E-LEARNING

By Kevin Oakes

Quote Worthy: A New Era in Learning

I must confess that my imagination refuses to see any sort of submarine doing anything except suffocating its crew and foundering at sea.

H.G. Wells 1902
science fiction writer

The horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty—a fad.

Marshall Ferdinand Foch 1911
French military strategist

There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his home.

Ken Olsen 1977
president, Digital Equipment

The future can be difficult to predict, especially regarding how technology we haven't used will affect our lives.

The future of learning, knowledge, and training and development has been hypothesized countless times in the past few years—with e-learning technology and methodologies at the forefront. The 1990s featured many bold predictions and promises about the growth of the industry. Many of those predictions haven't panned out. Pick up any industry magazine and you'll see multiple articles by gleeful critics on e-learning failing to live up to its promises. But the past has lessons. Poet and philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

A defining year

For most e-learning suppliers, 2002 is a year they'd like to forget. Like almost every other technology sector, e-learning struggled. Less corporate spending, poor execution by vendors, and a difficult economic environment collided headfirst with lofty growth projections for the industry.

Functioning almost as an industry scorecard, quarterly earnings announcements for the public e-providers made visible what the entire industry experienced. As I write this, one vendor preannounced a missed quarter and another announced it will need to restate previous years' earnings. Missing and resetting expectations typified the year for the public e-learning players (my company included), while several private e-learning firms struggled to find additional funding. Many never did and now don't exist.

Given all that, it sounds as if 2002 delivered a death blow to the e-learning industry. Actually, I think it was just the opposite. Although 2002 was painful, it was also one of the most positive periods for the long-term health of the sector. It not only helped thin the crop of vendors, but also pushed the industry into what I feel is a new era for learning.

In the spirit of George Santayana, let's explore what occurred in the past few years to see how a new era may be emerging.

The CBT era

In the early to mid-1990s, we saw the advent of what I term the CBT era. Computer-based training was dominated by instructor-led content repurposed into asynchronous, linearly designed courses delivered largely on CD-ROM. Content was static, meaning it was designed not to change much and to have a long shelf life. Content vendors touted their growing libraries of CD courses: The larger the library, the better.

In the CBT era, multimedia was a novelty and courses with video or animation were top of class. Technology decisions focused on desktop authoring tools such as IconAuthor, Quest, Authorware, and ToolBook, as well as features of multimedia-ready PCs (video cards, audio cards, and the like). The primary benefit in the CBT era: lower training costs with travel, facility, and instructor expenses the core cost reductions. Other benefits were consistent quality, 24/7 access, and better learning retention.

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The e-learning era

As we entered the late 1990s (I peg it at about 1997), the e-learning era began. I can still remember an email debate with several industry professionals on whether it should be a big *E* or little *e*, hyphen or no hyphen. We're still in the e-learning era, albeit at the tail end.

As opposed to the desktop focus of the CBT era, the e-learning era is more enterprise-focused and network-driven. It introduced us to such technologies as LMSs (learning management systems), LCMSs (learning content management systems), and virtual classrooms. CD-ROMs became yesterday's technology as 100 percent Web-based became the norm. Standards, primarily SCORM, emerged; issues of scalability and reusability dominated the technology discussion. But content, now Web-delivered versus CD-delivered, is still static. Start-and-stop courses with seat times measured in hours are the norm rather than the exception. Libraries of courses—even larger than before—are offered by dozens of vendors.

With all of the technology advancements, however, the main benefit remains the same as in the CBT era. Cost reduction is still highlighted by salespeople when discussing their solutions. The decrease in travel expenses and instructor salaries makes up the bulk of most ROI. And herein lies the industry's primary problem: The focus on cost reduction has been one of the single biggest failings of the e-learning industry as a whole. It's not difficult to show a cost reduction with e-learning, but if it's not effective then what's the point?

The productivity era

Where the industry is moving—and needs to move—is into something I call the productivity era. We need to stop describing the primary benefit as saving money and start promoting improving productivity.

The productivity era is defined by value propositions such as faster time-to-market, increased customer satisfaction, and improved readiness of an organization. Those are made possible by more sophisticated technologies that seamlessly integrate the various e-learning components and include more traditional technologies such as knowledge and information management. There's a stated initiative to integrate with other mission-critical applications in the enterprise, such as ERP (enterprise resource planning) and CRM (customer relationship management). Last, explicit content is designed to be dynamic, with short just-in-time learning objects supporting on-the-job performance while the organization begins to leverage the tacit knowledge that comprises the majority of knowledge in every company today.

That's a much-needed shift. There are still too many people and too many companies that describe the e-industry as "putting training classes on the Web." In reality, it's much more about connecting the minds of people in an organization in order to move faster, share best practices, leverage experts, and ultimately improve productivity.

That shift is already happening. I can point to several organizations that have documented significant productivity improvements through the use of an integrated online learning and knowledge management approach. Century21, the world's largest residential real estate sales organization, has recorded a 33 percent improvement in sales (measured by revenues per agent) by staff trained via the Web versus those who attended instructor-led training only. Microsoft has cut the time to sales readiness by two months, extending its product lifecycle by delivering and managing Web-based content to its worldwide salesforce. Stream, a global provider of CRM support solutions for leading technology companies (and recently acquired by Solectron), has experienced a higher rate of first-call closure by reps and higher customer satisfaction by using a performance support system with small, online learning objects.

There's nothing wrong with saving on expenses, but that benefit should play second fiddle to productivity improvements. If that shift happens, the value of the e-learning industry will be elevated in conversations in your organization.

Despite the false start, many people believe that most organizations will come to view that the process of learning and managing their intellectual capital electronically are mission critical, much as they now view a CRM system. That will take time, but many organizations are already using technology across the enterprise to better leverage learning and knowledge—thus making them more competitive in their markets.

We need look no further than the present when trying to predict the future. Sci-fi writer William Gibson said, "The future is here. It's just not widely distributed yet."

Contact Kevin

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