

## Top Ten Lessons for Corporate e-Learning Strategies

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### Introduction

As part of ongoing research into best practice and the realities of corporate e-learning, eLearnity hosted a corporate roundtable discussion in February 2002. Attended by senior managers from Marconi, Marsh, Lloyds TSB, Centrica and Vodafone, all of whom have direct responsibility for their organisations e-learning activity. All the organisations have been actively involved with e-learning for a number of years.

The roundtable focused on discussion of corporate experiences of the best and worst of e-learning within their organisations. What were the successes? What were the failures? What lessons had they learned?

The meeting was chaired by David Wilson, eLearnity's managing director and leading authority on e-learning, support by Sue Honore, eLearnity's research manager, and Carole Laithwaite, senior consultant and head of eLearnity's learning management practice.

Each organisation provided an overview of their corporate experience of e-learning together with discussion of state of implementation, learning experiences and issues, leading to a general debate and discussion of the key opportunities and issues for the implementation of a strategic e-learning capability.

### Common Elements

All organisations had been focused on developing a strategic e-learning capability within their organisations including providing:

- Online access to corporate learning through a learning portal or similar
- Online management and tracking(+) of access to learning
- Online courses to supplement existing training methods
- Use of generic external/third party online learning programmes

All organisations were also expanding their use of e-learning, in overall terms, and as a proportion of overall learning activity. (+) One organisation was not tracking access and use of learning having taken a decision to allow open access to drive demand.

In addition to the above, most of the organisations were also actively engaged in projects to:

- Provide online delivery support including online instruction or assessment
- Development of custom online programmes to supplement external learning content

### Top Ten Lessons

The following is an analysis of the top ten lessons for corporate e-learning strategies, based on the discussions from the roundtable plus associated research from eLearnity. These are presented in logical order rather than order of precedence.

## **Lesson 1 – Don't believe the hype (or the bluff)**

Experience has clearly demonstrated that making e-learning successful isn't as easy as portrayed by the industry. E-learning products don't work as you want them to out of the box, users have problems successfully accessing and engaging with on-line solutions and acceptance and usage isn't as automatic as the vendors indicate. Unfortunately, e-learning solutions have carried with them a degree of uncertainty or risk that is less than ideal. Whilst this may have been acceptable for early adopters, it is highly undesirable for corporate training managers who make up the mainstream buyers for e-learning.

As well as avoiding being taken in by the hype, you should also not allow yourself to be taken in by the bluff – particularly the technology bluff. Whether it's the vendor telling you that "all you need is a web browser" or your corporate IS people telling you how impossible it will be, you need to drill beneath the superficial to understand what the issues really are.

Dealing with both the hype and the bluff demands a higher degree of understanding than is available to new buyers of e-learning. It is important to underpin decisions with expert support and advice – but make sure it is really independent!

## **Lesson 2 – You need your own technical capability**

Leading on from lesson one, and the realisation that successful e-learning involves successful use of technology, you need to be able to manage your technology exposure associated with e-learning solutions. Whilst in the short term, this can be done with external resources, longer term you may want to develop your own internal technology expertise.

These resources can liaise with external suppliers and internal IS resources to help ensure the viability of the solution. They can also take the pressure off funding all external resources and provide direct support to projects and users where required. With some of your own technical resources, you are not dependent on the vested interests to interpret for you.

In some circumstances, these resources have also been used to develop interim solutions as an alternative to expensive external products or applications. This can have significant benefits, particularly where funding a large project (e.g. a large LMS project) is difficult. But it also carries longer-term risks including ongoing maintenance costs and difficulties in transitioning to a fully-functional 3<sup>rd</sup> party application.

## **Lesson 3 – Access to learning is key**

One of the largest challenges when deploying e-learning is often access for learners. Corporate intranets are not as universal and all encompassing as imagined. Many also do not have Internet access either. Learners do not all have their own PC and if they do, most corporate PCs don't have soundcards or speakers to support multimedia or virtual classrooms. Many learners, particularly blue-collar, don't even have access to a PC during working hours.

Any e-learning solution must take these constraints into account. Short-term you will have to work around them. Longer-term, the case must be developed and funded for greater access to the underlying infrastructure to support e-learning. Often business cases underplay these costs significantly.

It's also not just a problem of computer access, but also a problem of time to access. Many targets for e-learning within companies find themselves expected to access learning from their desk without explicit time or support to do so. They struggle to block out appropriate blocks of quiet time during working hours and end up being expected to catch up in their own time. We then wonder why e-learning is not seen as the great panacea for the future of corporate learning?

#### **Lesson 4 – Building it, doesn't mean they will come!**

In contradiction to Kevin Costner and the film "Field of Dreams", just because you build it, doesn't mean they will come and use it. There are many corporate e-learning portals where the reality of usage is a fraction of that envisaged. As well as significantly increasing perceived costs, lack of usage also undermines the strategy, in some cases killing it completely. Large companies with negative experiences of the uptake of e-learning projects, lose interest quickly and perceive it as not important.

Learners don't access learning just because it is there. In most corporate cultures, training has been something that was done to you, not something you did yourself. The bulk of employees have no real concept of self-driven learning and struggle to engage with self-service learning access and the sudden growth in the amount of learning available to them. Other companies create self-service access for learners, but do not transform their processes, expecting managers to still drive the process of who does what. Clearly these factors are interrelated.

For compulsory learning like compliance programmes this may be less of an issue, but for discretionary learning it can be almost fatal. As well as building provision, you need to actively engage the organisation and individuals to drive and maintain uptake. As well as active marketing, you may also need incentives for learners and managers. Some organisations have created a sense of competition between departments and teams in order to foster a more positive attitude to learning.

One of the organisations in the roundtable discussion had made a significant amount of e-learning content available through a learning portal and made access to it free. This enabled to them attract many people to the portal quite quickly, and has resulted in significant growth in usage, much faster than predicted. The downside is that longer term, the inclusion of higher value learning programmes will constrain the "open offer for free" approach.

#### **Lesson 5 – Commercially, pay as you go**

Typically e-learning vendors price based on numbers of users, or site-wide licences, offering compelling per user price advantages for larger volumes. But the consequence of the previous lessons and the potential difficulties in estimating demand make the commercial realities of e-learning provision quite difficult to match up to estimated user pricing. Many business cases that look pretty compelling based on the total user population accessing many e-learning courses, but look pretty sick if the reality turns out to be only a small fraction accessing only one or two courses.

If possible you need to pay as you go rather than paying upfront. Whilst there may be some short-term penalties in straight per user price, overall costs are now linked to actual usage and therefore more are more robust to low levels of demand. Ideally, you can also build in cost break points for larger scale usage, taking you closer to that compelling "site licence" cost.

This kind of discussion may be more relevant to certain aspects of the e-learning cost than others. Components with high fixed or upfront cost such as development projects or server-based costs may be difficult to structure or justify in this way. But components which are mainly variable cost such as third party content or hosted solutions from a learning application service provider may be good targets.

Whilst "pay as you go" may not be on the table immediately, it may turn out to be more commercially important than the specific prices of courses, and is therefore worth pushing for – unless you definitely know that your target population is definitely going to use it.

#### **Lesson 6 – Focus on the learner, not just on management**

Associated with the previous discussion of usage and demand is the process of engaging the learners themselves in the e-learning project. Whilst it would be surprising to find a project which does not consult the learners at all, it is still surprising how limited engagement with the

learners turns out to be in practice. In particular, there is a tendency to focus more on their management than the learners themselves. And just because management thinks it's a good idea, doesn't mean the learners will.

Sometimes management agrees with the concept of the e-learning project but doesn't create the space or time for the learners to engage with it. We have also mentioned earlier the cultural problems and conflicts that may occur. Worrying whether the design of the e-learning solution or content to make it interesting for the learners, doesn't mean it really fits their needs, their ability or willingness to engage with it, or their ability to apply it. Often e-learning content makes assumptions about learners and their motivation that turn out not to be valid. But because management agreed it was useful we went ahead with it anyway.

### **Lesson 7 – Learning management is important, LMS not necessarily so**

There has been a lot of hype in the market over the past few years or so about learning management systems (LMS). Two years ago, you seemingly couldn't do anything in e-learning unless you first invested in an LMS, and LMS vendors were leading the charge in marketing investment. More recently, with an increasing number of horror stories on the difficulties of implementing large LMS solutions, the opposite message has been appearing – LMS's are unnecessary. Of course neither of these positions is true. The reality is that "learning management" is critical in any large-scale e-learning provision, but that doesn't necessarily mean a learning management "system".

With the increasing integration between learning and HR with focus on competencies and performance management, and personal and organisational development plans, you have to have a coherent way of managing and tracking the learning provision. Also with the shift to employees taking more responsibility for their own learning, you need a means to provide self-service access to learning. In any significant level of scale, these processes need to be automated and that means some form of system for managing the key processes around learning. This could be an LMS, but it doesn't have to be.

Some companies embarking on enterprise-wide LMS projects have struggled to make them happen, either because of cost, or technical complexity, or purely because of organisational politics. In most cases though, they have still had to do something to automate or track some of the basic processes – typically by developing their own cut-down LMS application linked into HR or the Intranet. This can significantly accelerate and reduce the cost for them in the short-term, but whether it is a sustainable strategy longer term, I am less convinced about. However, that may not be the point. The tactical expediency of doing it themselves may well have unlocked corporate demand for e-learning without the upfront cost and complexity of a big LMS project. This demand can then justify the introduction of a more comprehensive solution, or alternatively enable them to bide their time until their HR systems vendor produces a viable LMS solution, integrated into their mainstream HR/ERP solution.

### **Lesson 8 – Integration is a big issue**

In lesson seven, and earlier when I talked about e-learning technology, I was implicitly talking about a series of integrated components rather than one single monolithic solution. Extensive use of e-learning as part of the broader corporate learning mix needs many different pieces to support it. A complete platform or e-learning architecture might contain a learning portal including an LMS and hooks into HR and competency systems. It will have learning delivery products including virtual classrooms, collaboration tools and assessment tools, and will access internal and external content and resources including management and distribution of multimedia resources.

Whether you are doing it all or only part of it, the relevant bits have to be integrated together with integration into HR systems, other intranet applications and maybe knowledge management systems near the top of the queue. Whilst the products and vendors of the specific components will claim compatibility and existing integration capability, mostly this turns out not to be out of the box and involves a specific integration project. History has shown that integration projects are more risky, and larger ones are often difficult to complete successfully. Whilst simple one-way data-dumping from one system to another may not be

that difficult, longer term many of these systems need to support tightly integrated processes that span across them (e.g. personal development plans driving personal learning plans, with automatic tracking and reconciliation of completion and competency between the LMS and HR system). This level of process integration is beyond most approaches to system integration currently employed.

This argument should not lead us to an automatic leap to the "one stop shop" solution increasingly being position by the some of the larger e-learning vendors. Firstly, the HR system is unlikely to be up for grabs, with an often huge investment already sunk in its implementation. Secondly, the diverse nature of many of the different components of the e-learning architecture and range of supplier relationships (learning and technology) make it very difficult to construct a single total solution. Whilst some vendors are attempting to do this, in reality they may just be a pre-integrated set of 3<sup>rd</sup> party components or use non-competitive technology components. "Jack of all trades, master of none" may work for you as long as "jack", is really up to the specific job when needed.

### **Lesson 9 – Employee data records isn't as clean as you think**

One of the consistent bugbears, underlying the previous discussion of integration between e-learning systems is the poor quality of the information often held in the existing systems. Many LMS projects in particular, have struggled because the employee data transferred from the HR systems turns out to be seriously flawed, often out of date, and being incapable of being used with the learning system.

This is often because the data is maintained by people other than individuals it relates to, or is significantly incomplete. It is also due to the fact that often there isn't a single HR system with a definitive set of data. Data often has to be assembled from many sources, and then requires a significant project to reconcile and clean it before it can be used. This can result in yet another set of employee data being maintained by the LMS and difficulties integrating back into the HR system. Tracking courses is one thing, but if you want to store this information in their employee record or relate it back to their personal development plan, you need to be able to tie these together. If the employee data doesn't match you fall down before you've even started.

This problem isn't unique to e-learning, but often it is the e-learning systems that discover the extent of the problem!

### **Lesson 10 – This all needs to be facilitated centrally**

And finally, working out a viable set of solutions to all of the above issues doesn't happen easily or automatically. Training has historically been very fragmented in most companies with many different people or departments being involved in the provision of training. Different geographical units do it differently. As do different divisions and different offices. It is also divided functionally, and in multinationals, local culture may change it further. All of these different bits of training are already out there talking to vendors about learning solutions already involving e-learning. This is a massive problem waiting to happen.

Developing a coherent perspective of all of this, and working out how e-learning can be deployed and managed needs a more strategic viewpoint that can come from the individual vested interests, and that viewpoint is both "learning" and "technology". The strategic adoption of e-learning as part of the corporate learning mix, needs an integrated strategy, and a framework for technology, standards and best practice. It will need a coherent approach to infrastructure and to transforming the organisation and culture.

Experience indicates that, given the diversity of the vested interests, this is best facilitated centrally, even if the actual provision, is ultimately owned on a distributed basis.

## Appendix – E-learning Market Analysis & Best Practice

### “Independent Insight into the e-learning marketplace”

e-learning has become a major corporate focus over the past 12 months, but making the right decisions regarding your e-learning investment is critical. The e-learning market place is changing rapidly and is very vendor-driven. Tracking the market place is difficult and time consuming. Getting beyond the vendor marketing literature and developing real insight is challenging.

As the leading independent European experts on e-learning, eLearnity can provide you with the answers.

#### **e-learning Expert Research Service**

Targeted at organisations wishing to develop and maintain an in-depth understanding of the e-learning market, this cost-effective expert research service provides you with up-to-date information on what is happening the market place together with authoritative guidance on the substance and significance of activity. Providing a UK and European perspective as well as US/global activities on an ongoing basis, you will receive access to:

- e-learning news from the UK, Europe and around the world
- "First Impressions" - analysis of key industry events, acquisitions and announcements
- Articles on best practice, key market segments and technologies
- In-depth reports and strategies for key learning and e-learning issues
- Independent profiling of vendors and products
- Back-up resources including press releases, links and references
- Access to expert analysts to answer your specific questions

The research subscription service is delivered via an on-line knowledge centre together with on-line access to expert analysts.

#### **Subscription Knowledge Centre**

The Knowledge Centre contains a range of documents that will be of use to subscribers relating to the e-learning market, best practice and reports. This includes news, reviews, reports, articles, opinion pieces, commentaries and surveys, case studies, white papers, and vendor and product profiles. Information will include eLearnity viewpoints on e-learning vendors and supporting resources and press releases where appropriate. The aim of the Knowledge Centre is to provide subscribers with a comprehensive and independent viewpoint on significant activity within the e-learning market, and tools to support subscribers in making decisions relating to their investments in e-learning.

Subscribers will be encouraged to provide input regarding areas of interest and priorities for future reports and analysis. eLearnity will review priorities and attempt to supply as many high priority items as possible. In addition to ongoing access to the Knowledge Centre, a monthly report will be emailed to all subscribers. This will contain a summary of news items, and other documents added during that month.

#### **Research Advisory Services**

Subscription to the eLearnity research service provides access to a customer-specific e-learning advisory service as well as the resources in the Knowledge Centre. A number of advisory hours is built in the service on commencement and can be used at any point during the term of the subscription. This is initially a minimum of 10 hours but additional blocks of 10 hours can be pre-purchased on commencement of the service or at any time during provision of the service. Contact eLearnity for specific costs.

The research advisory service is designed to provide subscribers with answers *to their specific questions* that may arise from use of the Knowledge Centre, or in addressing questions they may have based on their own activities with corporate learning and e-learning.

### Research Topics

The research subscription service provides a range of information types across all the primary segments of the e-learning market. With segment overviews, in-depth reports and analysis, and vendor and product profiles, access to the service will help accelerate and enhance your e-learning decisions. Example topics for current and future coverage include:

learning management systems  
competency management  
human capital management  
learning portals  
learning communities  
e-learning standards

Leadership and management development  
sales training  
IT training  
vertical market training  
specialist content areas

blended design  
live e-learning / virtual classrooms  
e-learning delivery tools  
content management  
content development tools  
e-mentoring & facilitation

consulting firms  
custom content developers  
education providers  
best practice & benchmarking

Contact eLearnity on **+44 (0)20 7917 1870** to discuss in more detail.

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