Preventing E-Learning Failure

Ten common pitfalls and how to avoid them.

By Pete Weaver

A growing number of organizations are embracing e-learning as an advantageous, if not altogether superior, approach to delivering training. In fact, some observers estimate that by 2005 as much as 90 percent of all training will be delivered electronically.

But in their rush to implement e-learning, organizational leaders are making unfortunate mistakes—missteps caused by being unacquainted with the proper uses and requirements of e-learning or by miscalculating the resources and expertise needed to ensure a program's success. Given that e-learning is still new and unfamiliar territory for many organizations, it isn't surprising that mistakes occur. Adding to the confusion are the large number of e-learning suppliers and the wide variation in technology, functionality, and services that surround the design and implementation of an effective e-learning program.

Here's how you can avoid the most common pitfalls that are associated with implementing e-learning.

Pitfall 1: Believing that e-learning is a cheaper training alternative. E-learning has many advantages: scalability, broad geographic reach, and unmatched delivery speed—just to name a few. But those advantages don't make e-learning less expensive than other training delivery methods. In the words of Elliott Masie, a recognized proponent of e-learning, "We need to dispel the notion that e-learning is a cheaper alternative."

Masie's observation counters the assumption that if all training is put on the Web, implementation costs will be reduced. In reality, making content and courseware available to learners incurs many costs for planning, infrastructure, installation, bandwidth, and systems integration—not to mention the ongoing communications and marketing required to ensure that intended learners use the system. Organizational leaders often overlook those costs and make purchasing decisions based solely on the cost of course content. In such instances, the e-learning program can be severely undercapitalized and run significantly over budget.

E-learning can be cost-effective, especially with a large number of users in multiple locations. But don't expect a meticulously planned, effectively implemented, well-marketed system that meets or exceeds expectations to come cheaply. Like most investments, money must be spent to make money.

Pitfall 2: Overestimating what e-learning can accomplish. Despite a growing reliance on e-learning, instructor-led training still predominates. According to a recent Development Dimensions

International survey, 68 percent of leadership development training is classroom based; other studies report an even higher percentage.

Such statistics suggest that e-learning will never supplant instructor-led training. One reason is because people are social learners. We like to learn in groups, exchanging thoughts and ideas and interacting with peers face-to-face. Classroom-based instructor-led training provides that experience; Web-based training generally doesn't.

Pitfall 3: Overlooking the shortcomings of self-study. The flexibility to learn anytime, anywhere is one of e-learning's greatest advantages. The self-study that characterizes that flexibility, however, poses a number of challenges.

In self-study (or asynchronous learning), learners follow their own schedule and aren't held accountable for their learning to an instructor, as in a classroom setting. That freedom of access is attractive, yet it has a major drawback: Unless learners are highly motivated, they may not complete the training. Observers have estimated that learners don't complete 50 to 90 percent of Web-based courses.

Although self-study is an effective and appropriate platform for certain kinds of information—for example, on cognitive and process topics—the method runs counter to how most adults have been conditioned to learn: in classrooms, with other students, being taught by teachers who held students accountable for their learning. That system didn't condition most of us to learn in isolation what we need to do our jobs better.

A related issue to self-study is whether training should happen on company time or on the learner's time. Learners may not be motivated to finish a course if they're expected to do it while maintaining their same workloads; organizational leaders may be unwilling to implement e-learning fully if they think it will reduce productivity.

E-learning can take many forms: chat rooms can be used Live virtual classrooms discussions. Web-based know can provide just-in-time and

Pitfall 4: Failing to look beyond the course paradigm. E-learning courses exist for most job-relevant technical and soft skills. But the proliferation of courses has led many decision makers to believe that e-learning is all about courses. Actually, e-learning can take many other forms. For example, asynchronous threaded email discussions and synchronous chat rooms can be used to build communities of learning. Live e-learning platforms (virtual classrooms) can support open-ended discussions and small-group projects. Web-based knowledge management depositories and electronic performance support systems can provide just-in-time and just-enough online advice. Even 19th-century apprenticeship and 20th-century internship learning models can be facilitated across distance through emerging online and wireless communication technologies.

One of the most powerful non-course e-learning approaches is electronic learning support. With an electronic performance support system, an organization can leverage the Internet or its intranet to make targeted learning available to learners when they need it, where they need it, and with just the right focus. Learners use an EPSS much in the same way they use a reference book, going to it for information on an as-needed basis. For instance, if you need help planning a meeting, you can read tips for meeting success beforehand. Or if you have a conflict with a coworker, you can immediately access information on how to address it.

An example of an advanced EPSS is DDI's OPAL (Online Performance and Learning), which includes practical tips and guidelines, 577 job aids and learning tools, and 164 topics separated into 13 topic groups and linked to 40 competencies—all accessible through a search engine that facilitates searches by synonyms. The breadth of content is supplemented by self-assessment and multirater feedback capabilities, features that greatly expand the functionality of a standard EPSS. Those tools allow learners to identify their strengths and development needs by assessing their own performance as well as by soliciting feedback from others—easily, electronically, and confidentially.

You can't overstate the value an EPSS provides in maximizing training's impact. Industry experts estimate that only 30 percent of training actually transfers to the job. Though low, that figure isn't surprising given that training delivery and learning application aren't always in sync. Take, for instance, a manager who goes through interviewing skills training but doesn't have an opportunity to conduct an interview for several months. By making learning available when and where it's needed, an EPSS places learning opportunities and information as close to the individual learner as possible.

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If you see e-learning merely as a course dispenser, you'll miss the opportunity to use an EPSS as part of a blended learning approach. *Blended learning* describes the combination of Web-based training with classroom instruction, but other components can be part of the blend as well. Knowledge management systems, email, videoconferences, guided chat rooms, and even phone conferences can contribute to an optimally effective blended learning strategy.

Pitfall 5: Viewing content as a commodity. Because writing and instructional design quality can vary greatly, one of the most significant factors contributing to the effectiveness of e-learning is the quality of the content. The sequence of the material and ease of use are also important. But buyer beware: Though the content offered by some providers is backed by extensive expertise and research, other offerings reflect little investment of time and effort.

Media also can vary in quality and impact. For instance, videos can be relevant and instructive, or they can be boring or poorly produced. When selecting content for use across geographic areas, you must consider its suitability to the audience. Content that's appropriate and effective for American audiences might be inappropriate and ineffective for learners in Europe or Asia. It's possible for a video to span geography and cultures, but success requires diligence, experience, and testing.

E-learning courses also need to be evaluated in terms of how they fit into the organization's entire training program. To maximize training's impact, the e-learning needs to complement and reinforce the learning delivered through other initiatives. A course that's inconsistent with other learning or inferior in quality can lessen the entire program's impact.

Pitfall 6: Ignoring technology. While ensuring that their e-learning content is of high quality, some decision makers overlook another critical component: technology. When implementing a Web-based learning system, several technological issues to understand and consider are the operating system, Web browser, tracking system, learning management system, database, and video servers.

The complex witch's brew of hardware and software found in most organizations demands that people with technical expertise be involved in the selection and implementation of e-learning. Too often, decision makers are so enamored with a course's potential that they make hasty and ill-advised purchasing decisions. They fail to ask the right questions, take an inventory of the organization's technology, or secure the commitment of technical experts by involving them early in the decision-making process.

Pitfall 7: Failing to involve IT. When learning is Web- or computer-based, among the most important partners to involve in the selection and implem entation are members of the information technology group. Their involvement is critical; IT, after all, is responsible for making sure the organization's computing environment is functioning properly and that no security problems arise. Your IT professional can provide the necessary technical specifications and help establish a realistic implementation timeline. (Too often, IT is asked to meet deadlines that it had little or no input in setting, and that it can't possibly meet.)

Sometimes the IT group isn't consulted until a newly purchased system needs to be installed—a disastrous situation if the installation proves to be technically complex or the e-learning system is incompatible with the organization's technical infrastructure. Such situations, which are fairly common, imperil e-learning initiatives and poison the relationship with IT.

Pitfall 8: Fixating too much on technology. Technology makes e-learning possible, but it's people—and their performance—that make it necessary. Accordingly, the most important question to ask when considering e-learning is, "What will be the impact on the people using it?"

Despite the degree to which it has saturated and altered the workplace, technology can still make people uneasy. The reason is simple: With the adoption of new technology comes change, and change makes people uncomfortable.

Ironically, with e-learning, as with all learning, change is the goal. An effective e-learning program changes the culture, workplace behavior, retention, and, ultimately, the organization so that it can become more competitive. That's a tall order. To achieve it, the people who champion, implement, and use the program need to be involved from the beginning. Throughout implementa-

tion, solicit and respect their opinions, address their concerns, and incorporate their feedback into the final delivery.

Pitfall 9: Assuming that learned knowledge will be applied. Sometimes, just acquiring knowledge is sufficient—for instance, when the objective is to learn a new pricing structure. But often, e-learning is used to impart skills (knowledge that changes behavior and is applied on the job), which can be more difficult to achieve.

Learners need opportunities to practice new skills and become comfortable with applying them. That's one reason skill practice is an important complement to an e-learning program. But even more important is attaining the buy-in of learners so that they'll be motivated to apply the learning. Unless you take steps to ensure that buy-in—such as including learners in the selection and implementation of courses or tools, providing adequate communication, and so forth—no amount of training stands much of a chance to affect performance.

Pitfall 10: Believing that because you implement e-learning, employees will use it. Just because e-learning is available doesn't mean it will be used. Many reasons explain that phenomenon: weak content, poor implementation planning, no alignment with learner or business needs, lack of management support, poorly blended components, no time or place for training, absent or ineffectual marketing, no organizational value placed on continuous learning, and so forth. Whatever the reason, the end result is the same: The training doesn't meet its intended goals, and valuable organizational resources are wasted. With that in mind, approach the following areas with care:

- Planning. An effective e-learning system begins with a sound, thorough planning process that establishes a vision, determines objectives, and includes all key constituencies—learners, managers, IT partners, and e-learning providers. The involvement of users in planning and implementation is paramount to e-learning success.
- Alignment. For users to accept e-learning, it must be relevant. That means it must align with organizational values and goals, have the visible support of senior management, and be effectively and accurately linked to other HR systems such as performance management or succession management. E-learning also has perceived value when it offers the knowledge and skills needed to support important organizational initiatives, such as a new product or technology development.
- Blending and integration. Because of the unique factors involved in the development of human performance, no single solution—be it classroom instruction, self-study, or electronic performance support—in and of itself can be a complete solution for skill development. The magic happens when an organization does a good job of selecting multiple options for learners based on their needs, preferences, and environment.
- Motivation and support. What will motivate learners to use e-learning? How will they be held accountable for completing training? Leaders must be able to answer those questions if they expect people to use e-learning.
- Marketing and communication. It's critical to build excitement and enthusiasm among learners for the launch of an e-learning initiative. Ongoing marketing and communication are required to keep learners engaged and motivated.
- Evaluation and refinement. Many believe that the implementation of e-learning marks the end of the initiative, but it's only the beginning. Once in place, the e-learning system must be evaluated, its effectiveness determined, and improvements and refinements incorporated on an ongoing basis.

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As e-learning becomes more prevalent, it will be viewed for what it really is—another set of options for delivering or reinforcing training. Until that time, however, organizations need to be mindful of the special requirements and considerations that accompany the implementation of and reliance on e-learning.

When the pitfalls described are encountered, they often lead organizations to abandon e-learning. But the organizations that will prove most effective at integrating e-learning into their training strategies will be those that learn from their mistakes and continue to leverage technology to deliver the most effective training possible.

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