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The virtual classroom

E-learning is an all-embracing and cost-effective way of training staff – how can it benefit your company?

A generation ago, the skills our parents learned at school or college would have been enough to take them through the greater proportion of their working life. The current working generation no longer enjoys such a luxury. There are many people working today who had never heard of e-business when they began their career and yet, now, e-business is central to the existence and success of the vast majority of the world's companies. Employees now have little choice but to keep retraining and attaining new skills to keep up with these constant changes in working practices.

Most people learn the new skills required to work in the e-business world in the workplace. The rate of development of e-business is such that an average employee could potentially experience a new skills gap every two to three years, affecting both their efficiency and their potential to develop. It is in the interests of both employer and the employee to meet these skills shortfalls as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Recent developments in technology have meant that the way in which companies train their staff has been entirely revolutionised. And the ease with which this technology can be adapted by large and small companies alike has meant a huge increase in the adoption of e-learning techniques.

What is e-learning?

In practical terms, e-learning has given us the ability to learn outside a physical classroom. "Distributed learning" has been with us for many years, usually in the form of correspondence courses and other distance learning techniques, but internet technology has provided the means for an advanced and wide-ranging e-learning infrastructure. E-learning allows companies to deliver effective, specifically targeted training in a cost-effective way. It can deliver training on a global basis, while tailoring content to suit the needs of individuals. It also allows an organisation to regularly assess skills gaps and invest in existing staff to plug those gaps.

Its benefits have already been realised by a number of the world's leading companies. Proctor & Gamble and GE have already embraced the idea, and John Chambers, CEO of Cisco, has described e-learning as "the third wave of the internet." Already, 30 per cent of corporate learning is taking the form of e-learning, while 70 per cent takes place in the classroom. However, within just 18 months, I firmly believe that this will be reversed, and 70 per cent of corporate learning will be taking place electronically.

What are the types of e-learning?

Broadly, e-learning technology can be split into three groups:

- Self-paced or asynchronous learning – a worker chooses a course independently and learns online, usually alone. Asynchronous learning is the e-equivalent of reading a book.
- Collaborative or synchronous learning – this usually makes use of instant messaging technology, which allows a remote learner to interact with others in the group, asking questions and discussing points.
- The virtual classroom or real-time learning – video internet technology allows a learner to see the teacher and talk to others in the class through instant messaging or an audio link.

Almost any type of corporate learning can be transferred to the e-learning arena. However, companies should realise that there are still forms of training that require contact with other people. For example, training that involves behavioural changes and, therefore, a high level of role-playing and interaction are much more effective if staff are able to physically interact with each other.

The arguments for e-learning

The need for a more competent workforce has never been greater. Globalisation, intense competition and the increasing premium on knowledge and service

work all need staff with new and different skills to drive the rapid pace of change demanded by CEOs. Constant retraining and assessment of skills, therefore, is something that successful companies cannot afford to overlook.

For employers, the immediate benefits of e-learning are obvious. Essentially, it is considerably cheaper than the traditional forms of education and training, both in terms of the direct cost of paying for individual courses and transporting large numbers of staff to a separate venue, and in terms of the time employees spend away from the office on traditional training courses.

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But the benefits go well beyond direct cost savings. In today's fast moving, web-enabled business environment there is no longer such a thing as a sustainable competitive advantage. The pressures of an e-business world are such that companies must constantly renew their business and react with lightning speed to the changing demands of the markets. A company's ability to react quickly depends almost entirely on its staff. Increasingly, true competitive advantage lies in a company's personnel and how well and quickly they learn.

Smart companies are, therefore, bringing people to the very heart of their strategies. This means not only more aggressive – and strategic recruitment – but also a more strategic approach to skill-building among existing workers. This focus on strategic retention, combining staff perks and development opportunities, helps to retain and motivate a company's best staff.

Further, the demand for talented employees has reached new heights and more companies are reporting difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled staff. In the longer-term, e-learning is likely to contribute to a company's ability to attract new talent. As each successive generation of new employees arrives with greater comfort with the internet, the opportunity of development and learning offerings through that medium becomes a natural expectation. The companies with these facilities on offer as the norm are going to be much more attractive to web-savvy recruits.

Who can benefit?

E-learning is particularly effective on a large scale – a multinational corporation, for instance, is able to use e-learning techniques to train its entire workforce around the world simultaneously on the introduction of a new product or innovation, with immediate and consistent results.

But that is not to say that e-learning is solely the domain of the largest corporations. Smaller companies can also benefit by training employees quickly and efficiently in new skills, creating a flexible and multi-talented workforce. In the UK, for instance, Unipart has introduced a comprehensive e-learning system that allows its employees to handle different parts on its distribution line. Theirs is an e-learning system based on "just-in-time" education – where the workers learn something in the morning and apply it to the distribution line in the afternoon. In Unipart's case the innovation has allowed it to widen its product base using existing staff and has gone a long way towards solving the staff retention problems suffered by so many companies. A successful e-learning strategy can be designed to fill specifically targeted skills gaps in an efficient way, serving to motivate employees, improve their productivity and reducing the need to bring in skilled workers from outside the organisation.

What are the benefits for employees?

From the employee's point of view, e-learning can produce considerable benefits towards their satisfaction and personal development. And there is evidence that a successful e-learning strategy can significantly enhance the employer/employee relationship. Employees recognise the need to constantly update their skills and expect the employer to help them meet that need.

Employees are also able to see a direct link between learning and a particular workplace goal and welcome the opportunity to learn new skills at a time and in a place that suits their requirements, rather than the company's own schedule and cost structure. It is this targeted nature of e-learning that makes it so appealing to employees. Learning can be strongly linked to an employee's performance as any specific skills gaps can be tracked, and the effectiveness of plugging those gaps can also be traced. This often means that the employee has a better "learning" experience as it relates directly to their job. E-learning platforms allow for the tailoring of learning approaches both to the needs of the business and to those of the employee.

Delivering the right product

A successful e-learning strategy demands careful thought and consideration of the benefits and limitations of internet technology.

The most important factor, irrespective of the subject area, is the timely and efficient delivery of excellent content. No employee will react well to poor content, but even if the content is good – engaging and interactive, in other words – it must be delivered in a way that is appropriate for the employees' means. Long and expensive downloads of huge media files only serve to frustrate the user and make it much less likely that they will take the time to learn.

But delivering the right content in the right way is not enough to ensure that it will be learned by the user. The keys to successful e-learning are similar to the requirements for any education strategy. You cannot drop *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* in front of a teenager and expect him to learn on his own. Learning in any form is about absorbing information but also about understanding it and learning how to apply that information in the correct way – in terms of employees, in a way that will improve their performance.

In the same way, making the most of e-learning is about much more than providing relevant information over a company intranet. Say, for example, that a company wishes to introduce a new expenses system for all its employees simultaneously across the organisation. It could point all employees to the information on its intranet, but it would have no way of knowing if all employees accessed or read the information (until, perhaps, hundreds of incorrect expenses claims arrive and chaos ensues). From the employees' point of view, they may read the information on a company intranet but if they cannot understand it, or need to ask a specific question, there is nowhere to go. The key to successful e-learning is the ability to track employees' work.

Keeping a sense of community

Classroom learning has been so successful for so many years because of the sense of community it creates. E-learning must create a similar sense of community. E-learning is remote by definition and it is vitally important that employees feel they are part of the team. Content must encourage interaction and companies should provide the means for employees to interact while they are learning. If carried out successfully, the community created in an e-learning environment can arguably be even greater than that created in a classroom as it is unrestricted by the classroom walls. Employees can discuss issues and points with others all around the world, gaining different perspectives that can be cascaded through the organisation.

conclusion

Of course, things can go wrong. But the potential pitfalls with e-learning are the same as the problems that spring up in a classroom – the work is boring or the teacher does not encourage students to discuss and interact. With e-learning this problem may be exacerbated by the fact that there is no eye contact with the teacher and so it is difficult to spot if a student has "switched off." But there are ways around this – by using a "white board" for instance, and keeping track of which students regularly contribute to the debate. A tutor can then encourage

particular students to contribute (through the use of an Instant Message, for example).

Learning is all about acquiring new ideas, skills, behaviours, experiences and working relationships, and applying them in ways that matter to performance. Learning is about the absorption and use of information, knowledge and experience – not about making such things available.

Organisations should avoid the mistakes of those companies which poured money into the mere cataloguing of – and provision of access to – knowledge. Instead, they should invest in performance and learning webs and infrastructure that marry relevant content to those who need it just in time for them to perform.

They should build performance and learning approaches that pay attention to assessment and evaluation as much before learning as afterwards. And they should focus far more of their resources and attention on the fundamental challenge of giving those with specific performance goals access to the skills, behaviours, knowledge and working relationships they need to succeed and achieve those goals.

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