

A matter of motivation

How often, when we talk about e-learning do we really mean e-training? What's the difference and why does it matter? Charles Gould examines the issues.

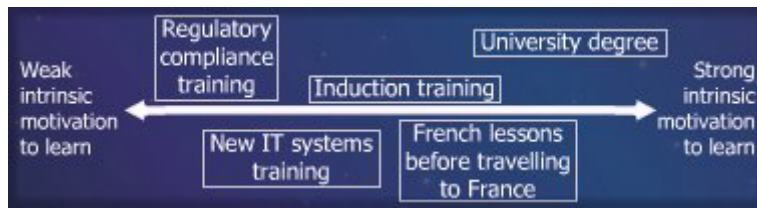
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I remember, about 5 years ago, when the term e-learning first began to creep into our vocabulary. Then, there was a genuine excitement at the prospect of empowering the learner to learn at their own pace, at a time and location that suited them. These and plenty of other often extolled virtues of e-learning were seized upon as representing the next big wave of technology, improving the way we live and work.

At the same time, it seemed to become an unspoken rule that the term 'training' was somehow not politically correct and that the emphasis should be on the experience of learning. Frankly, there is an enormous difference between what is e-learning and what would be much better recognised simply as e-training. Not only that, but unless this difference is recognised, we are at risk of misdesigning our learning solutions from the outset, whatever we choose to call them.

So what's the difference?

The difference really lies in the source of motivation to learn. When large organisations need to push through change, their people's skills and knowledge are some of the key instruments of that change. It's often essential that large numbers of people need to know something or be able to do something different. The motivation for the organisation is clear but what motivates the employees in this situation? Compare that scenario with the following one. An individual begins a qualification on a subject that interests them and which, they believe, will give them new opportunities in their career. They are prepared to invest their own time to work on the e-learning programme devised for the qualification. The motivation for the learner to learn in this situation is evident even if it does waiver from time to time.



This diagram shows a profile of a hypothetical (but fairly typical) learner and the levels of motivation they would apply to different learning or training activities.

There is something else interesting about this diagram. The weaker the intrinsic motivation, the more effort and skill is needed in designing a learning solution that will actually meet its objectives i.e. to help the learner to learn. When a person has strong intrinsic motivation to learn, they will tolerate all sorts of obstacles and difficulties to achieve their goals. They will spend time reading (yes, reading!) often long and turgid text. They do not require or expect enticing multimedia or frequent opportunities for interactivity.

Intrinsic motivation

But what do we do if that intrinsic motivation to learn is less obvious (as in the case of our organisational change example) or perhaps completely nonexistent?

The truth is that change initiatives are often met with resistance by employees. In such situations, getting people in a frame of mind to learn is no mean feat. First, there are factors external to the learning experience. Although these are crucial, as learning professionals we often have less control than would be ideal. We've already identified the link with change management. Other external factors might include: uncertainty about job security, lack of clarity about future role.

The learning experience that we design for people lacking this intrinsic motivation is a whole lot more challenging than designing for people keen and committed to learn. The first things our potential learner will ask (either consciously or sub-consciously) are: "Am I convinced that what I am learning is important to me?", "Do I believe I'll be able to use the learning in a way that matters to me?" Without positive answers to these questions, we really are fighting an uphill battle.

T-Mobile used an approach to their e-learning activity that deliberately focused on gaining attention. It focused on building motivation well before the serious learning began almost like an internal marketing campaign. This methodology is particularly appropriate for a large change initiative (in their case, implementing SAP across the business).

First, a short, linear but multimedia-rich presentation was emailed to affected staff (numbering several thousand). This was no more than 3 minutes in length. It focused on the What and Why of the project, deliberately limiting the key messages to a handful.

The next stage was a longer, more interactive presentation that began to set the scene for the training to come still using animations and audio. Its purpose was to answer questions like: "What kind of training will be available? What will be expected of me and when?"

Then there was a series of web-based training modules. Once onto this stage, the important thing was to make the first experience "safe, successful and interesting".

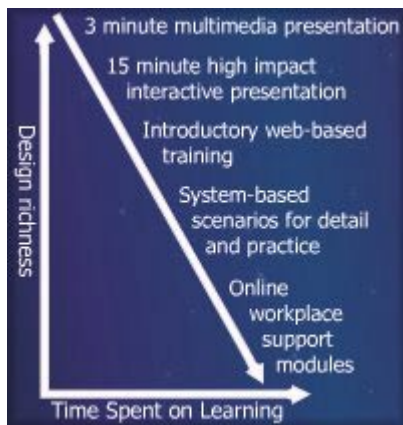
Safe – the learner should feel confident and secure. The training should feel friendly and unthreatening.

Successful – don't ask the learner to answer a really tough question straight away, boost their confidence.

Interesting – this is the time to engage the learner in the subject matter, building on the motivation they now have.

The final element of the programme was ongoing performance support material. The programme was designed to be accessible online instantly as the learner (now user) carried out their work.

How to tackle obstacles to motivation



Matthew Harris, T-Mobile's head of training for SAP felt that tackling obstacles to learner motivation was essential if the bulk of the training was to be effective. "We knew that people would need to understand how this was all going to affect them and that people might be asking why they need to do this. That was the first thing we had to address. Then, when we began the web-based training, we realised that we couldn't just stick it in the network and expect people to want to use it. They needed to know why and how it would be used in their jobs."

"Bringing a subject to life, offering unusual angles, enabling the learner the chance to engage with it in an interactive way, putting some control of the learning course into the learners' hands are all ways of consolidating learner motivation. Even where motivation to learn appears strong, the effectiveness and sustained motivation of learning depends on effective learning design.

The design of e-learning is ultimately about communications. Many of the skills used are equally applicable to internal marketing and employee communications. What we need to recognise about e-training, where an organisation needs to improve the skills and knowledge of its people, is that simply deploying online learning content is not enough. The learning will only succeed if it is positioned carefully as part of an internal communications campaign.

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