



Link to learn

E-learning initiatives, enhanced by traditional classroom tools, can help your ROI make the grade

by **Daniel Gee, MD, MBA, and Daniel Farb, MD**

SCOTTSDALE HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS, in Scottsdale, Ariz., chose an application service provider model for the delivery of electronic learning or e-learning to the organization. According to Judy Seiler RN, MS, head of human resources, the outsourcing of e-learning appeals to a multi-functional staff and provides a digital “dashboard” for skill development and performance accessible by the learner at any time and anywhere there is access to the Web.

Tammy Weidner, vice president of Six Sigma at Mount Carmel Hospital in Ohio, says that her hospital system has not used e-learning for its Six Sigma training. Instead, she says, “the culture [of the organization] has benefited from the interactive approach that the traditional classroom environment offers.”

These are the issues facing senior executives today as momentum to implement learning and training solutions grows in the new millennium. With innovative learning solutions emerging as a result of new audio and visual technologies for Intranet and Internet platforms, executives find e-learning to be a cost-effective and high-return-on-investment tool to maximize knowledge transfer to the organization. E-learning also has turned out to be a low risk and defensible way to maximize training in order to cope with the regulatory environment facing global healthcare today.

The *Boston Business Journal* estimates that e-learning has a potential savings of more than 30% over traditional classroom training. The elimination of employee travel, instructor costs, and time away from work, all add up in the cost-efficiency

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equation. No doubt e-learning presents one of the best modalities today in which to train, certify, and audit healthcare employees. This article explores the challenges a senior executive faces in choosing an e-learning solution and offers some insight on navigating the waters of e-learning initiatives to make the most of this type of investment.

E-LEARNING DEFINED

E-learning is best defined as "distance-learning-structured content or learning experiences delivered or enabled by electronic techniques." Such a definition includes courses delivered by the Internet, an Intranet, a CD, streamed audio and/or visual video and virtual environments with or without a mentor. The content can be delivered synchronously (live) or asynchronously (at a time convenient for the learner, at his or her own pace).

BLENDED LEARNING AND THE CHALLENGE OF LEARNING

The cost savings in adopting e-learning solutions should be balanced with pragmatic approaches that augment traditional classroom teaching and text-based learning.

Most people would agree that the ideal learning environment in most cases is a superb teacher who interacts with the students. The drawbacks of live teaching are cost, the inability to accommodate different paces of learning, the difficulty in standardizing information, geographical separation in a large organization, the fact that some teachers are not always inspiring, the inability to provide each student with feedback along the way, and the tendency of students to slip into the passive mode of listening to a lecture.

UniversityOfHealthCare had the task

of transforming costly instructor training for one area of pharmaceutical regulations to asynchronous online training for thousands of Bristol-Myers Squibb employees around the globe. They used stories, humor, interactivity, text, and graphics to provide most of what all but the best instructors could deliver, at a savings of millions of dollars.

The combination of synchronous (live and Internet-enabled) and asynchronous learning is called "blended learning." A variety of media can enhance any of those modalities. Blended learning is an ideal framework for action; training professionals call upon the most effective combination of learning delivery media and modality to engage learners in the most successful way possible. A good example would be a HIPAA training course on fundamentals delivered asynchronously online, followed by a synchronous Web-based lecture and classroom training, and contact with an expert on a message board, finally concluding with an online test to verify understanding.

BUYER-SELLER DILEMMA

Buyers want to sample a product that is already on the market but can be tailored to their organizations' specific training needs. Technology and content providers (sellers) have to create off-the-shelf products not only to start the process, but to achieve cost-saving margins that will benefit buyers as well. There are a number of ways to avoid this apparent impasse.

One solution is for technology and content providers to create their products so that they can be easily adapted; but companies who create these products may have trouble evaluating this

adaptability themselves. Another solution is to buy an off-the-shelf technology or content product and supplement it with the organization's own material; the potential drawbacks include inconsistency and unintegrated technologies. A third solution is for a company to buy a large package of training courses; this is gradually falling out of favor at some companies as they realize that they might pay for what they don't need. A fourth solution is for a company to produce all training content and technology itself; the drawbacks are that it is more cost-effective for an external producer to do this and sell to many different companies. Plus, creating training materials might not be the organization's core competency.

For the time being, there is a "fit" that a buyer must find from available sellers. This becomes a dilemma when the buyer buys a tool but a different one is needed for the job. Is there a strategy for success?

STRATEGIES TO ADOPT E-LEARNING

Gil Gordon writes in *Chief Learning Officer Magazine*, "Well-executed e-learning initiatives have proven time and again to lower costs, boost productivity, and reduce corporate risks."

But just as there are numerous success stories, some e-learning projects have fallen flat. What are the questions to ask to have the best chances for success in e-learning?

1. Incorporate e-learning or blended learning into the corporate strategy by linking training to a business goal.

It is imperative that training needs are clearly defined and matched to business goals. Management must then communicate loud and clear these strategic messages to all departments, champion its initiation, and maintain its support until results are achieved.

Of course, one needs to be mindful of the concept of "scope creep," in which too many project needs are tied to a learning solution that tries to answer all departmental needs but ends up never

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fully adopted by any department.

2. Match the appropriate e-learning learning methodologies to training needs.

The foundation of organization-wide e-learning is the licensing of a learning management system (LMS). At its simplest level, an LMS registers students, runs courses, and generates reports on their completion. At more complex levels, an LMS performs many other functions, such as creating certification tracks, allowing the entry of offline learning results, and so on.

Buyers should only license systems that support either the SCORM (Sharable Courseware Object Reference Model) or AICC (Aviation Industry Computer Based Training Committee) standard for e-learning programming, and should only license content that is compliant with those standards. Most systems, but not all, comply with at least one of these standards. Compliance with one of the two is adequate, since most content providers will provide content for either.

Buyers need to be aware of another standard that isn't related to content production, the Standard Object Access Protocol (SOAP). This enables an LMS to integrate with a human resources information system. This integration can enable anything from the automatic updating of employee information from a program such as PeopleSoft to more complex analyses of job performance and training results.

A newer product is the Learning Content Management System (LCMS). This enables the storage of content pieces such

as images, videos and documents in the system with the purpose of making them available for content creation by the organization.

As such, the LCMS often contains a course-creation tool. Buyers should ask whether content produced with that tool will be compatible with other vendors' systems—very often it isn't—and how well integrated that system is with the vendor's LMS. It is also important that the tool enable the insertion of individual content objects such as a Flash animation or an Adobe Acrobat document.

3. Establish and define your success metrics.

Success metrics can be as basic as attendance at training sessions and a check off of new policies or procedures learned. For organizations seeking to adhere to the compliance and regulatory issues, this metric alone will save hundreds of thousands of dollars.

For other organizations, success metrics can be crucial in determining performance pay or the success of a process improvement initiative.

The clear articulation of goals helps to ensure clarity of purpose in any e-learning endeavor.

4. Obtain a commitment from upper management.

A new e-learning initiative succeeds more often when upper management supports it. Of course, any initiative does better that way, but e-learning requires it more than others. The reason is that the returns on e-learning are dynamic. The incorrect, static way of looking at e-learning is that the organization has \$50,000 available for e-learning so they will budget for that.

The correct approach to e-learning recognizes that a \$50,000 investment by the training department may result in a \$100,000 savings for the risk management department, a \$200,000 savings for human resources in not having to deal with so much nurse turnover, and so on. The higher the level of the executive who is the e-learning champion, the greater the chance of dealing with interdepartmental issues and budgets.

NURTURE LEARNING

Complex theorists and biologists are crossing paths in the evolution of today's healthcare organization to a learning organization. The ability of an organization to expand its capacity to learn and nurture that learning to adapt to an ever-changing regulatory and quality improvement environment mimics the flock of birds adjusting to the sail of the wind to maximize the efficiency of flight.

Underlying this significant adaptation is the central ability to route information peripherally, translate strategy and reinvent departments much like the evolution of a central nervous system.

The power of businesses to leverage an e-learning initiative to a lasting success story can be fulfilled with careful planning by senior managers cognizant of the elements of e-learning, blended learning, and the technological considerations of various offerings. **MHE**

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