

Dazed and Confused by E-Learning

Confessions of a training manager

I recently decided that I need to get smarter about e-learning. Sure, I've been dabbling in it for a couple of years. I've tried out a variety of e-learning programs and been visited by countless company reps selling their products and services. Yet, I've become more frustrated because I feel I haven't been understanding, marketing, and de-

livering e-learning to my customers adequately.

So, I joined thousands of training professionals in April at an e-learning conference in Washington, D.C. I'd hoped to sort out the many questions I have about this technology. I wasn't alone. Most of the people I talked with at the conference were also somewhat confused and frustrated. Unfortunately, if that conference was an indication, e-learning clarity isn't on the way.

Maybe I tend to be tardy—my grandmother once said that our relatives came over on the “June-flower”—but I'm more confused than ever.

So, I did some research before and after the conference, attended workshops, talked to vendor reps on the expo floor, and networked with trainers. After all of that, here are some conclusions and questions swirling around in my aging brain.

By Gary Segers

The e-learning industry is in a confused and confusing state. The vendors I met with last April told a different story than at similar conferences a year ago. The new mantra is “blended learning,” which I’ll address later. What is interesting is that not one e-learning company went public last year. There has been a lot of consolidation, and some well-known e-learning companies are getting out of the business. For example, McGraw-Hill’s Lifetime Learning, an e-learning content developer on hard and soft skills, shut down early this year. What does that mean to buyers? Watchers say that the industry will continue to go through major changes in the foreseeable future, with an emphasis on a “full-service system solution.” Sounds costly to me. Which brings me to the next question.

Why do I have to pay so much? The current economy isn’t conducive to large investments in technology. Yet, until recently, that’s the business model of most e-learning companies. Whether for a learning management system or off-the-shelf courses, we’ve found that the products aren’t cheap. Training dollars are always hard to come by in any economy, and my experience is that it has been difficult to justify some prices that e-learning companies want to charge. On the sidelines, small- to medium-size businesses have been waiting and watching, but not buying. They’re an untapped market, but only if competitively priced products are available.

Where’s the quality e-learning product? My impression is that the focus is too much on technology and not enough on quality. I tested and observed a number of demo programs at the conference and thought they were just OK. In a recent issue of an e-learning magazine, Sam Herring, executive vice president of Lguide lguide.com says, “By and large, off-the-shelf content lacks substantive depth and learners aren’t challenged. The courses are too simplistic.”

Have any of you used an e-learning program that gave you a Wow! learning experience? I’ve yet to find one. The best e-learning applications I’ve found so far have been programs that teach how to use computer software. I still like getting into the classroom to learn how to use computer software.

Blending isn’t just for margaritas. To no one’s surprise, the mantra this year is blended learning. But what does that really mean? Workshops on the subject were popular at the conference, but my sense is

that we’re still in the early stages of figuring out what and how to blend. Talk to suppliers and you’ll hear the term *blended learning*, but that’s about as far as it goes. Most e-learning companies are struggling with the blended issue as much as those of us who have to deliver training are.

Do we know what we want? Do we trainers know what we want? Let me put it another way: I don’t think all buyers know enough yet to figure out what they really want. I mean what’s wanted in terms of quality, delivery technology, price, and countless other variables. Some of us may be fairly knowledgeable about this business, but many of us haven’t even deciphered the e-learning jargon yet—much less how to apply the technology. Some experts say that many buyers are too focused on wanting to have a huge inventory of online courses. That shotgun approach comes at the expense of making courses available that fit their organizations’ specific needs. For example, the U.S. Department of the Interior offers hundreds of NETg and SkillSoft courses, but I suspect that employees have taken only a small fraction.

Are we forgetting that e-learning is about learning and, ultimately, performance improvement? I’m going to be blunt: Too often, we tend to focus on the technology rather than the content and outcome. Yes, it’s slick to be able to say that our employees can access learning virtually anywhere, anytime, and at their own pace. And don’t we like the neat pop-up windows and video clips? The reality: All that great stuff looks just fine with a high-speed connection, but few Web-based courses work well off of a dial-up connection. And most employees aren’t interested in taking courses on their own time.

Supervisors resist employees using e-learning at their workstations. Bosses find it difficult to accept employees doing something other than “real work” in their cubicles, but don’t mind them being excused to attend a classroom-delivered course.

Some of you may think I’m totally off base, or you may find yourself nodding in agreement. Either way, I hope I’ve started a conversation. TD

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