

## An holistic view of e-learning

**"Content is king" has long been the mantra of the e-learning industry. But content that is not used, or not used effectively, is like a titular head of state who looks good but has no real impact.**

- Building competency versus doing the job competently
- The holistic approach
- Identifying the learner's key drivers
- Getting the buy-in from the target audience
- Effective learning design and delivery
- Simulations to bridge the learning-doing gap
- Just in time performance support
- Post implementation evaluation

We often hear stories of corporations with huge content libraries where only a fraction of the courses are being used, and where the end goals for e-learning are not being met. E-learners, by definition, need self-motivation to work through these courses. Just providing access to a course is not dissimilar to producing a film but forgetting to create a trailer, or promote the film to its intended audience.

So, what's the best way to motivate people to use e-learning and get the best out of it? How do you ensure that they are able to appreciate the wider challenges? Without the broader business context, even well-designed content can fail to hit the mark. Content might be the lynchpin for any e-learning, but can it be effective without the broader context that drives its value and benefit?

### **Building competency versus doing the job competently**

Learning has traditionally been geared towards building competence, i.e. acquiring the skills needed to do a job effectively. The learning focus in these situations is to identify the competencies required to support the job requirements, evaluate competency gaps, and provide training interventions that

will develop the employee to full competence. Essentially, this training is event-based, delivered either through a one-off event or in the form of continuous activities. As job requirements change, employees are retrained to meet the new challenges.

However, in today's world of high staff turnover, and competitive pressures to train people quickly to perform their job competently, is this traditional training model still valid?

For most organisations, the truth is that 'time to full competence' is rarely available as fluid workforces keep moving from one job to another. For example, a claims handler in an insurance firm has to have competencies across a number of areas - from insurance specific knowledge to legal and technical skills. It's estimated that the time to full competence for this is about three years. But in today's world, employees often don't stay that long in organisations. Even if they did, the time to competence may be too long for the organisations to remain competitive.

Compounding this dilemma is the fact that the knowledge required is too vast to be retained in the users' heads. So if organisations don't have the time get their people to full competence, is there an intervention they can provide (at the point of application) so that people can perform their jobs competently? If the learning alone isn't enough, how can organisations complement it to get high performance out of their people?

## The holistic approach

Taking a step back from the initial learning issue to look at the wider challenge can provide some of the answers. We call this taking a holistic, or integrated, approach to learning.

This approach challenges us to take off our learning hat for a moment and put ourselves in the shoes of the business stakeholder. Instead of thinking about return on investment from the learning, it might make sense to think about the ROI from the overall process interventions. By doing this we can gather clearer feedback for evaluation to Kirkpatrick's level four, because business outcomes can be more easily measured.

But what components do we consider in a holistic approach?

## Identifying the learner's key drivers

Companies focus on learning outcomes but, ironically, often misunderstand the reasons for why people don't respond well to learning. Many people view a training or learning process as a means to an end. If they don't understand

what's in it for them, or how they will benefit from it, there's a high risk they won't demonstrate the desired outcome.

Identifying key learner issues is therefore as critical as identifying the organisational learning outcomes. For instance, it's widely accepted that most employees view the appraisal process as purely a salary and bonus issue. It is pointless to launch an e-learning course on effective appraisals without first addressing this misconception and then introducing the idea that performance management is as much a long-term developmental opportunity as a salary review. Unless this is clearly communicated, and the benefits can be demonstrated to your learners, the long-term objectives won't be achieved.

A simple evaluation exercise can provide answers, then myths or misunderstandings can be tackled via a communication exercise that paves the way for the coming e-learning.

### **Getting the buy-in from the target audience**

e-Learning is still an unknown area for many people, and a key requirement is therefore to gain their buy-in, and motivate them to use e-learning effectively. Even if some users have previous experience, it's possible that they have been turned off by that experience. If end users aren't motivated, there is a chance that they may do the e-learning but miss out on the key issues.

A properly targeted communication strategy is therefore essential for getting users' acceptance of an e-learning programme.

Every learner wants to know "what's-in-it-for-me", and this can be easily tackled by a high impact, focused communication campaign. The tangible deliverable could be a 30-seconds communication trailer or a number of components working together, including the communication piece, a website, an online game, emails, posters etc.

Among other things, the campaign should make users aware of what is coming, give them a feel for what they are about to experience, and engage with recipients in a positive manner.

Increasingly, these e-learning communication exercises also have a valuable role in reinforcing brand values and helping end users identify with the brand. Sometimes, it helps to brand the training itself and promote it as you would a product externally.

Gaining end user belief - or buy-in - in the benefits that an e-learning programme will bring is normally sufficient to motivate them to do the course. Of course the e-learning course will then have to ensure that the promise is kept.

## Effective learning design and delivery

However successful the communication campaign is, the learning content is still the key aspect of the solution. As e-learning is a largely unsupported activity, it is critical that the design is engaging and instructionally sound. More relaxed bandwidth restrictions and better tools are helping in the design of courses that are highly effective and that impart the end outcomes in an increasingly sophisticated manner.

But the question to ask is whether the traditional form of linear learning works. And whether there is a merit in deconstructing the accepted format of e-learning - i.e. taking users through a step-by-step or screen-by-screen learning experience.

It is true that the administration of learning is made easier by being able to provide a simple measure of success - in the learning hours that the end users complete. But whether that is the most effective way of delivering learning is debatable. It might work in some cases, but both the training community and vendors have to be bolder in taking more innovative approaches. If they do, users will get a refreshingly different experience and will appreciate learning better.

An example could be to use e-learning as an enabler to point users to already existing material, which is then followed by an online assessment. It seems redundant to convert all textual material into page turning e-learning or expensive multimedia elements when users are perfectly open to learning through conventional means once they understand the context.

Take regulatory compliance, for example. Here it would make sense to invest most of the budget in creating a high-impact short piece of e-learning, making users aware of the key issues and their importance, and then convey the content in the existing format. It could be rounded off through cleverly designed assessments that teach through the feedback process. Such an approach is more likely to attract and retain learners than if they were only taken through a 30-minute e-learning programme.

## Simulations to bridge the learning-doing gap

Practice is the best way of retaining learning. Simulations provide a safe way of practising by putting users into simulated business situations. Simulations also

provide an excellent opportunity for users to experience hypothetical scenarios that may occur only rarely in real life.

This makes transition to the job easier as the learner is able to relate their simulated experience to the real life environment. Simulations have become accepted as an integral part of e-learning programmes. Systems training and business skills training courses, for example, use simulations extensively.

However, the area where simulations can have a huge impact - in bridging the learning-doing gap - has not been fully exploited. This again extends the idea of being able to deconstruct the conventional learning programme and use simulated scenarios outside the e-learning programme. Used as part of a well-designed programme, scenarios could be used effectively to stem any loss of retention between the learning and its application. You could imagine an employee completing an e-learning course and then using simulations (at a spaced out interval) to practice what they learned before starting the job.

### **Just in time performance support**

The challenge of getting employees to perform the job competently can to some extent be addressed by providing just in time learning interventions at the time of application. Performance support isn't a new concept, but integrating e-learning design concepts into the performance support area has meant that it can be delivered in an intuitive and engaging manner.

As an example, new company employees might be required to go through an e-learning programme on performance management when they join a company. However, it is likely that they will only need to draw on the newly acquired knowledge and skills in 6 to 12 months' time. Like anything else in life, the full impact of the learning dissipates over that period of time. A simple tool to use here could be an interactive process map on the intranet that managers and employees could dip in and out of during the review process to support their roles as they needed.

This, of course, further demonstrates the vital interplay between content and its contextual positioning.

### **Post implementation evaluation**

Post implementation evaluation after the e-learning has been rolled out can provide valuable feedback for measuring learning effectiveness at various levels on the Kirkpatrick scale. But used effectively, and in conjunction with some of the tools available in the holistic approach, the feedback can be used to enhance the chances of achieving better results at levels three and four.

Simulations and just in time performance support can be designed to take care of some of the learning gaps identified at the post-implementation stage. Well-designed performance support tools can be used which have a direct impact on the business results.

In conclusion, blending learning is important, but it's not enough if we wish to truly achieve the end outcomes while carrying our learners with us. We need a more integrated approach where communication, learning and performance support initiatives work together to achieve the business outcomes. Of course, this needs organisations to step out of their traditional thinking and encourage internal communication, training and operations departments to collaborate much more closely.

It's then that the true impact of learning can be realised. A holistic approach could make the difference between failure and success - not just of the learning intervention, but of the overall business itself.

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