

## E-learning

# Building a successful e-learning strategy

E-learning is by no means a panacea and requires extensive tailoring to ensure positive results and strong adoption.

E-LEARNING CAN be a very effective tool for organisations that need to improve staff development or provide training in new products and processes. It can also be of great assistance in compliance training – making sure that staff have the knowledge and skills they need to comply with relevant legislation and regulations.

However, e-learning can also be a disaster if it is not managed correctly. It is not a panacea, but a means to an end. This type of training must be exactly the right fit for the organisation in order to be successful. It should be chosen because it is the most efficient and effective way to meet the identified learning need.

Like most organisational change implementations, a successful e-learning strategy requires very careful planning and execution. Generally, the usual project-management principles are applied to e-learning, but special attention should be placed on managing expectations, ensuring management commitment and involving all key stakeholders.

The credibility of the e-learning implementation team is also critical. The introduction of new methods and technologies can create hesitation at both the employee and management level, but this can be overcome if people have confidence in those individuals who are leading the project.

Change management involves planning for the change itself as well as preparing for the introduction of the new techniques or processes. There should be

**By Derek Stockley**

careful consideration of both individual and organisational issues at the outset of any e-learning implementation.

### *Individual issues*

At the individual level, you should first try to gauge the likely reaction of your staff to an e-learning programme. Have they had exposure to it previously? Are they computer literate? How do they generally react to change? These are just some of the questions that should be considered. If the needs of individuals are satisfied then there is some likelihood that organisational requirements will also be met at the same time.

### *Organisational issues*

At the organisational level, key business drivers should be identified. For example:

- The urgency of the need for e-learning;
- Geographical positioning of employees (are they spread across several different locations?);
- Cost factors and how critical these are to the business;
- The importance of return on investment (ROI).

### **Meeting cultural fit and technology requirements**

Resistance to change will be minimised if the e-learning courses are aimed at the right level and the correct cultural fit has

been determined. This entails thorough consideration of the employee profile, organisational approach and technology adoption, for example.

Some e-learning implementations can be very basic, but whether they are simple or more complicated and in-depth, the right implementation should always build on a well-established base. If existing learning methods are basic, then the initial e-learning implementation should be basic, too. If the organisation has a more sophisticated approach to training, then the e-learning system should obviously follow suit – in fact, this will probably be expected. However, this does not mean that we should only aim for the very basic level. E-learning is a wonderful opportunity to expand the organisation with the introduction of new methods and approaches to training that take full advantage of today's advanced technology, which itself is continuously evolving.

The growth and diversity of mobile devices and PDAs are making just-in-time learning a real possibility. This is exactly what modern organisations require – an effective learning strategy, as and when it is needed, in an easy-to-access format.

The growth in these new technologies is one of the issues that should be dealt with when considering expectations management: people find it fairly easy to talk about the possibilities, but it is a different matter entirely to have these new technologies working exactly how you expect them to.

### Cutting costs

Many e-learning projects have achieved significant savings, partly because this method of delivery can cover a large number of people in a short period of time. Travel times and expenses for participants and trainers can be significantly reduced (if not eliminated entirely), particularly in geographically disbursed organisations. Here in Australia especially, distance can be a major problem. Nationally based and even state-based businesses – such as a public organisation serving Queensland – can have small numbers of staff spread all over the countryside. E-learning removes many of the difficulties associated with training this type of staff base. For example, concerns about timing, cost and delivery.

### Managing expectations

Keeping expectations at the right level throughout the project is critical. Any statements and claims made by the implementation team must be achievable. In conversations, misunderstandings have to be clarified immediately. Communication has to be ongoing and effective feedback mechanisms need to be in place. Basically, you need to know how your message is being interpreted.

High management expectations will also reinforce management commitment, as they will help in gaining support. However, if expectations are too high or unrealistic, problems will occur when actual achievements are made known. Management support can quickly falter so the avoidance of any misunderstanding is critical.

Similarly, all other stakeholders have to be kept informed and the reports should be as accurate and up-to-date as possible. Good communication and ongoing engagement are essential. Having a 'finger on the pulse' encourages ongoing, positive commitment.

### Tailoring your project

There are many variables in an e-learning project and each one will be different. For example, a solution that has worked for one organisation may be problematic for another.

First, the learning topic must be suitable for delivery via an e-learning programme. Traditionally, this has often been information-type training – for example, new products, policies and approaches. The ability to include simulations and other avenues for dealing with skills issues has broadened the types of training that can be covered. The first questions to ask concern the suitability of an e-learning programme include:

- Whether the subject area is suitable for an e-learning approach;
- Whether the training required is predominately information or skills based.

As mentioned in the introduction, compliance training is a typical e-learning application. In many instances, employees

dramatically and in some cases, e-learning may not be suitable).

The background, location and numbers of participants are all important and will add significantly to the outcome of the project. The larger the number and the greater the geographic spread, the more cost effective e-learning becomes. In some cases, particularly if time pressures are also strong, it may be the only option.

The subject and the participant profile will both contribute to the initial shaping of the project, but there are many more components that need to be added.

Careful consideration of the subject and proposed participants will enable you to build the most appropriate learning resource (or combination of resources) for your staff. For example, should the

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may already have some existing knowledge and skills. Taking this into consideration, e-learning can include pre- and post-course testing. The pre-test allows employees to start at their own level and the post-test provides concrete evidence for compliance audit purposes. This design feature makes e-learning very popular for this type of training.

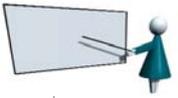
The second group of questions relates to the proposed target group – the people who need the training. You should seek to establish:

- Their previous exposure to e-learning;
- What their attitude is towards the subject area;
- Whether the training required is information or skills based and if there is some attitudinal change required as well. (If attitudinal change is required, the level of sophistication of the learning design can grow

project rely solely on e-learning or should there be some 'face to face' training as well? The design of an e-learning module requires the designer or programmer to anticipate all the likely issues that may emerge and include the content accordingly. An experienced trainer in a classroom might not necessarily anticipate every question, but he or she should have the knowledge and skills to respond in a way that satisfies the enquiry.

Many organisations find that blending e-learning with face-to-face contact is an effective method. As technology evolves, face-to-face is taking on a new meaning and a number of software products now enable classroom-style training with audio, video or text communication by participants in different geographic locations.

The training requirement should dictate the learning design. E-learning should only be considered once you



are sure it is a suitable delivery method for the type of training you need to provide.

Although the concept of quickly developed e-learning (known as rapid training) is being promoted as new software tools emerge, properly designed and executed e-learning can be very expensive to develop. However, implementation costs (apart from the participant time costs), by comparison, are negligible and if large numbers are to be trained, e-learning can be very cost effective.

By this stage, the possibility of an e-learning option will be emerging. If it does seem viable, the next question becomes: do we have the capability to do it?

Capability is dependent on in-house resources or the ability to source outside assistance. At this point, some basic questions could cover:

- What e-learning capability, if any, is present within the organisation;
- The amount of funds available;
- Whether e-learning is a one-off requirement or the first of many projects.

Exploring and answering these questions fully should enable you to begin shaping a good strategy for the project.

### E-learning tools and modules

Some organisations will already have a set of e-learning development tools. Others will have to evaluate the numerous vendor options available and choose one that best fits their organisation, both in terms of staff skill levels and information technology (IT) capabilities and requirements. The IT scenario can involve all sorts of issues related to capacity and complexity. In any e-learning project, IT will become an important stakeholder and its support is therefore critical.

A learning-management system (LMS) can be as basic or advanced as you want it to be, with cost proportionate to the level you choose. You need to be able to enroll, track and monitor participation in learning programs. If the organisation does not have an LMS, this is an investment that should be made as

soon as possible. I recommend choosing a basic system if you are just starting out, providing that it is also easy for participants to use.

Lessons from other e-learning implementations should be evaluated and, in most cases, the trend for shorter modules should be heeded. Busy people in complex organisations demand speed. They do not have time for one or two-hour modules. They prefer bite-size chunks of ten to fifteen minutes. This can also be helpful for ongoing learning that corresponds with the just-in-time training scenario. It is very effective when

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organisations can provide short, specific topic modules that satisfy an urgent learning need.

### Outsourcing e-learning

It is possible to outsource the learning design and content-development areas of an e-learning project but, like all outsourcing initiatives, this has to be very carefully managed. Any organisation deciding which path to take should consider the following:

- Whether there is a need to develop e-learning skills in-house;
- Any time constraints that could arise;
- Whether a basic or advanced programme is required;
- Whether the project can go ahead without 'expert' advice or assistance.

Outsourcing can have a number of pitfalls. If you are unsure of what assistance you require, a poorly worded contract accepted through ignorance can cost a lot as the programme develops.

A combination of factors, including time, cost, ability, quality and deliverables will shape the outsourcing

decision. In fact, they will shape the overall project as well.

### Closing thoughts

This workshop has attempted to highlight the major issues involved in framing and developing an e-learning project.

There are many variables that can be conflicting and these can often make e-learning projects complex.

A key to success is to keep the project as simple as possible. If you have not undertaken e-learning previously, start small – perhaps with a project that guarantees a high ROI.

Certainly consider your employees, the potential participants for the programme. What will make their training more enjoyable, satisfying and beneficial? How will you provide easy access? What support will they need?

I am a strong advocate of developing questions that can be given to staff for research purposes, so that the findings can be used to provide key information to help guide and finalise the project.

Managing the change itself is just as important as maintaining the eventual outcome of the project, so effective communication and management of expectations will help significantly.

In the end, success depends on identifying all the issues and developing appropriate responses. The credibility of the implementation team will be greatly enhanced if this approach is adopted and maintained. ■

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