

Get Real: Mission Critical e-Learning

Lars Hyland examines mission critical e-learning and how learning technology is critical to the way we support employees in the workplace.

We can all see that times are changing. The balance of global power is moving east, and industrial age industries are under severe pressure. By the time you read this, Ford, GM or Chrysler (perhaps all three) could well be bankrupt (or clinging on temporarily with a government bailout). Energy prices will continue to yo-yo, and financial credit at the unregulated levels we once took for granted will just be an incredulous memory. All sectors will experience a downturn and that includes the training industry which itself has been in denial for far too long. Like the automotive sector that has largely ignored the increasing scarcity of oil and climate change concerns, and the financial industry that sold us an irrational dream of endless credit for all, the training world has to get real. And that means finally acknowledging the elephant in the room: That most of our training activities are hopelessly inefficient and we have little proof of their effectiveness.

The good news is that we already have many of the answers - we just need to implement them. Learning technology is critical to the way we support employees in the workplace. It is no longer a novelty. Instead it needs to drive talent management/human capital/people strategy towards a more agile model.

So what does this look like? Well it means even if overall training budgets drop in organisations struggling to survive (let alone aiming for growth), a greater proportion needs to be spent on learning technology. If this happens, organisations can build a much more effective and efficient platform for supporting their staff whenever and wherever they need it. Organisations must be agile to remain competitive. Agility also best describes how we need to manage learning technology. Already in use to describe progressive software development and manufacturing strategy, allow me to describe an AGILE organisational learning strategy using that tried and tested chunking method - the mnemonic.

A = Accelerated

We do need to accelerate our ways of working to deliver value more. That is not the same as buying rapid development tools to bash out ill formed "e-learning" to an audience that will not only be unimpressed but also none the wiser - or more productive. Instead, we need to look at the end to end workflow, from need identification through to post deployment follow through. At Brightwave we have pioneered development practices which have led to large volumes of targeted, highly interactive learning content being produced in remarkably short timeframes to meet mission critical business change. A major key to success is a

tightly collaborative working relationship and smooth communication between all parties.

G = Goal driven

It goes without saying that any organisational learning and development activity should be strongly aligned with its core business strategy and its impact scrutinised. Unfortunately too much training is facile, inappropriate, delivered to the wrong people at the wrong time for the wrong reasons - indulgences we can no longer afford. A strategy based on learning technology has inbuilt measurement and assessment checks, both formal (for accreditation and regulation) and informal (peer level rating and feedback). Learning and development staff have to learn to offer solutions that are genuinely supportive of business activity - that means listening carefully and delivering more performance support than traditional training courses.

I = Integrated

To achieve Acceleration you have to join up the typically disconnected functions of Internal Communications, Training and Performance Management. Currently staff are often bombarded with conflicting messages from different departments and so become disoriented and numb. This can actually decrease productivity, rather than improve it. Thinking end to end means adopting "campaign" rather than "course" led programmes designed to effect real changes in attitudes, behaviour and performance. To go back to our beleaguered friends in the car industry for a second, think of it as the difference between pressing the accelerator to the floor while in neutral, as opposed to steadily moving forward in third. You can either get nowhere fast, or somewhere and still enjoy the view as you go.

L = Liberating

"When change is discontinuous, the success stories of yesterday have little relevance to the problems of tomorrow; they might even be damaging. The world at every level, has to be reinvented to some extent" Charles Handy, *Beyond Certainty*, 1996

All bets are off. Handy's words uttered 12 years ago have even more resonance now. We really are experiencing discontinuous change and that means previously accepted methods no longer work and may actually be damaging. This is particularly true in the training and education fields which cling doggedly to outdated and unproven learning theories and accepted practice. These constrained economic times will force us to reconsider everything. That should be seen as truly liberating for us as a profession - a licence to innovate. It means grappling with social networks, simulations, collaborative tools that will stimulate your staff to take responsibility for their own learning and performance. Use

these new methods to clear away unnecessary, ineffectual communication that clutters their working lives and provide them with the right tools, aligned messages and clear direction - they will do the rest. While that might feel frightening, there is a wealth of experience already out there that will help you make it work successfully.

E = Engaging

In interesting times, you need interesting solutions. It has never been so hard to get heard in the ocean of information, emails, texts, adverts and other media we all swim through. Any learning intervention must compete with them. What many experience as "e-learning" is oversimplified tutorials that retain too much of the old course legacy and are often rightly perceived as plain dull. Rapid development tools, when in the wrong hands, are in danger of serving the same recipe only as a fast food alternative. This does not make for a better learning experience. The true potential of learning technology is to provide virtual practice that simulates real aspects of every day jobs, tools that connect people to each other so that valuable best practice and news of innovations can spread faster, systems that support you at the time of need. That is what we should collectively know and understand as the definition of e-learning.

So (to help you remember!) an AGILE strategy delivers accelerated, goal-driven, integrated, liberating, and engaging learning experiences.

As learning and development professionals we are going to need to dig deep and confront those conservative fears and accept that we have finally reached a tipping point that will radically remodel the way we design and deliver learning solutions. Mission critical is not mission impossible. To paraphrase the new President Elect: can we do it? Yes we can.

Call us on 01273 827676 or email us at enquiries@brightwave.co.uk to find out more about our corporate learning solutions and how we can help your business.