

Capability building in the public sector

As the public sector prepares itself for severe cuts in spending over the coming year, e-learning seems like a panacea for coping with reduced training budgets. But organisations must decide how to use learning technologies for maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

There are lots of things to consider from whether to outsource to which training is most suited to e-learning. Opening minds, talents, and perhaps even purses to collaborative development organisations can achieve exciting new ways of supporting and getting the best from their people. Charles Gould, MD of Brightwave, considers how public sector organisations can positively build capability to deal with the straitened times ahead.



Throughout the public sector the same questions arise. How can costs be reduced without undermining service quality? What efficiencies can still be realised?

With training budgets in the firing line, many of us believe that learning technologies have a key role to play in the answer. The obvious argument is to replace expensive face-to-face training with more efficient e-learning. In many cases this will involve an initial investment to reap significant benefits in the future. In other words, costs may need to increase before the efficiencies kick in. It might be difficult to convince budget holders to spend more today for savings tomorrow. However, most public sector senior managers are used to the concept

of reducing headcount even if it means some short-term expense to yield ongoing staff savings. And a simple cost-benefit analysis will usually demonstrate savings within the first six months. This figure should become exponential as a well-thought through investment pays long-term dividends.

Once the broad case for e-learning has been established the next question is how to implement it as cost effectively as possible. Here further options arise. Invest in expensive infrastructure or subscribe to a service. Choose between developing online training in-house or outsourcing it to specialist suppliers. Again, the choices are not black and white. Here are some things to consider:

1. Play the numbers game

Look for training needs where large numbers of people all need to learn the same key things. This might be essential compliance training on subjects like health and safety or discrimination. Or it might be making sure employees know how to use a new IT system or understand a new policy such as your organisation's commitment to customer care. Where significant volumes are involved, the cost efficiencies of e-learning come most sharply into focus. After all, the marginal cost of providing e-learning to another person once it has been rolled out is small compared to face-to-face training. Often this sort of training has to be done quickly too. Herding thousands of people into classrooms is not just expensive but impractical, if not impossible, to do in a short space of time.

2. Don't reinvent the wheel

One enormous source of efficiency in public sector training is to stop duplicating effort. Unlike the private sector where competitive considerations may prevent sharing, the public sector has few reasons not to spread the cost of developing knowledge and skills. Why would one government department be developing training for its staff on data protection at the very same time as another one is doing the same? Aren't the key aspects of customer service excellence pretty much the same in one local authority as they are in the next? And there are over 400 of these in the UK!

3. Don't skimp on the quality

A word of warning here: tempting though it is to see e-learning as a cost reduction measure, focusing purely on making it as cheap as possible can be

counter-productive. Turning out ill-thought through, badly written and dull e-learning is a false economy if nobody learns anything. You might as well not do it at all. And you don't get cheaper than that!

Worse still, you run the risk of disengaging people if you insist on making them work through tedious and seemingly irrelevant e-learning. And of course you're wasting everyone's time to boot.

4. Less is more

On a similar note, avoid the temptation to see how much e-learning you can get for your buck. The price of e-learning tends to be measured by the hour and this shackle can encourage procurement departments to insist on getting as many hours as possible for the least amount of cash. If we stop to think about it, this obsession with the length of e-learning is clearly a red herring. Surely, we should aim for a situation where people can learn something in the shortest time possible. Lazy, flabby learning design will subject learners to the misery of screen after screen of indigestible content. Good e-learning designers will focus on clarity and engagement, recognising that learners have limited attention so they'd better make the most of it.

5. Horses for courses

Some subjects are more appropriate for e-learning than others. While we would argue that skilful learning design can use technology to teach almost any subject, there are some where replacing the face-to-face experience is difficult and expensive. For example, simulating the experience of a customer interaction or dealing with sensitive cultural issues can be done on a screen but probably in a less satisfactory way than in realistic situation. So it may well be that it's more cost effective to continue providing some training face to face as part of a blend.

6. Building Capability

The plethora of e-learning development tools on the market is testament to the belief among many that e-learning can be developed cheaply using in-house resources rather than outsourcing to comparatively expensive specialist providers. Instead, I would argue that organisations should look for the best of both worlds. That's to say, they should have the capability to apply their

knowledge of their people, culture and subjects but be able to call upon expert e-learning designers to make the learning experience as effective as possible.

Some organisations have few available resources in-house to develop e-learning. For them outsourcing is the only option. Others, however, see the value of making available subject experts and training professionals to reduce external budget and improve the quality of the end-product. While trainer headcount may be an obvious target for cost reduction, a proportion of trainers may be able to make the leap from designing classroom training to designing e-learning.

7. The collaborative approach encourages skills-transfer

In fact, we have encountered several in-house training departments who are looking to add e-learning to their repertoire. While they are reluctant to re-train as programmers and graphics designers, they can see themselves designing and authoring effective online learning. Working with external experts, they can learn the skills they need to structure content, write for the screen and design interactive exercises. They may still need to commission specific media work - graphics, animation, video, etc. However, with access to the right partners and tools they can combine cost-effectiveness and organisational impact through quality, well-designed e-learning. In theory, e-learning authoring tools mean that large quantities of highly interactive e-learning can be developed at below industry-standard rates. In practice, most authoring tools benefit from having experienced designers create templates and key design parameters which allow the in-house team to get up and running.

A good authoring tool will have built-in workflow that ensures version control and reinforces the development process, while its sophisticated reporting tools allow the project manager to have tight control over teams of developers.

Capability, Community and Collaboration

In our experience, the success of e-learning in the public sector revolves around the three Cs of Capability, Community and Collaboration.

Capability

We've touched on this already. Using external specialists to help build capability among learning and development professionals is the best of both worlds - in-house and outsourced.

Community

Public sector organisations are here to serve society as a whole and their specific communities in particular. But what about the communities within the public sector workforce itself? The ethos of shared services has long been promoted. I believe that shared learning services are a major opportunity for the public sector to build a community of best practice in learning and development. Brightwave's Local Government E-learning Service, for example, has been designed by councils for councils. It's based on what councils have said they need. As councils share knowledge, their learning and development professionals form their own cross-council community and opportunities for genuine collaboration. There is an increasing sense that working together like this will avoid duplication, reduce cost and develop best practice. This in turn will increase budgets to deliver the frontline services their local communities need.

Collaboration

When a group of Councils in Scotland worked together to procure an e-learning service this summer they led the way in two huge areas of cash savings for local government across the UK. The collaborative procurement process provided efficiency gains and cash discounts. The service itself enables sharing of learning and staff development which promises to save training budgets millions of pounds. The group of 8 Councils in the Clyde Valley has procured an e-learning service which will provide online training to more than 100,000 staff. The Clyde Valley Learning and Development Group (CVLDG) was set up to share approaches to L&D and, where appropriate, procure shared L&D services to maximise training budget value.

The collaborative procurement process clearly reduced the time and costs of engaging with each individual Council and their respective procurement departments. That meant that the supplier (Brightwave) was able to pass on substantial cost savings in the form of discounts. With all 8 Councils adopting the service, the price has been discounted by 25%. That amounts to an immediate saving of over £170,000.

The benefits of collaboration go well beyond procurement. In many ways, e-learning is a model for public bodies to work together and share resources. This shared e-learning service enables Council staff to access online training modules from work or from home. These modules can be created by experts within - or external to - the Council. The real gains, however, are from the ability for each Council to customise these modules for its own purpose without having to start from scratch. For example, if one Council developed an e-learning module on 'Confidentiality' it could make it available to all other Councils using the service. The chances are that the content of this module would be just as applicable to one Council as another. So, multiple Councils can benefit from this sharing approach but still have the option of customising it - perhaps to include links to their own Council policies and local information. The shared e-learning service

also means Local Authorities can choose to share strategic information on performance and training needs analysis which will enable effective and collaborative workforce development planning.

So the opportunities for the public sector to collaborate, save costs and build capability are there and increasingly being acted on. The capability of the public sector to train and develop its employees depends on using the right tools, the right experts and - most importantly - each other.

Note to editors - About Brightwave

Brightwave is the UK's leading provider of highly engaging work-based e-learning that delivers results and helps change behaviour. Brightwave works in partnership with complex global clients to provide a complete e-learning service, from content development to innovative tools, hosting and management, performance support and evaluation.

Clients include BT, Bupa, DHL Logistics, EDF Energy, IKEA, ScottishPower, Sky, Swiss Re, T-Mobile, TUI, The Royal Bank of Scotland, Virgin Atlantic Airways as well as public sector organisations like the Healthcare Commission, City of Edinburgh Council and Office for National Statistics.

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