

E-learning – offering opportunity

The case of ALSTOM

Vicky O’Leary



Vicky O’Leary is Director of Programme Development, RRC Business Training, London, UK. E-mail: vicky.oleary@rrc.co.uk

Distance learning has long been an established method of achieving knowledge and gaining professional qualifications and is now accepted as being a viable alternative to face-to-face teaching in a classroom. However, now, the increased reliability, speed and memory of modern computers, coupled with easy access to the world wide web, has made the infamous “e-learning” program a much sought-after alternative to the more conventional paper-based distance learning course. But can it really deliver all that it promises?

Solving logistical challenges

One of the most important benefits provided by e-learning is its ability to offer supported “Martini” learning – any time, any place, any where. E-learning offers learners the ability to take part in a tutor-led program without needing to commit to being at a particular location, at a particular time, each week.

ALSTOM, the global specialist in energy and transport infrastructure, opted for e-learning as the delivery mechanism for the health and safety training program they wanted to introduce for this very reason.

The initial ALSTOM pilot group involved a relatively small number of students from 16 different countries, so it would not have been financially or logistically feasible to develop and implement a face-to-face program, while a pure distance-learning program could not offer the collaborative learning that ALSTOM desired. E-learning provided the ideal solution.

Internationalization

Multinational organizations, by their very nature, are staggered across several countries and perhaps even continents. E-learning makes it possible to run a cohort which is truly global. In today’s world, gaining an international perspective is vital and e-learning enables individuals working for the same company, but who are spread throughout numerous locations, to build improved working relationships with colleagues they may never actually get to meet,

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resulting (hopefully) in a better flow of communication between offices enduring long after the end of the course.

Thankfully, many professional bodies are now also realizing the importance of international qualifications and are developing international equivalents of popular UK qualifications. This enables employees in different countries to study the same core information, ensuring common knowledge and understanding irrespective of location.

Bespoke knowledge

The e-learning environment enables not only the actual course material to be personalized to that group of learner's particular needs, but also the environment itself.

Following the successful introduction of the International Certificate programme, ALSTOM asked RRC to create a bespoke health and safety e-learning program tailored specifically to the needs of their staff.

Not only were the materials bespoke to ALSTOM's needs, but also the e-learning environment enabled RRC to provide links to ALSTOM's own document database, ensuring that learners could access everything they needed from one location. Assignments were also tailored to assess knowledge of ALSTOM's own operating procedures.

In addition to the standard elements of e-learning courses, corporate groups like ALSTOM are also able to benefit from private dedicated classrooms, allowing them to discuss sensitive information relating to the company without the fear that it will be read by competitors. This is particularly important in the area of health and safety where companies may be reluctant to divulge their own day-to-day practices for fear of repercussions. As it is generally accepted that nearly 70 percent of what an employee needs to know is learned outside of formal training, such communities allow learners to share the practical know-how which is difficult to capture in discrete learning objects and which would otherwise remain untapped.

Progress tracking

Another fundamental benefit of e-learning is the ease with which tutors and managers can track the participation and success of the program. Tutors on the ALSTOM programs were able to track the progress of participants at a glance, viewing how many pages of online course material each learner had accessed, how long they had spent online and how well they did in each of their assessments.

The future is bright

In short, e-learning has the potential to make learning exciting, engaging and compelling and means it no longer needs to be a passive experience, with the trainer simply telling the learner what he or she needs to know. Instead, learning can be based on debate and discussion, and constantly referenced back to the learner's own working situation, enabling them to understand fully what they are studying.

This said, a corporate client cannot expect to be able to devolve all responsibility for the training to an external provider, however competent. They must be prepared not only to market it internally to ensure that all participants are aware of what is expected of them, but also to be seen to “back” the project by taking an interest in the group's progress. Given the excellent tracking facilities available on most e-learning courses, this should not be an arduous task, but will make all the difference to the success of the program.

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Equally, e-learning should not be the mode of choice for all learners on all courses. Some learners prefer to work on their own at their own pace and do not miss the lesser interaction provided on a distance learning course. Forcing such people to train via e-learning can have disastrous effects. If there are several people on a course who are failing to interact with the group, hostility may arise with those contributing feeling that the others are benefiting from their thoughts and ideas without bothering to contribute anything themselves. It must also be remembered that if it is to be time-efficient, learners must have a reasonable knowledge of the internet so that they can intuitively work their way round the system. Also if they do not have access to the internet at home, they may actually be able to devote less time to study than they would otherwise.

As ever in the world of training, despite the obvious benefits offered by e-learning, consideration must be given to the individual needs of specific learners to ensure that the mode of delivery is chosen for the benefits it can offer rather than its position as the latest training trend.