Taming the irrational expectations of high-tech learning.

By Marc J. Rosenberg

Technology Euphoria?

For nearly 30 years, training managers looked out upon full corporate classrooms and smiled.

From the early 1970s to the late 1990s, companies built bricks-and-mortar training centers at an unreal pace. They had the best facilities and the best food in the business. And sure, somewhere in the back room or the basement, several techie types and a few instructional designers would pop out a course here and there, but nothing really significant.

Then everything changed. The Internet leveled the playing field. Technical roadblocks dropped by the wayside, and online training skyrocketed. Everything was moving to technology, and as the 21st century dawned, corporate training centers were seen increasingly as yesterday's news. Enrollments dropped as costs rose. Eventually, many of these centers were rented out for social events or even shut down.

Web-based courses were proliferating by the bucket load. Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) made interoperability more reality than dream. "Blended learning" became the mantra of the day. A little bit of classroom and a little bit of e-learning demonstrated that these two forces could work together. Learning management systems allowed organizations to catalog and track hundreds of courses down to each and every screen viewed by each and every employee. Full speed ahead.

Or so it was thought.

Irrational exuberance around learning technology drove an

unsustainable level of investment built on unrealistic expectations of what it could do. Online training began to cost too much and deliver too little. Companies became wary, training organizations downsized, and the e-learning industry shrank. Getting to the learning technology promised land no longer seemed so easy.

Today, companies are reassessing their learning technology investments. They ask questions about value and speed. They want to know what they are getting for their money, and they struggle to define just what the success criteria are. No one suggests that learning online is bad, even with lots of bad examples out there, or that a commitment to learning technology isn't appropriate, even though it is often seen as a money pit.

So now, training organizations must take another look at what e-learning really is and how learning technology can contribute to business success. As they do, five key questions must be considered when determining its true role and value. Answering these questions is a major step toward implementing a learning technology strategy that's not a flash in the pan but rather has a real chance of sustainability over time.

Tool or strategy?

When technology equals strategy, e-learning is likely doomed to mediocrity or failure. Organizations that focus exclusively on the deployment of an LMS, an LCMS, or an online catalog of hundreds of courses, are accentuating means rather than ends—enablers rather than results.

The better question is, "how can technology improve performance, increase customer or employee satisfaction, yield better business results, and so on?" When faced with the "technology as strategy" problem, a great way to get past it is to ask, "for what purpose or value?"

If this question can't be answered and supported, there really is no strategy. The technology becomes an end in itself, and over time, it will become a costly, unsupportable burden.

Is the culture right?

When great learning (including e-learning) comes up against a lousy learning culture, the culture wins every time. If e-learning isn't supported over the long haul, it will be difficult to keep going. Marketing helps, but learning technology can only be sustained when users and sponsors so truly believe that it is beneficial and preferable to older approaches that they become advocates themselves.

True learning organizations aren't those with the most courses; they are characterized by the broader culture of open knowledge exchange. Do people willingly share what they know? Do they take the time to coach and explain? Do organizational performance management systems encourage knowledge sharing or knowledge hoarding?

In a supportive culture, information flows across organizational and geographical boundaries, and, enabled by technology, creates a knowledge-rich environment where learning thrives.

The wrong solution for the wrong problem?

Sometimes, learning technology is used for the wrong reasons. Of course, great technology cannot counteract bad courseware. But an even bigger problem is that a lot of e-learning is compensation for poor documentation or bad processes. Instead of fixing a manual, making it more readable, logical, or useful, training is sometimes called upon to explain the undecipherable, reinterpret the unreadable, and demonstrate the illogical.

Worse still, training is commonly called upon to teach workarounds for unworkable processes. Why train when fixing the document would solve the problem and be cheaper? Why train when redesigning a process would make it easier and more efficient?

The answers speak directly to the culture of the organization and the expectations people have for training, which is often viewed as the easiest way to get from the problem to the result even though the real cause of the problem lies elsewhere and will, down the road, rear its ugly head again

no matter what training tries to do. It's bad business, for both the training organization and the company itself, but in most organizations, there's little resistance or alternative approaches offered; so it continues.

Is the course the overarching concept?

In the heady days of learning technology, putting everything online seemed a logical next step. Workers could access all forms of training, anytime and anywhere, and LMSs would manage it all. What could go wrong? Not much, except that that is where, in most cases, e-learning stopped. Courseware and instruction characterized the defining methodology for e-learning. All content was packaged into lessons and modules—some of them highly interactive and others just slide shows.

Now, new advances in the building and deployment of web-based, easy-to-use, robust, and reliable knowledge bases are providing the means for content distribution and management that is easy to find, update, and use.

Communities of practice, using the latest in instant web communications and social networking tools, allow people with similar interests and needs to collaborate across time and distance. Expert locators help surface subject matter experts in ways that enable expertise to be shared. Job aids and electronic performance support systems provide direct task-based support to workers at the moment of need.

For example, TurboTax enables people who don't know anything about taxes to prepare and file their returns with ease and accuracy. Global positioning devices enable people to find a location without having to read a map. As performance goes up, the need for training is reduced.

These new tools, made possible in part by emerging Web 2.0 technologies, enable people to learn and improve their performance directly in the context of work. More knowledge and collaborative opportunities in the workplace and more intelligent performance support strategies help workers

improve their capabilities quickly and cost effectively.

Traditional training programs are transformed into opportunities for learning labs, collaborative and team-based activities, and simulations, where people apply what they've learned under the watchful eye of a subject matter expert (the instructor or coach).

Thus, learning technology becomes more than training technology. It represents a broader array of online tools and resources that directly enhance knowledge and performance in the workplace.

How is success defined?

With so much interest and investment in learning technology and development, evaluation is often left in the dust, with little money or enthusiasm to really build a quality capability. Evaluation often defaults to pre- and posttesting, or in the case of some compliance requirements, attendance (or enrollment, logging in, and so on). The best e-learning strategies, the ones that generate the most support, place a high value on evaluation.

These efforts focus on the client's (not the trainer's) definition of success—improved satisfaction, higher sales, fewer errors, better throughput—rather than just a measure of learning gain. And they define success up front so that they always know what they're shooting at. Organizations that see the implementation of technology as their "raison d'être" often think of success as overcoming the struggle of just getting it all to work.

And so the circle is complete. Absent a business purpose for learning technology, it's much more challenging, if not impossible, to define business benefits that can be supported and sustained.

Technology keeps everyone, wherever they are, informed and involved. It enables people to learn faster and keep abreast of constantly evolving knowledge. It reinforces a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration—keys to organizational

learning. And it supports repositories of institutional smarts and institutional memory that survive those who contributed to them.

But learning technology is no magic bullet or miracle cure for organizations that embrace it without a sound business strategy at the foundation, or that try to force it down the throats of people who can't or won't buy in. It can't prosper when it's being used to compensate for other failings in the organization, or if it doesn't expand its own role definition from a sole concentration on instruction to a broader mission of support for workplace knowledge and collaboration.

Ultimately, these failings can easily lead to inappropriate or weak success criteria. With these challenges in play, the future of e-learning and learning technology is far from assured.

Embracing learning technology means understanding what it can and cannot do, and what it needs to be successful in the long term. With the right perspective, balance, vision, and business alignment, learning technology will become invisible (this is a good thing), and learning (and performance) will have more room to shine. Full speed ahead.

Marc J. Rosenberg is a management consultant in learning, e-learning, knowledge management, and performance improvement. He is the author of Beyond E-Learning; *marc@marcrosenberg.com.*