

Don't believe in 'e'?

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I wish I had ten pounds for every time I hear a conference speaker or corporate learning manager tell me they don't believe in 'e'. We frequently have this discussion in one of our corporate best practice interviews, analysing what a company has really done with e-learning and blended learning, and why they have succeeded or failed. There's no doubt about it, it's trendy to knock the 'e' bit, and to state the claim that this should be 'about learning, not about e'.

I'm not complaining really; it's not that I really disagree with it (some of you may be surprised to hear). It's just that I wish the people saying it were doing it from a position of strength rather than weakness. Sometimes, the claim for non e-ness comes from organisations that have already significantly engaged with e-learning, and that, whether by design or by demand, have adopted e-learning as a significant piece of the corporate learning mix. But more frequently, it comes from organisations who have limited understanding and experience of e-learning, and that have neither design or demand to do otherwise.

In these cases, saying you don't believe in 'e' is too easy. It's a means of avoidance, rather than an expression of understanding. Of course it's all about learning, but to my mind, to validly make the non-belief statement, and get away with it, you should be able to demonstrate understanding and experience. And nearly always that understanding will involve doing more of it rather than less. You need to understand why it's not about 'e', and at the same time understand why 'e' will end up becoming one of your dominant ways of accessing and consuming learning. Sound perverse? Let me explain.

Firstly, e-learning is all about learning. It has to be. It doesn't matter how much 'e' I use or not, if I don't learn, it's a waste of time. One of the biggest challenges of the training industry is to prove the value of what people learn. The same applies to e-learning of course. E-learning (and blended learning) must prove that it is effective from a learning perspective. It also must recognise where it is most effective, and where it is acceptably effective. Acceptable might be good enough if logistically there's no other sensible or cost effective way of doing it.

I think there's a lot of mileage for 'e' in providing 'acceptable' learning, either as part of something else - let's call it blended, or on a just-in-time basis, when there's no other real option for delivering it other than interrupting a work colleague and getting them to do it for you. I've nothing against the latter by the way, it's just not a sustainable way of running a business, given the amount of work everyone has to do and the lack of time of time they have to do it!

Has the organisation recognised this reality? There is a huge need for just-in-time learning in every organisation I talk to, and 'e' is likely to become the main way of fulfilling it. Have you put in place (or started to) a comprehensive strategy for providing on-demand, just-in-time learning support across the business? If not, I'll stay cynical of the reasons for not believing in 'e'.

Have you also started to re-engineer core developmental training to create blended learning programmes utilising the power of 'e' to build active learning networks amongst the learners, and to provide learning resources, anytime anywhere? Are you integrating e-assessment to streamline the individual learning processes as well as validating successful completion of the learning process? If not and you are a large organisation, I am again going to be cynical of motives for non-belief.

How many of your organisations can honestly provide a definitive yes to both the just-in-time need, and to integrated core programmes? With the business pressures of today, meeting current learning needs is almost impossible (if not impossible already). And it's getting worse not better. Whether by design, or by demand, corporate learning has to change to better meet these challenges and opportunities. And it needs to do it fast! Comprehensively integrating e-learning into your corporate learning strategy, and using

that as a catalyst of change to re-engineer your learning processes and culture, looks the only game in town for most large companies.

So, despite agreeing with the sentiments of 'let's drop the e', seldom do I agree with the motives. Yes, the 'e-label carries it's own baggage, but you should only drop it if you are going to embrace it anyway. If you are dropping the 'e', as a way of marginalizing the role of 'e', you are missing the point; unless of course, you have come up with alternative approaches to fulfilling core and just-in-time needs, that you can prove are equally scaleable and sustainable going forward.

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