

Learning in times of change

In the 2003 Best Practices in Change Management report (from Prosci) which studied 288 international companies, the following findings stood out:

- Why learning technologies can support change
 - How learning technologies can make a difference - Top 10 tips
1. The top obstacle to successful change initiatives is employee resistance at all levels.
 2. The top reason for employee resistance to change is lack of understanding.
 3. When asked what they would do differently next time, most teams would begin their change management communications and learning earlier in their next project, instead of it being an after-thought.

Change is the trigger for most organisational learning needs. Whether it's new products, a merger or acquisition, a new IT system or the need to improve customer service, training is a vital instrument in facilitating change and unlocking its benefits.

Why and how can organisations leverage e-learning to make a difference as they address change?

Why learning technologies can support change

The stakes are often high with strategic change initiatives. Organisational learning is a key factor in driving the benefits that these initiatives aspire to. Learning technologies are central to effective large-scale organisational learning. In organisations where products change quarterly, or regulations change almost overnight, we need faster and deeper ways of refreshing knowledge. Technology projects, in particular, have the potential to disrupt the daily operations of thousands of users. In such situations traditional classroom training and workbooks can no longer be the whole solution.

Here are a couple of recent examples. Nestlé, the world's largest food and beverage company, are currently managing a worldwide change programme, appropriately called GLOBE, which will ultimately affect nearly all staff and their working practices. A key part of the accompanying communications programme

is a comprehensive suite of e-learning modules to support staff in their implementation of new methods and standards. The Royal Bank of Scotland, one of the most dynamic and successful banking groups in the UK, has for some years benefited from a strong investment in learning technology which played a significant role in the smooth merging of operations with NatWest, a larger entity than itself at the time.

Because change takes place these days at such a fast, accelerating pace, classic theories on change management and organisational learning are in need of review in the light of new tools and techniques. Digital communications enable the rapid delivery of consistent, carefully formulated messages, often using multiple media. This consistency allows you to have full confidence that your message is being conveyed in the intended manner, leaving you and your team free to concentrate on managing and coaching staff through the emotional and attitudinal issues that invariably arise.

Learning technologies can take this a stage further. e-Learning can be used to measure the impact and effectiveness of change initiatives providing early feedback for management. Implementing e-learning is also an opportunity for change and improvement. The detailed analysis undertaken by an e-learning project often challenges existing assumptions about the utility of current knowledge and working practices. Close measurement of staff performance can also tell an organisation what training activities are value creating and, heaven forbid, those that are actually a waste of time.

How learning technologies can make a difference

e-Learning offers a range of techniques for managing change as an essential part of a comprehensive change management plan. Let's look at ten techniques for getting the most from learning technologies.

Top 10 tips

1. Use a blend of media

Email, multimedia communications, web-based learning modules, electronic performance support, virtual classrooms, coaching, tele-conferences, online discussion groups. All of these may be employed to create an effective learning and communications programme. In one recent project, we designed a learning programme which gradually built, over several months, the intensity of the message using an increasing number of channels. Beginning with emails to all staff, the next stage was a sequence of short multimedia presentations. This was followed by local briefings and then a combination of classroom sessions and web-based training modules. Aspects of these were then maintained on the intranet to provide instant support as people began to settle into their changed job roles.

2. Get people involved and engaged early

Don't introduce change as a fait accompli, even if it is firmly part of the strategy. Use polls, discussion groups, email and tele-conferencing to gather opinions and demonstrate a listening attitude. Use inclusive and consultative language. Avoid the trap of relying on top-down edicts. Demonstrate that feedback is responded to. When we in Brightwave changed one of our key IT systems, we began by canvassing detailed opinions and suggestions, encouraging users to log their comments in an online database, the format of which demanded constructive feedback. The resulting change was heavily influenced by these contributions.

3. Capture the brand

When we began working with T-Mobile to support their SAP implementation, it was at the time they were re-branding from One2One. The multimedia presentations and the web-based training developed were unified, not just in their adherence to the new corporate branding but to the tone and terminology of the project.

4. Start with 'Why?'

If people don't understand why the change is happening, they won't see how they fit into it.

On a recent project with another telecommunications company, change was needed to improve efficiency in the way that a fault management system was used. Bad habits in using the system had been eroding the effectiveness of the process and serious errors had been occurring. The web-based training programme we developed began with a video that challenged long-held assumptions about the way things should be done. It revolved around a typical user operating the system in the way they had learned from colleagues. But it showed the direct consequences of a misuse by showing an engineer struggling to fix a piece of equipment with insufficient information to do so. The frustration and inefficiency this caused was shown with immediate impact. In this case, the 'Why?' did not need to be spelled out. It was obvious.

5. Build on what's already known

People will interact best when there is an element of trust – and familiarity engenders trust. As with anything new to learn, grounding new knowledge and understanding in an existing conceptual framework is essential. The video we used for the telecommunications company was powerful because it was very recognisable.

6. Engage (even entertain) as well as inform

Borrow from external marketing and advertising. Multimedia technologies such as Flash make it possible to convey key messages in attractive memorable ways, without having to have a budget of millions.

7. Customise the message

Keep addressing the question 'What's in it for me?'. Employees must believe that the change will benefit them as well as the organisation. Learning and communications technologies are ideally suited to customised messages. Simple interactive filtering can cut out the irrelevant and focus on how the change will affect specific groups, even individuals. More sophisticated methods, such as using database log-ons to determine what content a particular individual has access to, are increasingly possible with the advent of Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS).

8. Offer the tools to make change easy

e-Learning enables the supply of knowledge and instruction at the time and place they are needed – on the job. For all the effort you may have put into listening and communicating the reason for change, if people are expected to change aspects of their jobs, they need the tools to do so.

9. Measure and diagnose

Tracking which parts of a change programme people don't understand or where people are not engaged can enable targeted remedial action. Crucially, it can also be used to provide evidence of the effectiveness of a change programme.

10. Don't depend on technology

Finally, despite its enormous value, beware of an over-reliance on technology. Research shows that direct, face-to-face communication plays an important role, particularly where emotional reaction is likely. It can be essential evidence of the support and commitment to change from senior management.

Of course, in many organisations, e-learning – when implemented on a large scale – will need a change management strategy of its own. If that is the case, then extensive use of e-learning in change programmes needs to be done with great care or it could backfire badly. We don't want to compound the challenges of change by throwing in yet another ingredient of change. But used sensitively and appropriately, learning technologies can lead to faster, more reliable

implementations of change, accelerating innovation and maintaining competitive advantage.

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.