How to Keep Online E-Learners

Even e-learning proponents admit that most users don't complete online courses. They don't find the material they need quickly enough, run out of time, or just get bored. Another problem is that co-workers interrupt, telephones ring. And without a change of onscreen scenery, it's difficult to keep employees from dropping out of e-learning-delivered training.

Whatever the reasons employees aren't flocking to online learning, organizations have options. You can make one or two courses mandatory, and you can aggressively market internally. But the most effective approach appears to be integrating the communication tools of e-learning into your overall plan to create a new learning community.

Building the collaborative components of e-learning into your organization's online training solution fosters learner interaction and feedback through threaded discussions, chat sessions, and virtual classes. Participants can share their ideas and experiences and benefit from that exchange of information. Course dropout rates decrease when people who are learning the same subject engage.

Make sure they chat.

By Caron Osberg

Do you remember a discussion with a teacher or a co-worker that made things clearer, or how much you learned when you explained a problem to another student? Recall the feeling when you finally understood a difficult concept. Organizations can tap such universal learning experiences to lower the dropout rate of online learners. For example, Sun Microsystems discovered that only 25 percent of employees finish e-learning courses when they're strictly self-paced; the completion rate is higher when learners are expected to communicate via email, bulletin boards, chat rooms, or phone calls.

Many e-learning solutions are seen as replacements for face-to-face instruction and can discourage or eliminate employees' opportunities for learning from others. For most people, learning is a social process. To fulfill that human need, an e-learning community can be created.

Cases in point

Berlitz International's worldwide e-learning system, *@Berlitz,* uses communication technology to enhance and reinforce employees' learning experiences. When a language instructor takes an online course, the course isn't considered completed until he or she goes to the appropriate bulletin board to answer three questions already posted and posts three new questions.

Cynthia Gould, manager of online production and administration for Berlitz, says, "We set this up to accomplish three things: enhance communications, encourage information sharing, and, especially, create a sense of community online."

Berlitz's employees, located all over the world, share ideas in online live chats or threaded discussions on electronic bulletin boards, where users post questions and comments publicly that can be accessed by others interested in the same topic.

That technology offers e-learners a real-time, text-based communication system. Chat rooms, bulletin boards, and threaded messages are open to employees and instructors for class discussion or casual chat about the subject matter and its applications. Learners can meet classmates online to discuss assignments or ask about course topics. Virtual roundtables can be set up for different topics, or participants can create their own discussion groups.

Research by Corporate University Xchange, an education and research-consulting firm, polled people who had recently completed online courses. It found that the second most-mentioned request was active correspondence with an online facilitator who has frequent virtual office hours. The first was credentials as an outcome, college credit or a certificate; 3 and 4 were 24/7 technical support and the ability to start a course at any time.

The benefits aren't reserved for learners. Instructors can also meet in a reserved chat area to discuss lesson plans, conduct private mentoring or coaching with participants, and share ideas about training and development topics and techniques. Online conversations can be password-protected, ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

Discussions with instructors and other learners increase the likelihood that an online course will be completed—and knowledge will be retained. Think of traditional learning environments as you begin to formulate a plan to draw e-learners together. It's important to keep in mind this tenet: Adult learners need feedback to know whether they've properly understood the material and mastered the skills. The challenge is to create a mechanism for interaction and feedback in your e-learning environment. **TD**

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