E-learning Strategies

How to get implementation and delivery right first time

Don Morrison
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For ABB and NTD
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Introduction

... people learn in order to achieve desired forms of participation in communities and activity, in order to affect positively their sense of their meaning in the world. People learn not just in order to do, but in order to become ... we stress the learners' sense that they are contributing to the life and success of an enterprise that matters to them and to others, and that they in turn matter to that enterprise. A worker engaged in mindless or meaningless activity learns a good deal—about meaningfulness.

Show me the army with better trained soldiers and I will show you the victor of the battle. Sun Tzu

In just a few days, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) will publish the first tranche of material in its OpenCourseWare programme. The aim over the next 10 years is to make the university’s materials for nearly all its courses freely available on the Internet. OpenCourseWare is a such a remarkable undertaking that the university has admitted to being surprised at its own audacity. MIT’s programme is just one of many signs that the long-term success of e-learning is inevitable. The ability to deliver cost-effective, personalized, relevant, interactive learning whenever and wherever it is needed is simply too beneficial to teachers and learners alike not to succeed.

The challenges for e-learning lie in the short and medium term: in the short term because enterprise learning departments are being tasked with making e-learning work effectively using what are still embryonic tools; in the medium term because all e-learning practitioners are struggling to develop a clear and imaginative vision that will give direction to their current efforts and mollify those making substantial investments in e-learning’s promises. This book is about meeting those challenges in a post dot-com reality and in the context of learning in the enterprise.

Everyone has learning needs; no one has e-learning needs. That tells us e-learning is a solution not an end in itself. Implemented right, it can be a powerful way of meeting learning needs. It’s turned out that implementing e-learning successfully is harder than we at first thought. There are technology hurdles to get over, and e-learning creates significant change across the enterprise — if it doesn’t, there’s no point. As everyone knows, change is almost always uncomfortable. For
Introduction

No strategy, no implementation

Implementation met some success criteria

Implementation met all success criteria (temporary state)

No strategy, no implementation

Strategy, no implementation

Implemented, met some success criteria

Implemented, met all success criteria (temporary state)

Figure 1 — The e-learning continuum

some time to come, anyone working on an e-learning project will be a pioneer but not an early pioneer. There have been enough implementation successes and failures for lessons to have been learned and best practices forged. You'll find many of them in the pages of this book. They will help you get implementation and delivery right first time.

It seems to me that there is an e-learning continuum and every enterprise finds itself at one of four key points on it (see Figure 1). The aim of this book is to provide strategic guidance for decision-makers, implementation teams and delivery teams at all four points.

Since the dot-com crash, I don’t hear people talking about e-business. That doesn’t mean it’s gone away, just the opposite. The e-business lessons we learned about nimbleness and connectedness are applied routinely in every business that aims to stay in business. The same thing happened with e-learning. Even though many enterprises have moved into a comfort zone where the traditional learning delivery channel—face-to-face training in a classroom—is used alongside e-learning channels as a matter of policy, the lessons e-learning taught us have changed everything. The headline lessons are:

- Learning should be driven by business requirements not training requirements.
- The learner not the training department is at the centre of learning in the enterprise.

When training met learning

Expressions can be Trojan horses delivering radical messages hidden inside conspicuous ones. In the early 1960s, Avis Rent A Car launched an advertising campaign with a tag line that is reckoned to be one of the 10 best ever: “We’re No. 2. We try harder.” By turning self-deprecation into a selling point,
Avis’s advertising agency, Doyle Dane Bernbach, resurrected an ailing car rental company. But the campaign secreted a message into the consumer’s consciousness—that Avis was the number two company in car rental. It wasn’t. The sleight of hand enabled Avis to leapfrog over a slew of competitors and wrest second place from the incumbent.

“E-learning” was a Trojan horse too. While everyone focused on the “e”, the hidden message—that training was being replaced by learning—slipped into our collective unconscious. So what is the difference between training and learning? In David Mamet’s film State and Main, a Hollywood film crew descends on a small town in Vermont. Joe White, the film within a film’s screenwriter, makes the acquaintance of Ann Black who runs the town’s bookstore and amateur theatrical group. Making conversation, Joe observes: “... small town. I suppose you have to make your own fun.” With homespun wisdom, Ann teaches the writer something about his own business: “Everybody makes their own fun. If you don’t make it yourself, it ain’t fun, it’s entertainment.”

For me that exchange goes some way to explaining the difference between training and learning. Everybody makes their own learning. It’s a commitment we make to ourselves and our employers—to remain capable of consistent peak performance through a process of lifelong learning. If you don’t make it yourself, if you don’t have a role to play in the process, if you just sit back and consume what’s pushed at you, it ain’t learning, it’s training. The raw content of learning and training might be the same; everything else, as you’ll see, is different.

**What you need to know, what you need to do**

The head of the technology team on an internal e-learning project at PricewaterhouseCoopers would routinely interrupt meetings with the caution: “We’ve started talking about how. We should be talking about why.” He was right. But making strategic decisions about e-learning is tough. Skipping over the thinking and jumping straight into the doing is very attractive; it’s also dumb. In the course of implementation and delivery, there are hundreds, maybe thousands of questions you need to answer. Without sound strategies to guide the process, you might end with e-learning but chances are you won’t end up with an e-learning solution. To help you move towards the solution that’s right for your enterprise, I’ve designed most chapters in two parts:

- **What you need to know** to answer the question Why?
- **What you need to do** to answer the question How?

**Controversial topics**

Two of the most controversial topics in e-learning are return on investment (ROI) and instructional design (ISD). There is a wide range of opinion about