

# ...Implementing e-learning successfully

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*In this elearning article, Derek Stockley highlights some important tips in the successful implementation of e-learning.*

## Building a successful e-learning strategy

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E-learning can be a very effective tool for organisations wishing to develop staff or provide training in new products and processes.

E-learning can also greatly assist in compliance training, the training required by law to ensure employees have the knowledge and skills they need to comply with relevant laws and regulations.

E-learning can also be a disaster if it is not managed correctly. It is not a panacea, it is a means to an end. To be successful, e-learning has to have the right fit with the organisation. It should not be chosen because it is fashionable. It should be chosen because it is the most efficient and effective way to meet the identified learning need.

Like most change implementations in organisations, success comes from careful planning and execution.

The normal project management principles apply. Special attention should be placed on managing expectations, ensuring management commitment and involving other key stakeholders.

The credibility of the e-learning implementation team is critical. The introduction of new methods and technologies can create hesitation at both the employee and management levels. This hesitation can be overcome if people have confidence in the people leading the change.

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

The starting point for an e-learning project involves consideration of both individual and organisational issues.

At the individual level, the likely reaction to e-learning by employees needs to be identified. Have they had exposure to e-learning previously? Are they computer literate? How do they generally react to change? These are just some of the questions that should be considered at the individual level.

At the organisation level, the key business drivers should be identified. How urgent is the learning need? Are employees geographically disbursed? How critical are cost factors? How critical is ROI (Return on Investment)?

If the needs of individuals are satisfied, then there is some likelihood that organisational needs will also be met.

Resistance to change will be minimised if the e-learning is aimed at the right level and the correct organisational cultural fit has been determined. Cultural fit includes consideration of the employee profile, organisational approach, technology adoption and the like.

Some e-learning implementations are basic, others very complicated and detailed. The right implementation builds on an established base. If existing learning methods are basic, then the initial e-learning implementation should be basic as well. If the organisation is sophisticated, then the e-learning system can also be sophisticated. In fact, it will probably be expected. This does not mean that we should only aim for the basic level - e-learning is a wonderful opportunity to stretch the organisation, by introducing new methods and approaches that take advantage of technology.

Technology is improving all the time. The growth and diversity of mobile devices (cell phones) and PDA's (Portable Digital Assistants) make JIT (Just-in-Time) learning a real possibility. This is exactly what modern organisations require - effective learning when needed, in an easy to access form.

The growth in these new technologies is one of the issues to be dealt with when considering expectations management. People talk about the possibilities fairly easily. It is a different matter to have these new technologies work exactly how you expect them to.

Many e-learning projects have achieved significant savings. E-learning can cover a large number of people in a short period of time. Travel times and travelling expenses for participants and trainers can be significantly reduced and/or eliminated, particularly in geographically disbursed organisations. Here in Australia, distance can be a major problem. Nationally based, and even state based organisations, for example an organisation serving Queensland, can have small numbers of staff spread all over the countryside.

A good e-learning project can save a lot of money. I recommend conservative financial and savings estimates, so the final result comes within budget or with even greater savings than predicted.

The management of expectations applies to both management as a group as well as individual employees.

Keeping expectations at the right level throughout the project is critical. Statements and claims made must be achievable. In conversations, misunderstandings have to be clarified immediately. Communication has to be ongoing and feedback mechanisms need to be in place. You need to know how your message is being interpreted.

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

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

There are many variables in an e-learning project. Each one will be different. A solution that has worked for one organisation may be problematic for another.

The learning topic must be suitable for an e-learning approach. Traditionally, this has been information type training - new products, policies, approaches, etc. 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 be asked concern the suitability of e-learning to the topic area. Is the topic suitable for an e-learning approach? Is the training predominately information or skills based?

As mentioned in the introduction, compliance training is a typical e-learning application. In some cases, employees may have some existing knowledge and skills. E-learning can include pre and post course testing. The pre-test means employees can start at their own level and the post-test provides concrete evidence for compliance audit purposes. This design feature encourages the use of e-learning in compliance training.

The second group of questions relate to the proposed target group - the people who need the training.

What is their exposure to e-learning? What is their attitude towards the subject area? Is the training need information or skills based, or is there some attitudinal change required as well?

If attitudinal change is required, the level of sophistication of the learning design grows dramatically. In some cases, e-learning may not be suitable.

Participant background is important. Participant numbers and location also add to the situation. The larger the number, the more cost effective e-learning can be. 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.

We have covered the learning topic and participant profile. These two issues start to shape the project, but there are many more to be added.

Consideration of the learning topic and the proposed participants means that the learning method has to be considered. Should the 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/programmer to anticipate all the likely issues that may emerge and include the content accordingly. An experienced trainer in a classroom might not anticipate every question, but he or she should have the knowledge and skills to be respond in a way that satisfies the enquiry.

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

The training need should dictate the learning design. Only then should the e-learning method be considered as a possible option.

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

Some basic questions:

- What is our e-learning capability (if any)?
- What funds do we have available?
- Is this a once-off requirement, or is this the first of many projects?

The answers to these and other questions will start to shape our e-learning strategy for the learning project.

Some organisations will already have e-learning development tools. Others will have to evaluate the many options available and choose one that fits their organisation, both in terms of staff skill levels as well as information technology (IT) requirements. The IT scenario can involve all sorts of complexities related to capacity and complexity. IT becomes an important stakeholder. IT support is critical.

A Learning Management System (LMS) can be basic or very advanced, with costs being proportionate. You need to be able to enrol, track and monitor participation in learning programs. If the organisation does not have an LMS, then careful consideration to acquiring one has to be given. I recommend choosing a basic system if you are just starting out, providing that it is very easy for participants to use.

Lessons from other e-learning implementations should be evaluated. 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 10-15 minutes. This can also be helpful for ongoing learning which corresponds with the Just-in-Time (JIT) training scenario. It is very effective when organisations can provide short, specific topic modules that satisfy an urgent learning need.

It is possible to outsource the learning design and/or content development. Like all outsourcing projects, this has to be very carefully managed.

- Do we need to develop our e-learning skills in-house?
- What are the time constraints?
- Do we need a basic program or are our requirements quite advanced?
- Do we know what we want or do we need expert advice and 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 program develops.

A combination of factors (time, cost, ability, quality, deliverables) will shape the outsourcing decision.

In fact, these factors will shape the overall project as well.

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

There are many variables that can be conflicting. They certainly make e-learning projects potentially 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 specific project that has a very high return on investment (ROI).

Certainly consider your employees, the potential participants on the program. What will make their participation enjoyable and satisfying? How can we provide easy access? What support will they need?

I am a strong advocate of developing questions, like the ones above, so that the answers provide key information to help guide the project. Finding the answers to the many questions raised in this article will help plan, design and implement a successful e-learning project.

Change management involves managing the change as well as the outcome. Maintaining communication and managing 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 implemented.

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