

Th not the e-learning but the e-learner?

There is a lot of literature about e-learning, but little attention on the e-learner. That's ironic, because the success of e-learning depends on good choices by the learners.

A frequently touted benefit of e-learning is that it shifts control from the bureaucracy and instructor to the learner. Should learning and performance professionals be enthusiastic about that movement? The answer rests, in large part, on what e-learners will do with their opportunity. Much depends on their eagerness and ability to learn independently and online.

Let's start by looking at learners' eagerness. Will they *choose* e-learning? Will they do what needs to be done diligently, on their own? Will they use the rich resources provided online? Or head for the refrigerator? Will they return online repeatedly to review models, reflect on exercises, take tests, practice on cases, refer to tools, search out examples, and contribute to communities?

An internal study in a large government agency found little enthusiasm for e-learning among employees. A 2001 ASTD/Masie Center study reported grim participation statistics, with only 69 percent of employees electing to begin compulsory online courses and 32 percent starting voluntary courses. Even organizations with a financial interest in the success of e-learning are admitting lukewarm acceptance within their ranks. Karen Frankola, e-learning solutions manager for NYU Online, reported in 2001 that Sun Microsystems's studies found that only 25 percent of its employees completed online self-study courses. Study after study has found that despite organizations' good intentions, e-learning initiatives are failing to capture and sustain the interest of learners.

"Many students given control over their own learning choose to terminate the experience before mastering the training task," says Ken Brown, a University of Iowa assistant professor specializing in business management and psychology.

What to Do About E-Dropouts

By Allison Rossett and Lisa Schafer

Such lack of interest and dismal completion rates from employees would appear to point to a problem with the courseware or its implementation. Accordingly, those aspects receive the most attention and finger pointing. For some e-learning experts, it's a cut-and-dry argument: Learners don't complete e-learning because they're not engaged. But what if the courseware is sound? What if the problem isn't with e-learning but with the e-learner?

The fact is that many employees don't know how to be effective self-learners. They're just not aware of or in control of independent learning strategies. Though many learners can establish goals, assess progress, earmark time, and exert continuous effort to work-related projects, when it comes to e-learning they're more likely to go for a cup of coffee.

What is the problem? Are e-learners just plain ornery? Are they angling to return to the comforting embrace of instructors?

We see no plot afoot. Instead, we see unprepared people with habits cultivated in classrooms dominated by instructors. It should be no surprise that learners often experience confusion and failure when they go it alone online.

Because so many learners resist e-learning, should we abandon all hope, wash the whiteboards, and return to the classrooms? Of course not. What we must do is recognize the threats to e-learners' success and take steps to build their enthusiasm and strengthen their commitment to e-learning. Our focus here will be on two critical links: the e-learning and e-learners.

Elevating the e-learning

It's essential that we focus first on the learning programs. They have the greatest potential to influence whether e-learners succeed or fail. Here's what you can do to ensure a successful program.

Provide meaningful content. E-learners crave content that helps them work better and faster. For example, PeopleSoft sales consultants want to understand new product fea-

tures to prepare outstanding client presentations. Customer service representatives at Sprint want to know how to order an international toll-free number for a new account. For John Speicher, a systems engineer at Cisco Systems, it's simple: "I'm more likely to pay attention when I know it's going to affect a client in an hour."

Content must be ruled by the priorities of users, not the passions of subject matter experts. Talk to the potential audience. Provide what they say they need. Frame resources in light of learners' questions, concerns, and priorities. And whenever possible, lead them directly to an example of how to handle a particularly troublesome problem.


During development and prototyping, test the content with potential users. Ask if the program will help today, tomorrow, and two months from now. Make certain that the e-learning transcends the obvious. As one e-learner remarks, she often finds herself "waiting for the good part." Her patience is the exception; most learners won't wait.

Provide my content. Although meaningful content is good, tailored content is better. Land's End is an excellent example. Parkas, boots, flannel shirts, turtle-necks, and monogramming—the content is there, as is the information to support it. But the company takes it a step further. It tries to match its products to customers by creating an online model, or avatar, that is unique to you. Weight? Height? Hair? Body shape? Land's End even lets you craft a model that is more or less "mature." (You get to decide what that means.) Land's End then recommends clothing. How will you look in that jacket? Those pajamas? The online experience is tailored to your needs.

E-learning must move in that direction—offering choices about tone, path, practice, and community. E-learning should be able to adapt to a learner's style, consider his or her successes, and then offer an experience with more of the elements that appeal and fewer that baffle.

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Julia Manson, a product consultant with PeopleSoft, says, “Forget the fluffy background and flowery language. Talk to us like adults.” Another e-learner might want detailed background information, elaboration, and support. Though an in-class instructor is limited to only one approach, e-learning has the potential to fulfill multiple approaches. Designers should tailor courses for a range of learning preferences, but a program can’t do that without involvement from participants. They have to know what they need and acknowledge the difficulties, for example, in converting legacy materials to the Web. They have to be honest about their weight when Land’s End asks them to type in a number.

In another example, at the IRS online experiences are matched to the tasks confronting its HR and training professionals. (Tasks were determined through a needs assessment.) Those professionals were asked such questions as what kept them up at night as the organization moved towards more reliance on technology for learning  “IRS Goes E,” May T+D.

Provide opportunities for action

A course’s design should encourage e-learners to seek, try, decide, compare, and commune.

Seek. One broadband provider’s TV ad shows a man who has surfed the Web to the point of reaching “the end of the Internet.” What can we, as instructors, do to harness that kind of curiosity into an engaging learning experience? A possible solution is the inclusion of inquiry-oriented activities such as a WebQuest, which engages learners by encouraging them to seek out resources on the Internet.

Try. The essence of action is nudging the learner to *do* something. E-learning for tech-related fields often uses the “try” action. For example, Element K requires e-learners to use the Feather option in a Photoshop course or expects Windows administrators to modify the startup process as part of the course. With other types of content, an e-learner can try his or her hand at interactive quizzes or games. The Nobel e-museum includes a game with practice identifying blood types www.nobel.se/medicine/educational/landsteiner/index.html. Land’s End online encourages shoppers to try before they buy.

Decide. Chinos or jeans? Take the quiz or skip to the explanation? Presenting the e-learner with choices parallels realities in the workplace. Do I recommend in-

vestment in that bond or this equity? What would the ethical action be in this circumstance? E-learners constantly face such decisions at work. Excluding the decision-making process from a course wastes a valuable learning opportunity. Indecision is an obstacle to progress; decision is a call to action.

Compare and commune. The ability to identify what you know and what you don’t know is critical to the success of independent learning. At the First Things Fast Website www.jbp.com/legacy/rossett/rossett.html, training professionals have the opportunity to compose their own responses to skeptical, disinterested, or resistant customers. They then compare their approaches with a model effort.

For PeopleSoft’s Manson, real-time collaboration brings the training to life: “When people ask questions, you say, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s what I was thinking, too.’”

Communing goes beyond asynchronous discussion forums to include virtual classrooms, electronic brown-bag discussions, and instant messaging. “Participants don’t realize how much they learn from each other,” says Jean Ezell, HR business partner at Bank One.

Structure experiences for success

E-learners fail when they face online content for which they’re unprepared or from an interface or a structure that confuses or confounds.

Focus content. To keep e-learners away from ending an online session, guide them into appropriate choices and avoid placing them in situations in which their confidence will be dashed. It’s important to provide prerequisite information and to help online learners decide whether they’re qualified for the experience. For example, basic math facts must be mastered before long division.

It’s also useful to provide a roadmap. Barnes and Noble University www.barnesandnobleuniversity.com details course descriptions, including prerequisites and the intended audience. IBM provides roadmaps for its PC Institute learners to steer them to content that’s suitable for their needs and skills. For knowledgeable e-learners, IBM recommends the use of job aids, or reference sheets, in lieu of a course.

Detail outcomes. Whether users need to perform statistical calculations in Excel or want to make sure they’ve included the required elements on a food nutrition label, represent the outcomes and related challenges in ways that e-learners can use to count

themselves in or out of the online experience.

Interface. The interface must show learners where they are, where they've been, what's to come, and what needs to be done to achieve success. Cisco's Speicher requires online mechanics that are as easy as "hit play and go." That can be done by providing an intuitive structure: organizers, headings, summaries, and overviews that orient the e-learner. Most tax software does that well.

It's also important to guide the learner's choices. Mike Williams, in *Handbook of Research for Educational Communications and Technologies*, says that learners with control over their instruction often make poor choices. On the other hand, e-learners remain fond of the choices that pepper many e-learning environments. Our challenge: finding a proper balance between choice and direction. Bradford Bell and Steve Kozlowski, in an article for *Personnel Psychology*, suggest adaptive guidance. Adaptive guidance uses technology to check progress and provide recommendations, also offering model routes and approaches to decide how, what, and where to study.

Touch minds and hearts

Successful online experiences not only challenge the mind, they also touch the heart. Try these strategies to encourage enthusiasm and transfer:

Communicate the why. Show why all new employees need background on company products. Tell why it's important that a salesperson know how to avoid computer viruses. E-learners left wondering why will click the close box.

Frame the experience in authentic ways. Specific problems, war stories, and vivid examples are suitable for framing. For example, to convey the importance of avoiding computer viruses, you can depict an employee that unknowingly receives a computer virus, sends an infected email to all customers in her address book, and is then mercilessly and understandably chewed out.

Use characters with challenges and priorities similar to the e-learner's. IBM's Basic Blue fea-

tures other new supervisors as they grapple with the growth and challenges natural to their new position.

Inoculate e-learners against the obstacles to come. When training managers are about to set up a new merit increase program, run through the challenges they'll face from employees. Detail the nature of likely concerns, and suggest honest and substantive ways to counter workers' objections.

Reiterate the content through job aids, ongoing discussion forums, and coaching. Providing detailed information during the e-learning process is all well and good, but it's useless if it can't be accessed later. Make sure employees can get to needed information or help when back on the job.

When e-learners commit to e-learning

Learners can take advantage of e-learning by talking to themselves. Enhancing awareness of the learning process, also known as metacognition, is the foundation of successful independent learning.

Here are some questions e-learners should ask themselves:

Am I able and willing? Learners must feel comfortable with the basics, such as using the Internet, as well as the intangibles, such as why they're taking the course, whether they're certain about how it affects their career, or if they're interested in learning more about the topic at hand.

Am I inclined to try something new? Many e-learners have expressed preference for the familiarity of the classroom. An independent learner recognizes that but is willing to give online approaches a try. Bank One's Ezell encourages others to be open to e-learning. "Don't be intimidated, you can't break it," she says.

Am I honest with myself? Learners need to be honest about their strengths and weaknesses related to learning independently. Jumping in head first and hoping for the best is a good way to end up discouraged. They should consider whether they have the background knowledge to be successful, whether they can track their progress, and whether they have enough time to complete a

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course. Sarah Ryan-Roberts, an e-learner in the online San Diego State University Educational Technology masters program, says that honest self-assessment ultimately influenced her choice about programs. “I need the structure of a formal program,” she says. Without clear expectations and deadlines, she knew she would fall behind and quickly become overwhelmed. Likewise, Cisco’s Speicher prefers programs that let him see the instructor and experience nonverbal cues, even when those messages are delivered online.

Am I responsible? As adults, it’s likely that we’re all reasonably responsible, but we’re not all responsible learners. Do you set goals and use time-management skills? Do you take responsibility for your learning and for your participation in team activities and online communities? Do you deliver what is expected and promised? Do you provide prompt feedback to teammates? Those are questions to consider when approaching e-learning. Suzanne Moore, another online learner in the San Diego State University program, suggests, “Read your syllabus thoroughly at the beginning of the semester and map out your time and deadlines.” She found it necessary to go online two to three times a week to stay on top of her course.

Am I anticipatory? Look around the bend and imagine what might hinder your progress. Top-priority projects and family crises often lurk just out of sight. Successful e-learners anticipate distractions.

Cisco’s Speicher sums it up this way: “You don’t have people contained, and you can’t control the distractions—coffee, phone, and such. With e-learning, you don’t go through the same transition like you do when you go into a classroom.” He suggests that e-learners prepare for e-learning just as they would for the classroom: Turn off the telephone or forward calls, use the restroom, dispense the coffee, and dispense with the chit-chat. Many organizations have produced environmental cues, such as yellow tape and signs on top of computers, to warn colleagues that employees are participating in online learning.

Talk to management

Just as e-learners profit from looking inward, they’ll benefit from talking to their managers about any proposed online learning. It wouldn’t hurt any e-learner to pose these questions before taking an e-learning course:

What is your perception of the relationship between this online experience, my career, and our unit goals? Learners should understand the relationship of those

resources to current and future trends and priorities. It’s best to know in advance whether the topic is germane to company goals, relates to performance appraisals, or is important to advancing one’s career path. **What kind of support is available?** When learners falter, it’s helpful for them to know what resources are available, such as coaches or support from their manager. In addition, learners should know whether employers will provide time at work for e-learning or recognition for contributing to online communities and online knowledge bases.

What choices exist? Learners should ask management which learning paths and online resources have been most fruitful. A little investigation of other units will help learners discover recommended combinations of face-to-face activities and online resources, or which strategies boosted success.

Does e-learning work? It’s helpful to hear the e-learning success stories, but pay particular attention to e-learning failures. Learning from others’ mistakes is a painless way to get the most out of any e-learning.

Click or quit

E-learning critics point to flabby programs, an ambivalent audience, and high cost. But e-learners are the crucial link in e-learning success. When people go online to learn, they often make bad choices, including a propensity to become e-dropouts. Ecstasy about e-learning and references to anytime, anywhere often turn off busy people who say, “Not now, perhaps later.”

There are tangible strategies to increase the likelihood that people will participate, persist, and learn. First, strengthen your e-learning programs for the people who stand to benefit most. It’s a reasonable place to start taking advantage of technology for learning and support. TD

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