

Removing Barriers with E-Learning



White Paper



Introduction

In the current business environment a company no longer depends simply on its capability to raise capital but on the capacity of its workers to learn, collaborate and create new ideas. Ideas are the new capital of the contemporary corporation. Idea generation gives rise to newly-minted knowledge which enriches corporate intellectual capital. The wealth of a company's knowledge leads to innovation and creativity which creates the products and services that ensures sustainable market success.

The economy is becoming more knowledge-based and the demand for highly-skilled workers is increasing in all market sectors. Today, companies have to do with less, making it difficult to retain and attract skilled people. For organizations, recruiting and supporting knowledge workers is becoming a strategic opportunity. For the individual knowledge worker, the consequence is both enhanced career prospects and increased demand to learn more while functioning at an ever-faster pace. Workers are having great difficulty organizing learning within their demanding and complex schedules. As a result learning is being viewed as both a strategic advantage and potential dilemma.

According to leading training executives, there are important learning elements that a company training program should contain if they are to train their employees properly. They include:

- **Basic Knowledge Learning** – Provides the learner information about an industry, a line of business, and a process used within a field.
- **Interactive Learning** - Provides the learner the ability to apply basic knowledge to a given work scenario.
- **Collaborative Learning** – Allows the learner to take the information obtained in the two previous interactions and apply it to a collaborative work project with colleagues – internal and external.
- **Group-Instruction / Conference Learning** – Supports a framework to enrich current knowledge and acquire new knowledge within an industry setting.

Companies that view learning as an ongoing process with inclusion of the above activities will usually be able to create the right climate and structures within their business activities for a successful learning program.

Creating an enterprise-wide learning program is not a simple course of action of gathering and combining some content on the Web and licensing a few skills-development courses. Successful learning programs must be closely linked with a company's overall business strategy – and its corporate visions and culture.

Learning Environment Key Issues

Yesterday's successful approaches to learning fall short of meeting today's challenges of a changing economy, technology innovation and shifting buyer values. The key learning issues currently being debated in most corporate board rooms are as follows:

- A failure to create a long or short-term learning strategy aligned with corporate business and technology strategies.
- Employees' being trained today may not be equipped with the right knowledge to meet tomorrow's customer needs.

- Corporate in-house training activities are inadequately positioned to leverage different types of knowledge and new kinds of learning delivery.
- Training delivery approaches are usually fashioned on the university classroom – a formal, face-to-face model that often is not well suited to workplace learning needs.

The answer to these challenges is an integrated approach – integrated content from many sources, extracting new knowledge from work processes and activities, and bringing learning to the workplace by means of appropriate technologies. The learning program must be effective and flexible and closely integrated with workers and the actual work. The program must also be efficient - reduced total cost for the company, and a better alignment with individual work and personal lives. The market response is a powerful and holistic solution that is referred to as E-Learning.

The E-Learning Situation

E-Learning may be chic, but the concept itself has been around for many years. E-Learning is training that is facilitated through a network, usually over the Internet or a corporate Intranet. This concept has its genesis in computer-based training (CBT), which appeared in the late 1900's and used CD-ROMs, as the tool of choice. Recently, E-Learning has evolved into a valuable management tool used in the corporate world, public sector and academia.

E-Learning is typically segmented into two categories: synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning imitates a classroom, which means classes take place in real-time and connect instructors and learners via streaming audio or video or through a chat room.

Asynchronous learning provides a learner access to prepackaged training on her / his own schedule, working at her / his own pace and communicated with the instructor, or other learners through e-mail.

E-Learning courses add value to traditional learning modes by offering self-paced or live, instructor-led classes. Specifically, self-paced courses can be taken at the learner's convenience and are suited for self-motivated people. Typically, these courses can be taken at anytime, anywhere, making them convenient for busy executives and workers as well as for globally dispersed employees.

Live E-Learning takes place in a virtual classroom at a scheduled time that learners commit to attending, just as they would a traditional training class, less the travel. Learners can collaborate, share information, and ask questions of one another and of the instructor in real-time. Live E – Learning is effective for sharing information. Soft skills such as management leadership or team building can be included in this environment.

Not to be overlooked, traditional classroom training will always be a valuable means of learning. Classroom training is still matchless for the amount of face-to-face interaction which both the instructor and learners that is necessary to learn specific management, leadership, and other highly collaborative skills.

The attractiveness of E-Learning may also be explained by earlier efforts in knowledge management and collaboration, which laid the groundwork for E-Learning's attractiveness. The grand scheme of knowledge management to unify workers and customers under one amorphous information-system standard was hard to grasp and achieve. That experience may be tempered somewhat by the more pragmatic effect of E-Learning.

E-Learning is a vital teaching tool but companies shouldn't be lulled into believing that this method can teach all things to all people. When the stakes are high or the subject is highly personal then real live instructors are still irreplaceable.

E-Learning program support the following objectives:

- Use effective and flexible learning as a competitive weapon
- Make training more available to learners
- Redesign how training is delivered
- Make training more meaningful to the workplace
- Place the responsibility of learning in the hands of learners
- Make training consistent and available across the extended enterprise
- Respond quickly to constant change and product innovations
- Increase the scope of training

New demands in organizations are increasing the interest in E-Learning on a daily basis. The need for more efficient, effective and flexible ways to deliver training has led many companies to explore the choice of E-Learning. The convenience for users of these programs - at their own pace, at their own place — and the engaging nature of the multimedia delivery is big advantages. The federal nature of Web-delivered training makes the delivery standardized for all learners.

The E-Learning and Knowledge Connection

The capability to quickly transfer and communicate contextually rich information throughout the organization is no longer deemed a competitive advantage. Certainly, it is what management must put in to practice just to be viable on a level playing field. Most companies find themselves helpless in a quagmire of info-glut: information that is unfiltered and inadequately structured and organized. Thus, it is taking the next step – from information acquisition to knowledge generation – that distinguishes the winning business. This is where the most benefits from E-Learning can be quantified: in accelerating the velocity of mission-critical knowledge to workers and teams.

E-Learning forms a necessary connection with knowledge management by providing multiple inputs to knowledge-based systems and processes. Knowledge systems can be enriched with information from most learning events, as well as with the vast amounts of information generated within customer and employee interactions at the various corporate touch points.

Sources of Knowledge and Learning

Knowledge is imparted to people throughout life – from school days to and during their career years. These sources of knowledge include:

- **Broad Structured Knowledge** – Provided by institutions of higher education, this knowledge may derive from the universities and colleges themselves or from other sources; this knowledge is synthesized and usually organized by means of curricula.
- **Industry-Specific Knowledge** – This is knowledge that workers acquire and possess concerning their area of workplace expertise. This knowledge is usually obtained in interactions with colleagues and customers and through research projects.

- **Company-Specific Knowledge** – This is knowledge that is company specific. This knowledge includes information on an organization's strategies, policies, processes, structures etc.
- **Newly-Minted Knowledge** – Newly-minted knowledge is typically produced through interactions within the corporate processes and workgroups. This emerging knowledge is very closely related to a company's business processes – for example, development of a new manufacturing process or a new product. This knowledge exists more often than not in the minds of its creators, but it can be transferred to a training program for propagation.

These isolated islands of knowledge form barriers to the learning required by today's knowledge workers. Universities all too often assign themselves an exclusive franchise on substantial learning and faculty may miss the opportunity to contribute to industry and company-specific knowledge, and new corporate knowledge.

Industry in turn is dissatisfied with high education, as exemplified by the corporate university. Generic training firms, almost polar opposites of universities, look for the most profitable "one size fits all" training that they can sell and resell, and they are generally not well regarded by industry.

The E-Learning Strategic Framework

Leading market research firms estimates U.S. companies spent in excess of \$1.5 billion on E-Learning programs in 2001. Not all of this investment was well spent, however. Lessons learned are beginning to come to light: pervasive among best-in-class organizations is a well articulated E-Learning strategic framework that focuses on alignment with the enterprise's business and technology strategies.

More and more, organizations are turning to E-Learning programs to grow and broaden rich competencies and skills throughout the extended enterprise of employees, customers, partners, and suppliers. To achieve this goal, companies need an all-inclusive learning strategy and systems plan that moves beyond fundamental delivery of training course offerings. Top companies are building learning programs that encourage first-rate performance, content, and resource management.

To establish a successful E-Learning program, companies must take into account the desired outcomes from a strategic position. An E-Learning framework consists of strategy and architecture components. These important elements acting together enable the program improve individual and business unit performance, enrich core competencies and skills, make possible the organization to react swiftly to competitive pressures and customer and market needs and reduce costs.

An E-Learning strategic framework should motivate employees, improve productivity, enable skill development, and support retention across the enterprise. Those outcomes are wide-in-range and require attentive consideration of the benefits and limitations of learning technologies and a complete analysis of the business, technology, and learning requirements and constraints.

Ask the typical senior manager about her / his learning program and the reply will likely be a reference about only two factors: content and delivery. Although content and delivery are important, they alone won't enable the realization of significant benefits. In fact, focusing on content and delivery can create a myopic learning state.

E-Learning Strategy addresses an organization's existing culture, governing strategy and principles, business processes, and structures that will contribute to E-Learning success or failure. In this context, strategy is defined as the critical business and technology decisions that need to be made to drive the E-Learning program. Supporting strategy is a shared corporate vision and vernacular for conveying E-learning across all business activities in the extended enterprise via the value chain.

The E-Learning Architecture supports the E-Learning Strategy and is the technical underpinning on which an E-Learning program is built. In addition to shared terminology, stakeholders must agree on what E-Learning will look like and how it will be used by customers, partners, employees, and suppliers.

The Architecture is comprised of "views" that represent building blocks that support one another. Considering each component individually and in amalgamation and making key decisions ensures a sound structure and system configuration that will yield desired performance results. The Architecture's views include:

- Learner Needs View
- Enterprise Business View
- Enterprise Technical View
- Learning Strategy View

The Architecture contemplates factors as how customers, partners, and suppliers will interact with and use the learning system. The following business view questions need to be answered:

- Do learners include customers, partners, and suppliers in addition to employees?
- What are the technical requirements of the end-users?
- Are learners geographically dispersed?

The Architecture considers the required functionality and solution components for the program. Planning for E-Learning needs to address open systems, including facilities for integrating existing elements, such as legacy learning, enterprise applications, online learning, and emerging technologies.

The E-Learning Process

The key phases of a typical E-Learning Process are outlined below:

- **Phase 1 – Start-up** – The employee selects the time and location for his / her learning session.
- **Phase 2 – Enrollment** - The employee signs-on to the organization's Intranet and clicks through on an E-Learning icon, which takes him / her either to the company-managed registration page or the Web site of a learning outsourcer.
- **Phase 3 – Curriculum / Course Selection** – The E-Learning system generates a list of customized courses based upon the employee's profile. These comprise relevant topics that the employee is eligible or required to complete, based on job role, work prerequisites, course already completed and, if applicable security clearance.

- **Phase 4 – Learner Interaction** – The employee selects a particular course module or lesson, from his / her curriculum, and navigates through it at his / her own pace, either in one sitting or in pieces at predefined timeframes. More sophisticated modules include audio, animation, hotlinks to Web-based supplemental learning materials, e-mail contact with an instructor (or coach) and opportunities to chat on-line with other students.

After completing a course or lesson, the learner completes a review module, which then advises her / him to either take the course again or proceed to an online examination. Upon completion of the exam the system records the results in his / her HR folder.

- **Phase 5 – Examination** – The HR activity and the supervisor of the employee's company automatically receives a completion report by e-mail or database form, on which courses he / she has completed, how well he / she retained the knowledge, which material the learner is due to take next and what progress his / her fellow learners have made for the same time period. The system also generates a new list of courses the next time the learner signs-on to the system.

E-Learning Benefits

It is an encouraging sign that companies are moving beyond the traditional belief that E-Learning only decreases training cost. Successful companies are viewing E-Learning's potential for broader business impact: aligning learning to increased revenue, improved employee retention and better customer service.

A great deal of E-Learning's promise is associated with today's knowledge economy. Human capital will make or break your business – the more your employees know, the more they can accomplish. Not surprisingly, the need for well-educated employees is nothing new. But with shorter product development cycles and unpredictable customer needs, there's a greater pressure to provide training that can be updated quickly and accessed at employees' convenience.

The important benefits associated with the successful development and deployment of E-Learning is shown below:

- Eliminate travel requirements - Less travel time and costs
- Provide training outside work hours and reduce time away from work for learners
- Flexibility to enrich and change training content on demand
- Improve learner convenience and service
- Increase training about company products and services
- Better quality training programs
- Improve employee skills and competencies
- Acquisition of new customers
- Improve quality of corporate products and services
- Impact corporate revenue and profitability.

Next Steps

The next step is to engage The Knowledge Compass, Inc. (TKCI) to conduct a Workforce Learning Assessment. This workshop is designed to identify learning program opportunities and formulate strategies for improving worker skills and competencies within an E-Learning framework.

The workshop is an intensive strategic diagnostic that engages experienced and skilled TKCI senior consultants with a cross-section of an organization's business and support leadership.

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