Closing the Knowledge Gap with E-learning

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by Lana Vukovljak

Are high costs and potential downtime preventing your staff from receiving much-needed training? E-learning offers more than a solution to these concerns: it's a better way to learn.

In this article, find out how e-learning works and how to implement an e-learning program in your organization.

The advent of the Internet as a means of delivering and facilitating learning has changed the way organizations can provide training. Instead of sending employees to training facilities, organizations can use the Internet to deliver training and connect employees with knowledge they need to meet business goals. According to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), a workplace learning association, employers are making the transition to Internet-based learning solutions because technology offers the opportunity to integrate learning with work and enhance performance in a dynamic, interactive, and measurable way.

For HIM professionals, this means that much-needed education and training for employees can be customized, offered on site, and tackled in pieces, rather than in week-long or day-long courses.

What Is E-learning?

E-learning is a broad term that encompasses instructional content or learning delivered by electronic technology (Internet, PC, TV, telephone, etc.). One delivery medium that has become very popular in recent years is the Web. Web-based training delivers educational content through a Web browser via the Internet, intranet, or an extranet.

In contrast to traditional forms of classroom-based learning that require a student's physical presence in specific courses at certain times and locations, e-learning can take place at any time and in any location. This enables learners and organizations to customize the education to meet their needs and create opportunities for sharing information and peer-to-peer learning.

E-learning can be synchronous or asynchronous or instructor-facilitated or self-directed and self-paced. Synchronous learning is a real-time, instructor-facilitated e-learning event in which all participants are logged on at the same time and communicate directly with each other. The most common tools used in this type of learning are virtual classrooms, chat rooms, and audio or video conferencing. Asynchronous learning, conversely, is e-learning in which interaction between learners occurs intermittently and with a time delay. Asynchronous learning mediums include self-paced or self-directed courses taken via the Web with threaded discussions, and e-mail interaction.

Unlike traditional classroom-based learning, e-learning is always learner-centered, regardless of whether learning takes place in real time or is asynchronous. E-learning is designed to allow students to take charge of their own learning. The students are able to find, analyze, store, and retrieve information in a new and more self-directed way. According to *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators* by George Collison, learners react to content, share challenges, and learn tangibly by putting into words (often via discussion postings) their own understanding and clarifications of assumptions. By experimenting with new skills and ideas, the students eventually take ownership of them.

What Are the Benefits?

High-quality e-learning creates an economic advantage for both individuals and organizations by shortening the amount of time it takes to train on new products and processes. Once the up-front infrastructure and development costs are met, the cost of educating additional students becomes marginal. Compared to traditional classroom-based training, organizations can significantly cut their employee training costs by implementing e-learning. When calculating costs for traditional training, in addition to training hours, number of students, and instructor hours, consider the cost of a training facility, the travel costs for

each learner, and their hours out of the office. For an e-learning program, organizations need to consider product and implementation costs, which tend to be significantly lower than the costs of traditional training.

Because e-learning can take place at the organization, employees do not spend time traveling to a training facility. Further, training can be scheduled at convenient times for both the employer and the employees. As a result, businesses don't need to lose several employees for days at a time, because the training can take place in shifts or one student at a time.

E-learning has the potential to help close the critical competency gaps that stand in the way of individual and organizational success and can help workers keep pace with today's rapidly changing business and work environment.

Are You Ready for E-learning?

When implementing e-learning, there are three basic types of readiness an organization will need to consider: financial, structural, and cultural.

Financial: Daryl Capuano, a consultant for e-learning consulting firm Brandon-hall.com, says the first practical step in any e-learning program has to do with numbers, specifically the number of employees and the number of miles between them and the training facility. Organizations need to consider the expenses incurred if employees are sent to off-site training and compare those with the cost of purchasing online training.

Structural: Does your company have the right technological infrastructure in place? If your organization selects the Web as the delivery medium, you need to make sure that you have necessary equipment: plenty of PCs for employees and Internet access with sufficient bandwidth. Frustration with inadequate technology can be a barrier to successful learning.

Cultural: Readiness revolves around more than technology; the employees also need to be ready for e-learning. Employers should determine how employees prefer to learn, whether they have basic computer skills, and whether they are familiar with online learning. If face-to-face meetings and phone conversations are the primary means of communication in an organization, then potential learners might need to become familiar with how to use discussion boards, virtual classrooms, or e-mail before starting training.

Once an organization determines its readiness for e-learning, the organizers need to secure the support from upper management. Also, have a clear implementation plan and consider the following questions:

- How will the courses be rolled out to users?
- Who will track learners' progress?
- What are the timelines?

The best way to approach selecting and implementing an e-learning module is to form a project management team. The team would include members from information systems, human resources, education and training, and finance. Make sure that you involve your learners in the process. They will be the primary users so their feedback is very important.

Making It Work—at Work

Once you have selected the e-learning program and courses, the next step is making the process a success. A positive call for participation to employees is a prerequisite to successful e-learning. Below are a few ways to make e-learning appealing to your employees:

Do not force your employees to learn on their own time unless they choose to do so. If the training is important enough to ask your employees to participate, then make sure to provide work time (not including lunch hours) or offer compensation.

Set realistic expectations. Make sure that the selected courses are at the appropriate level for your employees and are as applicable to your employees' needs as possible. Allocate enough time for training so the students are not expected to complete a two-hour course in one sitting. Remember that one of the major advantages of e-learning is that it can be done over multiple sittings and can be customized according to students' needs and schedules.

Provide an inviting setting for learning. In addition to the necessary hardware and software, consider the environment in which employees will be learning. If your employees are learning at their desktop, provide headsets to reduce distractions. Consider setting up a training room to prevent disruptions that your employees might experience at their workstations. Even though adult learners are self-motivated, they have their own challenges and conflicts. An atmosphere of support will make your e-learning more successful.

E-learning offers organizations an affordable and convenient way to educate employees. It enables employers to provide needed training without dramatically reducing productivity. The interactive aspect of e-learning increases knowledge retention while giving employers a way to track progress. For HIM professionals looking to keep employees up to speed or increase their skills, e-learning is a vehicle to explore.

References

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A Checklist for E-learning Success

A well-designed e-learning program should incorporate the following features: multiple activities, quality content, collaborative learning environment, feedback, different learning styles, and aligned goals. Below is a closer look at these features:

Multiple activities: Today's learners expect more comprehensive learning experiences. Research has shown that retention increases as learners apply information through a variety of vehicles. E-learning is an active medium and learners expect increased interaction because they operate under different learning behaviors. For example, human-computer interaction requires multitasking, which must be considered when designing online courses.

Quality content: Because of the proliferation of courses and programs offered via the Web, the selected content should come from a trusted, authoritative content provider like a well-known organization or training company.

Collaborative learning environment: A well-designed e-learning program establishes mechanisms to engage learners directly and collaboratively with the materials and with others in the course. Effective communication and collaboration are essential to becoming a successful learner and the success of one student helps other students to be successful. Collaboration and peer learning is done primarily through discussion threads, bulletin boards, e-mail, and virtual classrooms.

Feedback: Every student response must be followed by a consequence, which means that an answer to a question is either confirmed or corrected. All interactions in e-learning should be designed so that they provide immediate feedback.

Different learning styles: Not everyone learns in the same way, so it is important to provide multiple opportunities for different learning styles. Successful e-learning must be designed to accommodate:

- visual learners (learn using graphical ways of presenting information)
- tactile learners (learn by writing down information they want to remember, creating study sheets)
- collaborative learners (like working in small groups toward achieving a common goal)
- self-directed learners (the learning is initiated by the learner. The learner makes decisions about what training and development experiences will occur, and how)

- sequential learners (learn using a linear, organized, and rational learning style. Sequential learners gain understanding by following logical, linear steps)
- global learners (global learners absorb materials randomly and in "big jumps")

Aligned goals: Providing students with clear goals and objectives at the beginning of the course is critical because they help students set their expectations and aid them in determining whether the course is suitable. E-learners are not a captive audience, so it is critical that instructional objectives are in relation to the application that makes sense for them. In other words, the medium should match the topic.

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