


# TRAINING 101

## Pilot Primer

The ABCs of  
piloting your  
e-learning  
program

By Patrick von Schlag

In “The Trainer’s Ally”  Training 101,  
T+D, February  
you learned how to start the e-learning  
discussion in your organization, find user  
champions, and pick your initial pilot  
group. Now the real work begins. How  
do you get a pilot under way?

When developing a pilot, it’s impor-  
tant to have clear, measurable objec-  
tives, which you create by asking these  
questions:

- How many participants do you want?
- What types of feedback will you request?

- How are you going to capture that feedback?
- How will you measure whether the feedback is “good enough”?

Your pilot should identify who takes the training, what training they complete, and whether they’re able to pass posttraining assessments. Asking participants to take a pre-assessment evaluation will help you identify how training transfers to on-the-job performance.

For example, you're piloting an e-learning solution to prepare a salesforce of 50 to sell a new product. A good pilot includes a representative sampling of at least seven to 10 participants—including remote, experienced, and inexperienced users.

Set up a control group and define how you're going to measure its results to illustrate the training's ROI. You could, for example, demonstrate reduced training time, reduced travel costs, or the ability to train more people for the same budget. Such data will support the efficacy of your solution and defend the project's ROI.

You'll also want to test your ability to drive awareness of the e-learning solution. One way to do that is to look at how you currently promote classroom programs through emails, bulletin boards, newsletters, and so forth. The best way to drive awareness, however, is to meet with managers, discuss their past experiences with training programs, and introduce them, personally, to the new tools.

The enthusiasm you show for learners in a classroom environment is even more necessary for e-learners. Employees will want to know why it's beneficial to them to learn in this new way and how learning this information will help their job performance. Here's how to prepare for their questions.

**Predict problems.** The purpose of any pilot is to test assumptions and ensure that the solution works the way you intended. An effective pilot program takes into account the most substantial challenges and proves to be efficient in those situations. Predictable challenges include

- user acceptance
- content alignment (Is the content the right information?)
- technology
- effectiveness.

**Over-communicate.** When asking peo-

ple to change their behavior, it's essential to set up a mode of communication that extols the program's benefits and encourages users. Just as a marketing department uses product testimonials, you should collect learner case studies to illustrate how participation in the program helped them succeed on the job.

When participants begin to use the pilot, congratulate them on entering the program and ask why they enrolled and what they need to learn. Like classroom learners, some participants will do the work on their own with virtually no help; others will require ongoing guidance and mentoring.

**Demand results.** The best teachers expect results in the classroom and beyond. One of e-learning's hidden challenges has been the lack of specific expectations. With the exception of legal compliance training, the purpose of e-learning isn't to finish the course but to improve employee performance.

Work with managers to identify the specific expectations they have for participants. Ask

- What is the problem you're trying to solve?
- Is training really the answer?
- How do you plan to measure success?
- Are you planning to take part in the program as well?

Gathering manager input will help you produce programs that are both useful and used.

**Don't go it alone.** Keep all interested parties involved. Update the vendors that support the content, learning management system, or other tools to ensure that the products work as described and that you're getting the network performance and skills you contracted. Whether you use weekly conference calls or virtual meetings is less important than making vendors aware that they're engaged as partners in the process and that you expect ongoing support.

Keep business champions abreast of the program's progress too. As participants successfully complete the program, congratulate them and inform managers of the accomplishment. Ask to see how employees apply what they learned back on the job, and use that information to create success stories.

### From pilot to rollout

Once you've run your pilot successfully, you're ready to launch. As with a rocket, the e-learning launch requires extra energy to overcome inertia. That energy must create

- excitement. How will the new program improve employee performance and the business?
- persistence. What difficulties are you likely to face? How will you overcome them?
- momentum. How are you going to get learners to use the solution and motivate them to keep using it?
- commitment. How do you keep everyone on board and focused on achieving results?

E-learning programs are like any other significant corporate initiative. If you set clear objectives, produce thorough plans, execute those plans, check your work, and adjust as you see challenges, you'll have a terrific pilot and launch. Most likely, you'll also have a more prosperous company.

**Patrick von Schlag** is director, business strategy for Global Knowledge, an independent provider of IT education solutions and certification programs; [www.globalknowledge.com](http://www.globalknowledge.com).

Send short, how-to articles on training basics to **Training 101**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Email [T101@astd.org](mailto:T101@astd.org).