How to buy successful e-Learning: top tips for training buyers

Ian Page

Ian Page is Marketing Director at SkillGate. E-mail: www.skillgate.com

Introduction

Surprisingly, less than 10 per cent of time spent on training in organisations is currently delivered by e-Learning, according to research from the UK's Chartered Institute of Training & Development (CIPD). However, this is about to change as more companies rush to adopt the technology.

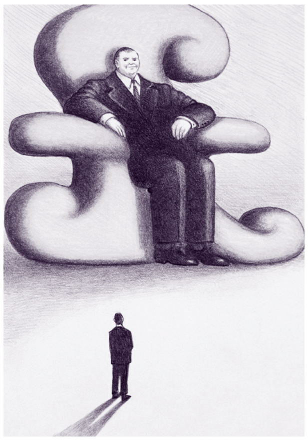
The CIPD survey forecasts that within three years, up to 25 per cent of training will be delivered by e-Learning.

Market research company IDC is going as far as predicting a 30 per cent compound annual growth rate for e-Learning across Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) between now and 2008.

The most difficult step in implementing e-Learning is the first step. The market is flooded with software, authoring tools and learning management systems, so it is easy to get lost in the maze before you've even started.

It goes without saying that you must first understand your organisation's training requirements and match them to your available resources and current capabilities.

Once you have a blueprint in place, it is worth using the following five key rules to ensure you buy effective e-Learning. This will help you avoid the frustration and pitfalls that can raise their ugly heads when developing a new online training solution.



Overview

If you only do five things:

1. closely analyse the requirements of your delegates;
2. make sure you can measure the effectiveness of your e-Learning solution;
3. ensure your content wins over design;
4. make certain that your e-learning solution is addressing the problem in hand; and
5. make sure your e-learning solution ''blends'' all appropriate media.

Rule 1: closely analyse the requirements of your delegates

This might sound obvious but ''relevance theory'' has a lot to say about effective e-Learning. Delegates complete online courses because they feel they are:

- *Rewarding*, i.e. the delegate feels they will gain some tangible or perceived intangible benefit. For example, a qualification may result in entry to an academic society or lead to improved job prospects and salary.

- *Convenient*. The method of delivery of learning is straightforward. It must conveniently slot into a learner's daily routine and be convenient.

The more reward the delegate perceives, the more inconvenience they will accept in the delivery method. Or, put another way, the more effort they will make to complete the learning process.

A course becomes ''relevant'' to the delegate at the perceived trade off point between convenience and reward.

Rule 2: measure it!

Unlike traditional forms of business training, measuring completion rates is an excellent way to assess whether delegates found e-Learning relevant.

Many companies have invested in learning management systems (LMSs) to facilitate this. Various standards have been created to allow developers to plug content into these measurement systems. One example is Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) – an XML-based framework used to define and access information about learning objects, so they can be easily shared among different LMSs. Another standard, AICC, defines the structure of a training programme and how courses talk to an LMS.

An effective LMS, combined with these industry standards, can be an important foundation for e-Learning, but it is not the only route. It is imperative that trainers who buy e-Learning solutions should focus attention on the design and timing issues wrapped around content delivery.

Increasingly companies are focussing on ''solutions''-based approaches where e-Learning software is selected for its relevance to a specific learning objective. While solutions-based approaches do not require LMSs, it is still imperative that systematic and comparative measurement is part of an e-Learning package.

Rule 3: the problem e-Learning solves is rarely defined by the learner

The big question that needs to be answered in companies is: ''What problem is e-Learning solving?'' Individuals are notoriously reluctant to part with their own money to pay for training. Nine times out of ten, it is the company that endorses training spend. However, the return on investment the company expects is usually not the same as that expected by the learner.

It is important to underline who is paying and why, before implementing an e-Learning programme. At present, 70 per cent of CIPD members are using e-Learning for IT training. The runner up is technical training (45 per cent), followed by health and safety (34 per cent) and induction training (33 per cent).

In our experience, e-Learning can have huge benefits in the following areas:

- *Technical specialist education*. In a fast moving, growing and dynamic industry, keeping abreast of the latest thinking, sources and knowledge can be difficult. e- Learning is an obvious choice to fill the knowledge gap.
- *Reducing the cost of investment in people*. An increasing number of industries believe continuous professional development is part of their commitment to their workforce, offering long-term benefits in staff retention and quality of management. Return on investment is still a key issue though, hence a growing trend for companies to buy libraries of e-Learning content.
- *Meeting legal requirements.* Many industries and companies are now legally required to educate staff and award competency or knowledge certification for regulation and compliance. e-Learning is an easy and inexpensive ongoing compliancy training solution.
- *High speed induction*. Industries with high level technical content and/or large numbers of unqualified or inexperienced newcomers need rapid skills induction. Formal induction education and technical knowledge improvement paths are delivered in incremental stages or modules – often ending in a formal qualification. The flexibility of e-Learning lends itself well to this arena.

Rule 4: your success will be measured by how little time delegates spend learning – not how long!

Many e-Learning designers believe they have to incorporate numerous ''bells and whistles'' into a site to keep a delegate online for as long as possible. This is often referred to as the ''stickiness'' factor. The theory behind this is that the longer a delegate spends online, the more knowledge they will absorb. There is actually no logic to this.

At a recent meeting of the e-Learning Network, the audience – comprised largely of training designers and managers – was asked what they thought caused the ''wow'' factor in e-Learning. The majority agreed that it was content, not design. The ''wow'' factor for a delegate comes when they learn something they recognise as useful to their jobs. It follows that the quicker they can learn it, the better.

Rule 5: successful e-Learning should be ''blended'' in several ways

A commonly understood model of e-Learning delivery is the ''blended'' theory, where e-Learning content is delivered prior to physical attendance at a training course or a post-course programme – the ''sandwich''. This can be an efficient and effective method, particularly if travel costs have to be taken into account, for example.

However, successful e-Learning can involve many ''blendable'' dimensions. For example:

- *Involve supervisors*. It should be easy for line managers to access information on, and assist in, a delegate's e-Learning progress.
- *Mix objects to create individualised solutions*. Study programmes should be flexible enough to deal with individual learning patterns. Some delegates, for example, may need extra help in modules originally thought easy. Beware of expensive courseware that is ''fixed in stone'' once it is completed.
- *Integrate time as an ally*. Traditional training is usually bound to a time and date schedule. With e-Learning, training can be delivered 24/7 and with varying intensity.
- *Use a range of educational media*. e-Learning should integrate all educational media. It is easy to include virtual meeting sessions or video streaming into courses. e- Learning can also incorporate colleague feedback, managed action planning, real-time workplace exercises and coaching.

Keywords:
Computer based learning,
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