach the intended audience, and this then has an effect on the design. Singh and Reed (2002) find that despite the industry developing specifications, there are actually no e-learning standards yet, which means that there is no standardization of products to make them compatible with each other. Hence content may not be portable between learning management systems (LMS), and you may not be able to track data or share content between different e-learning applications running in the same company.

What type of learning will be delivered online? Francis and Emelo (2002) debate whether it is better to buy-in or build your own, while Kiser (2002) questions whether or not it is necessary

“There may be a hybrid solution that is more efficient still – where lower level or generic skills are bought in but company-specific items are developed in-house.”

to appoint subject matter experts. There may be a hybrid solution that is more efficient still – where lower level or generic skills are bought in but company-specific items are developed in-house. Be aware, though, that this could lead to some of the compatibility issues raised above.

Will staff be keen to learn on-line? This is perhaps the most important question of all. The greatest hurdle for many is getting staff to try e-learning and some have found it useful to revisit self-development models of learning which were first discussed in the 1990s. By linking learning to development plans there is a purpose and reason for it to take place. Logicom focussed the introduction of their e-learning on its being integrated into the general HR and development practices of the company. For example, they use e-learning materials to support personal development plans as agreed between staff and their managers during appraisal discussion; they use e-learning as pre-course development prior to an in-house training event; and they use e-learning to support their managers' plans for team events. They also encourage staff to book time in the e-learning resource centre rather than just dropping in to help formalise the process with the staff. Xerox Europe also has a company framework which links appraisals, “Performance Excellence”, personal development plans and e-learning. Norwich Union is also in the process of linking more closely their e-learning appraisal processes through personal development plans.

There is also the issue of people simply not wanting to learn online. E-learning requires self-motivation and self-managed learning. Some people are used to, and prefer, the few days offsite with its associated social life, and hence may rebel at having to learn in an alternative way. Therefore it becomes crucial that you sell and market the e-learning provision appropriately from the start.

Many companies report the value of a pilot programme. Learning the lessons from such early work is important. The BBC, for example, found that the pilot of e-learning did not create the level of interest expected. The team had a re-think and decided they needed to actively market and promote e-learning. Coca-Cola Enterprises GB decided that as e-learning was new, the HR team should be the first to experience it so that they would be able to understand what helps and hinders the e-learning process itself.

The obvious question is why has e-learning proved to be so hard to implement? One reason appears to be that a cultural change is needed about how training and learning happens and, most importantly, how it is delivered. Many organisations have found to their cost that if e-learning is made available in a passive way, say by distributing passwords and telling people about e-learning programmes, this rarely creates a rush of interest.

As with any training intervention, planning and thinking time is important but the research indicates that this is even more the case for e-learning. One mistake mentioned by a few was where time had been taken to carefully plan content and approach, but planning the final delivery phase was neglected. Developing e-learning in a decentralised environment presents certain additional challenges. A WebLearn programme introduced at BP created a central e-learning capability group to identify high leverage areas for e-learning. Separate teams then developed these autonomously across the business world-wide. This approach worked well for them and within 12 months they had 30 different projects in existence (Accenture, 2002).

The British Council is another decentralised environment with offices from Manchester to Malaysia and most points in between. They operate in 110 countries and have over 200 offices worldwide, with over 80 per cent of the 7000 + staff working outside of the UK. Although English is a common language, it is likely to be the second or third language for most of their employees. They give considerable autonomy to each country (or area) of operation and this itself has presented a particular challenge around securing support for and the effective use of e-learning that would require relatively high investment, especially at the initial stages. It was therefore important to get the correct balance between a highly devolved organisation and one in which a corporate framework and the tools required to effect and create a corporate e-learning infrastructure would be available. So far they have developed (in-house) seven core modules on topics such as induction, enquiry management and information retrieval for enquiries. The longest of these represents 20 hours of learning in total. They are now trying to get a number of people based in the same office to undertake the online programme at the same time to overcome the negative issues of isolation and lack of interaction with other participants. Progress is monitored throughout these modules by the use of individual learning logs and a threaded discussion area with online back up from a UK based tutor.

The temptation with e-learning is often to design on a grand scale – something that a number of organisations warn against. One organisation in particular reflected on a competitor who had undertaken a large but unsuccessful e-learning programme. This was solid proof to them 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”. It is far better to build awareness about e-learning first. The differences between e-learning and more traditional types of training may also need to be carefully thought through in each company.

Similarities between e-learning and traditional training approaches include:

- Finding time for e-learning (and training in general) is difficult; the same is true of course for any training intervention. However, the impact on e-learning is greater due to its greater reliance on individual motivation.
- Spending time to carefully plan and design helps all training but this is much more important for e-learning. Many organisations cite this as a factor in their success.
- Return on investment (ROI) applies to all training interventions, however the high investment costs of e-learning may increase the focus on ROI. This said, a survey of over 200 senior executives by Young (2002) reported 51 per cent seeing an efficiency gain, 46 per cent seeing a positive impact on the quality of critical business processes, and 20 per cent seeing improved employee retention, with 53 per cent seeing a decline in training costs.

Differences between e-learning and traditional training approaches include:

- Resistance to e-learning is widespread and often hard to overcome. Encountering a minor problem with a training programme rarely puts people off training completely. The reverse happens with e-learning and minor difficulties can have a huge negative effect.
- Quality content and user-friendly technology are even more important for e-learning.
- Staff may fear technology. Although this was mentioned by a few companies in the Ashridge study it tended to be a minor rather than major problem.

“The advice therefore is that, especially in the early stages, ‘small is beautiful’. It is far better to build awareness about e-learning first. The differences between e-learning and more traditional types of training may also need to be carefully thought through in each company.”

- E-learning requires a cultural change about how training and learning occurs. Organisations that are successful with e-learning are those that appreciate the level of change required.

On the face of it, this looks like e-learning has all the disadvantages of traditional training but magnified, and none of the advantages! This is not the case. There are many benefits to be gained, particularly if you want to provide a standard learning message for more than one site, such as is the case with the British Council. Remember also that most employees currently being introduced to e-learning did not grow up with computers, did not use them at school, and have not previously used them as a learning aid. The generation starting out in the labour market now will find e-learning easier, and the next generation will find it easier still, as they have been involved with e-learning of one form or another throughout their school education experience – if only to look up items on the internet or a CD ROM. The coming generation of employees are more comfortable with e-media than are the current ones, and they have not yet had the experience of the corporate away day training sessions as a comparator. Given this change in the profile of potential learners, the future for e-learning can only be more positive than it may seem currently in some organisations.

References

- Accenture (2002), "Digital empowerment at BP enables value creation through e-learning", in-house publication, Accenture, London.
- Francis, L. and Emelo, R. (2002), *Buy versus Build: A Battle of Needs*, American Society of Training and Development, Alexandria, VA.
- Galagan, P. (2002), "Mission e-possible: the Cisco e-learning story", in Rossett, A. (Ed.), *The ASTD E-Learning Handbook*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Holstrom, L. (2003), "Eliminating barriers for all e-learners", *Educational Technology*, Vol. 43 No. 6, pp. 61-2.
- Kiser, K. (2002), "Taking it to the bank", *E-learning Magazine*, July.
- Singh, H. and Reed, C. (2002), "Demystifying e-learning standards", *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 62-5.
- Young, K. (2002), "Is e-learning delivery ROI?", *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol. 34 No. 12, pp. 54-61.

Corresponding author

Eddie Blass can be contacted at: Eddie.blass@ashridge.org.uk

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints