

Breaking Through the E-BarrierS

There's more hope than hype.

By Martyn Sloman

Three years ago when e-learning was the new kid on the block, the advice to an ambitious human resource or training manager was straightforward: Cut your training costs by agreeing to a three-year deal with a supplier of e-learning systems and content. Get the chief executive to give his or her endorsement. Prepare a brochure, plan a launch, and place a high-profile article in a training magazine.

In hindsight, another good recommendation would've been to contact a recruitment agency so you could move on before it all went wrong.

If that sounds unduly cynical, consider the following. Every year, ASTD publishes a survey of respondents in its Benchmarking Forum. The April 2002 report shows there has been little increase in the amount of training delivered

through learning technology, or e-learning, remaining steady at less than 10 percent. In fact, the highest percentage—9.1—was recorded for 1997 (there's an inevitable time lag in surveys of this kind). Although the past two ASTD reports are positive on the future of e-learning, the figures suggest a plateau rather than growth of e-learning use in the corporate sector.

The 2002 annual survey of training managers in the United Kingdom, undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, also shows no evidence of an e-learning explosion. Less than one-third of the 500 U.K. training managers polled have introduced e-learning; of those, almost three-quarters describe its use as "a little."

Some hard questions should be asked:

- Is the age of e-learning over before it really began?
- Were the hype and selling misplaced?
- Would a suitable epitaph be (to borrow a quip from President Clinton's ex-Labor Secretary Robert Reich) "Rarely has a term moved so rapidly from obscurity to meaninglessness without an intervening period of coherence."

My contention is that pessimism is not warranted. Dig a little deeper into the recent ASTD surveys, for example, and a more cheerful picture emerges. Former ASTD research director Mark Van Buren struck this optimistic note in the 2001 report: "We found evidence that perhaps e-learning isn't destined for the 'it's history' pages but only taking a breather." A year later, he and report co-author William Erskine suggest that "some firms held the amount of e-learning steady while making significant investments in e-learning systems and courses." Looking to the longer term, they said, "Cutbacks on travel and the need for security have made more organizations increase their e-learning since September 11."

Significantly, the HR and training professionals who participated in the ASTD surveys have consistently believed that e-learning will, in due course, provide a fifth to a quarter of all training in the typical organization. What has emerged, however, is recognition that progress will be slower than expected. Barriers have become evident. Before we look at those barriers, let's take comfort in lessons from history.

Along the towpaths

The full potential of any new technology takes time to be realized; we must expect some false starts. We must also expect some early misunderstandings

History repeats powerful tech

on what the technology can achieve.

A good example is found in the railway age in the United Kingdom—generally accepted as a defining period in the first industrial revolution. When railways arrived, they were seen as a serious competitor to the canals for the transport of heavy goods between industrial centers. Doubtless there was much chatter on the towpaths among canal operators reassuring each other that this new fad would pass. The skeptics also would have been reassured by the events of 1845. In that year, a huge speculation in railway shares was followed by a spectacular crash—even in the shares of the companies that became giants of the industry. There's nothing new about the dot.com collapse.

The railways survived and the canals declined. What is instructive is the diverse impact of the railways. In giving ordinary people access to the coast, for example, the railways created the modern British seaside and transformed leisure. Another consequence had to do with time zones. Before the arrival of the railway network, time across British towns and cities varied; the time in Gloucester differed from the time in Oxford, for example. But to ensure predictable times for train departures and arrivals, national times were introduced.

Let's move to a more recent and more applicable example, the development of email. Writing about the origins of the Internet, John Naughton describes how email emerged from the work of the Advanced Research Projects Agency:

"Email came as something of a surprise to ARPA—or at least to some people in it. The Net was funded, remember, to enable the research community to share scarce resources. The idea was that researchers at a site would be able to log into—and run programs—on computers at other sites. So, imagine ARPA's puzzlement when a specially commissioned survey in 1973 revealed that *three-quarters* of the traffic on the Net was electronic mail...worse, some of these messages were not even about computing!"

History repeatedly tells us that a powerful technology is irresistible. The confidence of training

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professionals in the future of e-learning isn't misplaced. But so far, we may have been looking in the wrong places for results and deploying our energies inappropriately. We have misinterpreted the gains to be won from e-learning.

The real gains

The major opportunity to arise from new technologies is the ability to transfer up-to-date information from one computer to another instantaneously at minimal cost. But that capability wasn't developed with training applications, or learning, in mind. However, the ability for immediate and universal transfer of information will fundamentally alter the way learning takes place in organizations. Exciting times lie ahead.

So far, the e-learning agenda has been dominated by the availability of technology rather than the needs of learners. It has also been sold, indeed oversold, as a way to save training costs in the corporate sector. The main impetus has been on the production of generic material for learners in large organizations. That's understandable given the emphasis on cost savings, but it has resulted in a painful lesson for the profession: Making generic Web-based material available via intranets and hoping learners will absorb it won't work. Short-term cost-savings can be achieved that way but, except in rare circumstances, long-term benefits won't emerge. Learning, organizations, and individuals are complex. The approach needs to be far more tailored to their circumstances.

The good news is that many people in different organizations are applying their first-rate minds to come up with ingenious solutions. Providing that we're honest in this new, more mature phase of e-learning, the barriers will be overcome. The potential gains are compelling. Let's illustrate this proposition by looking at two ends of the e-learning chain: the production of content and the reaction of learners.

Much content to date has been generic, suitable for all organizations rather than tailored to the needs of a specific organization or context. Inevitably, the most successful activity has been the development of

material for instruction in IT-related skills (Microsoft products, designing Websites, C++, and Java). That makes some sense: Such learning requirements lend themselves easily to access of material at a personal computer. But those subjects don't command the highest attention and priority from senior management. Except in the IT and related high-technology sectors, those areas aren't seen as vital drivers for the business. What's exciting and starting to happen is that there are more Web-based modules on topics that *are* seen as critical to important, immediate business objectives. Web-based training will become better regarded as it becomes customized.

E-learning isn't redundant but needs to be seen as one constituent of a wider solution; *blended learning* is the fashionable, if somewhat loose, term. Most current e-learning activity is the production and promotion of generic, Web-based learning. One feature of advanced e-learning will be the emergence of more specific content, driven by better authoring tools and the creation of more specific learning objects. Additionally, the acceptance of standards for e-learning content will be a vital step in allowing content to be transferred between organizations. That will encourage collaboration and cooperation between different organizations to produce better and more suitable content. That's all happening now.

LearnShare

In 1996, training managers at General Motors, 3M, Motorola, Owens Corning, Deere & Co, Eaton, Pilkington, Owens-Illinois, Northwest Airlines, Pfizer, Chevron, Levi Strauss, and Verizon realized that by working together, their companies could save money on training and benefit from a collective expertise by sharing the products they developed. The training managers believed that sales of technology-enabled training were packaged to meet vendors' needs. The license terms, costs of multimedia, and requirement of high-volume purchases didn't meet their companies' needs.

The managers' response was to establish LearnShare as a consortium to pool the resources and

knowledge of 13 noncompeting corporations

learnshare.com. Its shared mission is to

- provide a marketplace with best-in-class learning products and services, including a portal of carefully selected learning resources and easy access to world-class strategic partners
- facilitate benchmarking and sharing of best practices that capitalize on the experience and expertise of industry leaders
- leverage the collective strength of collaborating companies in evaluating and acquiring products
- provide specialized services that build customized solutions for unique needs
- serve as a first-level clearinghouse for vendor and provider selection.

A half-million courses are now available through LearnShare. For an annual fee of US\$50,000 (about half the cost of a training manager's salary), companies can join as subscribers. With the subsequent addition of United Parcel Service, CAN, United Health Group, and AT&T Broadband, the LearnShare network now encompasses more than 2.5 million employees. LearnShare says that the 13 charter members and additional subscribers benefit from their involvement through improved cycle time, decreased cost, more-focused experimentation, and an increase in learning and development that supports the bottom line.

"Sixteen companies can achieve collectively what one can't," says Lois Webster, general manager. "Being a member or subscriber of LearnShare accelerates a company's productivity and increases its access to creative solutions. In addition, large companies make substantial savings through cost avoidance, and small companies launch more quickly into the e-learning world."

I&DeA Learning Pool

I&DeA, the Improvement and Development Agency, was established to meet the needs of local councils (municipalities) in England and Wales. There are more than 400 separate local councils in the two nations, employing more than 2 million people. Elected members control the councils, and their services are delivered through professional and frontline staff employed by the municipality.

The needs of the 400 councils have much in common. They're all involved, for example, in addressing the demands of central government for greater efficiency or best value. On the other hand,

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local delivery of services gives rise to different requirements and different approaches for different localities. Rural Cornwall is a quite different environment from an inner London borough.

Since its inception, I&DeA has promoted the objective of collaboration between local authorities and sought to create mechanisms that allow that to take place. Its most recent initiative has been the introduction of Learning Pool, touting it as "an innovative new service that takes advantage of the expansive network of the Internet." Learning Pool will enable councils to access and share low-cost, high-value training online—leading to economies of scale and reduced duplication of effort.

At the heart of the approach is a system of file-sharing technology developed in partnership with U.K.-based e-learning specialists, the Epic Group. The system enables any Learning Pool council to tag and share e-learning materials. The system was piloted with 13 local councils in spring 2002 and during a three-month period with a larger group of 86 councils in May. I&DeA developed several e-learning modules specially designed for local council needs as a starter pack. Member local councils will be encouraged to produce their own learning materials and share them using simple tools.

Further features of Learning Pool are designed to develop community and collaboration within the sector. A Website www.idea.gov.uk/elearning provides a focal point for information about new resources, and discussion boards enable different interest groups within the community to collaborate in new ways.

Determining factor

Ultimately, however relevant the content and how important the learning to an organization's mission, one factor above all will determine the progress of e-learning. That's the reaction of the learner. As part of the 2002 CIPD U.K. survey, training managers who had implemented e-learning (remember, less than a third of the total sample) were offered a

mands a new attitude on learners."

series of statements on e-learning and asked to indicate the extent of their agreement. The statement that commanded the most support: "E-learning demands a new attitude on the part of the learners." To reiterate, making content available via the Internet or intranets and hoping for the best won't work. E-learners need support; they'll need time and space to learn, and they must be encouraged to cultivate new learning habits.

Last year, ASTD and the Masie Center produced a report—"If We Build It, Will They Come?"—of e-learning in practice on 30 courses at 16 U.S. companies; feedback was obtained from more than 700 learners. The aim was to analyze the relationship between an organization's efforts to market and motivate learner participation and the satisfaction of learners. The study concentrated on these particular features of the context in which e-learning is delivered: marketing of the initiatives, support for the learner, and effect of incentives on an individual learner's willingness to participate.

The findings were many and varied, but one of the most significant was the importance of effective support. To quote:

"Although marketing and promotion efforts appeared to be the crucial factor in prompting learners to begin the courses...they were not always likely to engage in the portions of these courses delivered via technology. Rather it was the amount of support learners received that actually increased their willingness to begin the technology-delivered portions. The level to which learners felt they were supported was one of the primary indicators regarding their participation in e-learning."

The report emphasized the need for management and co-worker support in providing learners with enough time to take courses and in offering encouragement to complete them.

We've all been warned. In considering the problem of learner acceptance for e-learning, we need to revisit some old thinking and develop some new. The importance of learner support—particularly from

immediate managers—is scarcely a discovery. As the famous baseball player and malapropist Yogi Berra said, "It's déjà vu all over again." We're not asking line managers to direct employees to appropriate courses and brief them before and afterwards. We're asking line managers to emphasize learning at employees' desks. That demands a new mindset.

E-learning is far from a fad or a lost cause. It's a new idea whose time is yet to come. I remain convinced that it's the most exciting development for trainers in a lifetime. We've learned a lot over the past three or four years and, in terms of practical advice, the main lessons are as follows:

- E-learning savings is about change management, not cost.
- Throwing generic material at unprepared learners doesn't work.
- Before proceeding, ask what the compelling business case is.
- Collaborative approaches will prove increasingly attractive.

The last point is the one that will present the largest hurdle. E-learning is a more collaborative activity than we realized. It benefits from an exchange of information and views that cross institutional and organizational boundaries. As training professionals, we must be prepared to learn from each other. We must collaborate, cooperate, and share information on how the barriers to effective e-learning can be overcome. Such collaboration is essential for learners and important to our profession. We have something to learn from the open-source movement in information technology that believes a better source code will be produced through shared endeavors.

We must ensure that (to borrow a phrase from Russian anarchist literature) "the severe effort of many converging wills" combine to overcome barriers. TD

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