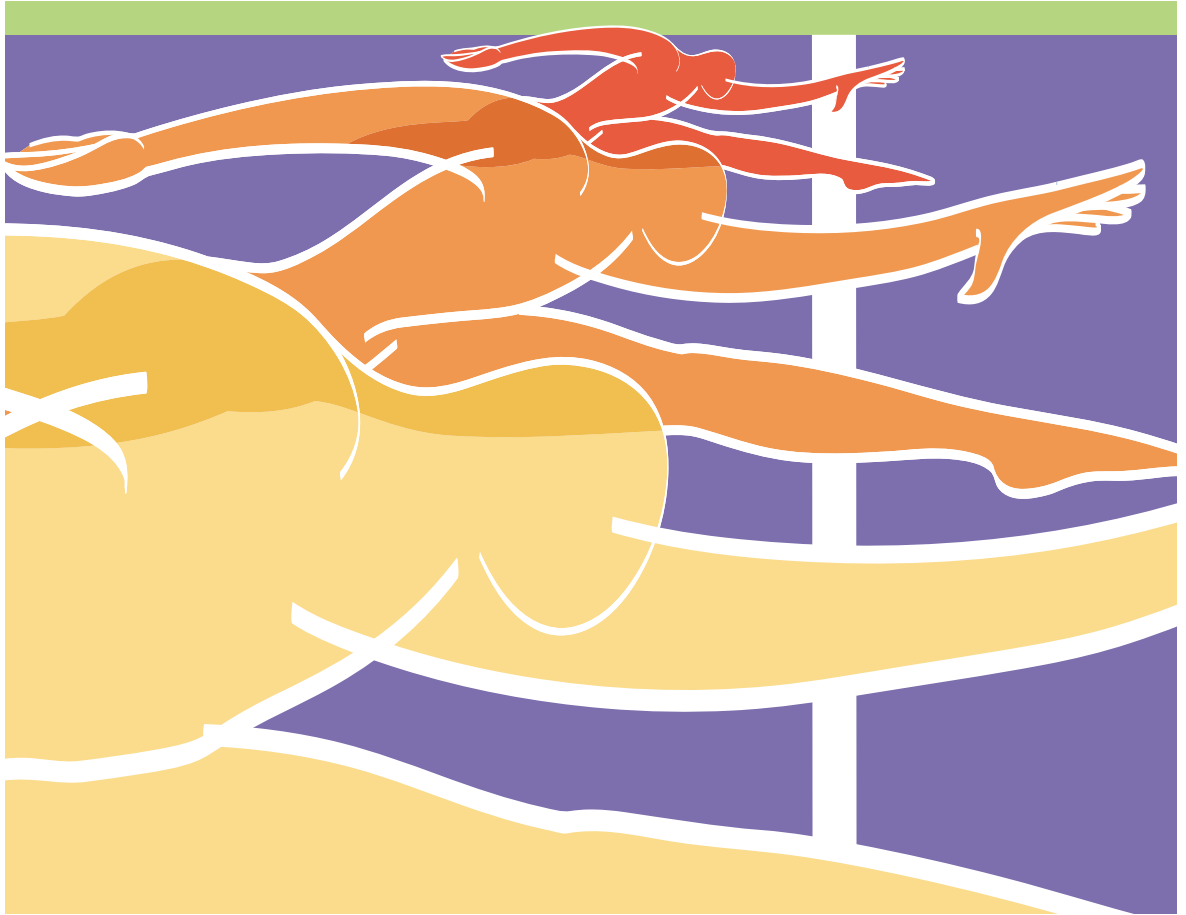


TRAINING 101



Marathon E-Learning

Doing it for the long run.

By Stu Tanquist

Illustration by SIS

Employee participation in e-learning initiatives often falls below expectations, baffling senior management and e-learning champions alike. Considering the typically large financial investment and strategic value to the organization, corrective action is warranted. When attempting to resurrect a stalled e-learning initiative, it's essential to understand 1) why people resist, 2) what improvement opportunities exist, and 3) how to initiate strategic

interventions that align expectations with final results.

Wave of resistance

People resist change for a multitude of reasons. Even positive change that offers substantial employee benefit can be viewed as a threat or inconvenience. That's especially true if learners equate the new form of learning to the loss of traditional instructor-led options.

Traditional education tends to be a

passive form of learning: Go to a classroom at the assigned time, sit in a chair, listen to the instructor, and perhaps take notes. The instructor outlines activities and assignments, and face-to-face assistance is readily available.

People may resist e-learning because it can feel cold and impersonal. It creates a participant-centric environment that requires initiative and effort. Learners don't just arrive at the assigned time; they must take personal responsibility for budgeting their time, accessing their computers, learning to use required hardware and software, acclimating themselves to the interface, and overcoming technical problems. That can be particularly challenging for people who aren't comfortable with technology.

An added complication is the opposing views of e-learning: Management touts its flexibility ("It offers employees the ability to learn from home"), while employees interpret that as yet another demand on their personal time.

Some learners may resist e-learning because it's new and can be misunderstood. As technology improves and people begin to realize the benefits, user concerns will diminish. Resistance to change, however, is here to stay.

What employees know

Implementing an e-learning initiative without a thorough understanding of your user group and learning culture is like jumping from an airplane without first checking your parachute. Employee assessments can provide invaluable, and sometimes surprising, information. For example, initial e-learning excitement and energy from media hype and internal promotion can create the perception of an accepting user environment. But the enthusiasm can quickly deteriorate if there's inadequate support or reality falls short of expectations.

Interviews, focus groups, and surveys all have their place in your assessment

arsenal. Take care to ensure that the assessment doesn't provoke resistance. A poorly designed one may imply that employees will no longer have access to instructor-led training and will be required to learn from home, adding more hours to their workweek. You must anticipate employee perceptions, concerns, and fears before designing your instrument. Interviews and focus groups provide an effective approach for potentially sensitive issues because you can address concerns before inaccurate perceptions develop.

Remember that legitimate barriers or misperceptions can cause employee resistance, but overcoming them also offers great opportunities for quick improvements. Answer these questions to identify potential barriers:

- Has senior and line-management support been consistently communicated and demonstrated to employees?
- Do employees understand why e-learning is being implemented and its potential benefits?
- Do employees have the necessary equipment, tools, knowledge, and skills?
- What hardships or inefficiencies exist?

The information you collect will be more meaningful once you identify whether employees have had other e-learning experience. If so, clarify the delivery mode and whether the experience was positive or negative. Employees who lack e-learning experience may have difficulty envisioning the benefits. People with negative e-learning experiences may have struggled for many reasons (for example, inadequate resources, lousy products, lack of supervisory support, and so forth).

Get a plan

Once you understand the reasons behind the resistance, you can develop a plan to overcome barriers. Information from the assessment will be invaluable to planning.

Step 1: Eat fruit. The key to success is

to target low-hanging fruit first. Come up with simple solutions to help well-intentioned employees with legitimate concerns. By overcoming their concerns and obtaining buy-in from at least some employees, you'll begin to turn the tide of resistance. Continue to evaluate progress and adjust your plan accordingly.

Step 2: Grease the wheels. To increase acceptance, it's important that employees understand why your organization needs the change and how it will affect and benefit them. Be sure to highlight ideas or changes that you've incorporated, based on employee feedback.

Make every effort to meet organizational learning and performance goals through the use of positive interventions. Recognize that uncompromising resistance is a performance issue that can undermine otherwise successful initiatives. It may be in the best interest of the organization to discipline hardcore resisters.

Step 3: Set your course. When developing your project plan, refer to this list to help overcome common causes of inadequate participation:

- Facilitate communications from senior, middle, and line management to emphasize organizational commitment to the learning initiative. Communicate expectations within the management group to ensure that you articulate and reinforce a consistent message throughout the organization. Hold supervisors and managers accountable for the learning or performance outcomes in their respective areas.

- Verify that employees have the required hardware, software, connectivity, knowledge, skills, and access to environments that are conducive to learning. In addition, ensure that employees have supervisory support and a designated time to learn. Provide basic classroom instruction or coaching to novice computer users.

- Foster a climate that encourages and supports learning. Create incentives for

learning, such as individual learning plans, performance review processes, and prize drawings.

- Promote e-learning early and often. Focus on benefits, not features. Use presentations, demonstrations, newsletters, flyers, and email.

- Create and distribute “getting started” tutorials and job aids. Establish a knowledgeable help desk to assist users. Train e-learning champions throughout the organization to serve as resources to their peers. Demonstrate e-learning functionality at every opportunity, and give people the chance to try it in a supportive environment. For example, schedule facilitated lab times in which people can train with a coach.

- Look for opportunities to recognize and praise employees and managers publicly for their learning accomplishments.

- Distribute system-usage reports and graphs sorted by managerial areas of responsibility. Highlight departments or units that exceed expectations and those that are subpar. Distribute reports to all managers and senior management to create a competitive spirit and accountability tool.

By striving to understand and address employee needs in the planning process, you'll greatly improve chances of success. Your perspiration and perseverance will be rewarded through increased e-learning participation, resulting in enhanced and long-lasting learning and performance gains.

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