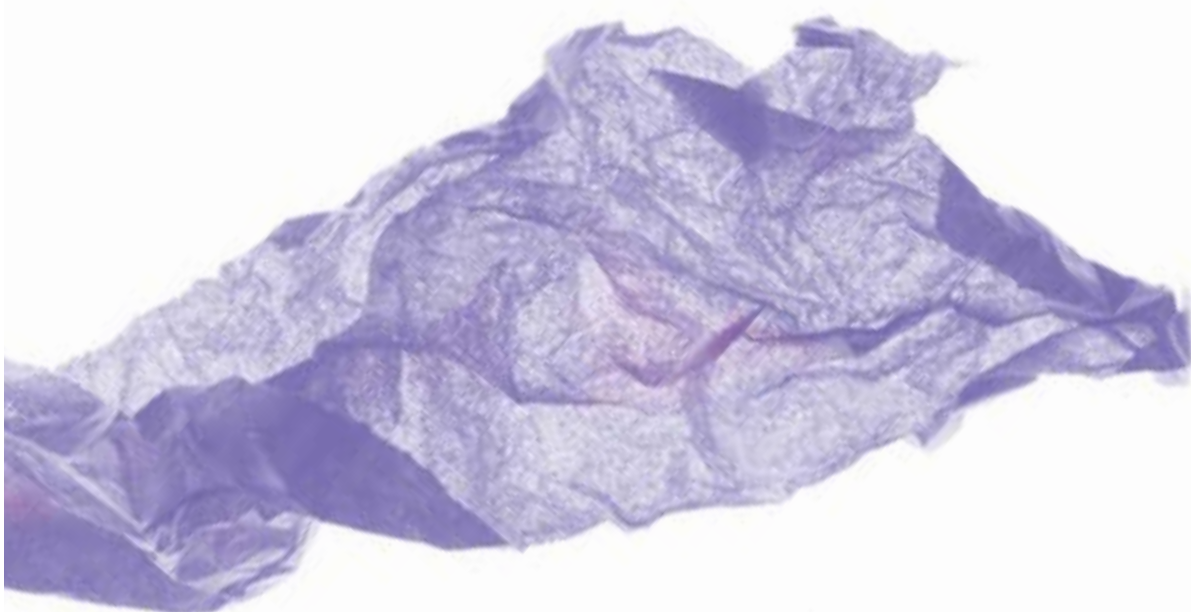




Chartered Institute
of Personnel and
Development

E-learning The learning curve



The change agenda



INTRODUCTION

If we rely on articles, papers and conferences, it seems that e-learning has only emerged in the last three years. In reality, however, the use of technology to support training – programmed instruction – goes back several decades.

The 1990s saw increasing use of CBT disks and CD-ROMs to support learning. But it is the emergence of the Internet that has offered far wider horizons, giving rise to a whole new series of possibilities from connectivity, that is, the process by which computers are networked and can share information. If e-learning is defined as 'learning that is delivered, enabled or mediated by electronic technology', then its time has come.¹

Given e-learning's recent increase in visibility, and the potential promise for teaching and learning, it is scarcely surprising that perceptions about its significance differ. Views on its contribution to the organisation range from enthusiasm through scepticism to hostility. Early on, we witnessed a series of claims that e-learning was the ultimate panacea, but at the time of writing (October 2002) many commentators are suggesting that this early optimism was grossly misplaced. There is now sufficient evidence to show that the growth of e-learning in corporate organisations has plateaued following a variety of implementation problems.²

It is therefore appropriate to ask what is currently happening. What is taking place in those organisations that have made a firm commitment to the use of e-learning as part of their portfolio of training interventions, in particular:

- What is currently on their agenda?
- What strategies are they employing?
- What problems have they encountered?
- How are they seeking to overcome them?
- What advice would they offer others who might be thinking of implementing e-learning?

Our premise is that the future progress of e-learning will be shaped by the activities of individual professionals within organisations who are determined to find effective solutions. Their experiences and insights will prove to be far more helpful than any amount of hype or rhetoric.

The CIPD therefore invited a number of organisations to participate in this short study and to share with us their experiences and views about what makes for effective e-learning. All the organisations have given some thought to their approach to e-learning. All have training managers who had indicated a willingness to contribute to public debate in the interests of sharing in order to arrive at best practice. We are most grateful to these individuals and their organisations.³

Our findings represent a snapshot of what is currently happening in a number of progressive UK organisations. We hope that by producing this report we will assist others in planning their e-learning strategy. This Change Agenda is not intended to be comprehensive or to reflect the state of e-learning across the whole of the UK. Nor does it seek to offer a set of policy recommendations or prescriptions. What has become apparent in talking to the participant organisations is that 'one size does not fit all.' A strategy and an agenda can only be constructed within the context of the particular circumstances found in each individual organisation. However, some problems can be overcome by a better understanding of where others have found appropriate solutions. This is not a time to reinvent the wheel.

BACKGROUND

Eighteen months ago the CIPD regularly received calls from members asking for help: 'I have been asked to look at how we can save training costs through e-learning. What would you recommend?' The appropriate answer was not always welcome: 'If you start from that premise you'll fail.' Mercifully such calls have ceased, and the debate has progressed as awareness about the strengths and weaknesses of e-learning has advanced.

Those early days of e-learning were product-driven and the debate was dominated by vendors. Competing suppliers offered learning management systems that could offer access to learning modules, create portals and learning maps for individuals, act as a training database and course booking system, and produce statistics. Web-based modules (or learning objects) were deployed on the Internet or on company intranets. Most of these learning objects were similar to those already available on CD-ROM and covered the following topic areas:

- information technology (IT) for end-users (for example, Microsoft products)
- information technology for IT specialists (for example, HTML or Java script)
- management and interpersonal skills (for example, coaching, leadership, project management).

The limitations of an approach based on generic materials is now apparent. Indeed the strategy adopted by some of the participant organisations in our study can be seen as a direct response to the problems they encountered when deploying purchased generic materials.


E-learning has moved beyond web-based modules accessed at the individual's desk through an intranet. A useful distinction is made by a leading US commentator, Professor Allison Rossett of San Diego University. She distinguishes between the 'stuff' and the 'stir' of e-learning. By 'stuff' she means the reusable web-based learning objects which are deployed on corporate intranets – an example would be a module which is downloaded by the user in order to learn to use Microsoft Excel. The 'stir' refers to the collaborative tools of e-learning, such as online discussions and virtual classrooms.

As we will see below, most of the current focus is on the 'stuff' rather than the 'stir' of e-learning, but a number of organisations have begun to explore the 'stir' as a vehicle for assisting learning in their organisations.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

The ten organisations that participated in our study are very varied. They include the large (Defence Management Training has a potential learner base of over 300,000) to the small (Guidant with just 60 employees in the UK and 1,700 in Europe). They range from multinational organisations (Interbrew, and Nestlé) to those that focus entirely on local services (Surrey County Council and Glasgow City Council). Given their differences, it would be surprising if they were all at the same stage and using similar strategies for e-learning.

Generally, current progress in e-learning in corporate organisations is best described as tentative and exploratory. However, well-considered initiatives are taking place, and organisations are asking 'what works?' Although it may be unpalatable to those seeking a quick fix, in order to make e-learning work, every organisation must progress along its own learning curve. And it may be that pain is inevitable! Reassuringly, though, some organisations see a clear way forward and are committed to that approach. For all organisations, however, the introduction of e-learning is a demanding change management process. It requires a consideration of all the processes that underpin an effective organisational transition.



However, this doesn't mean that organisations must 'go it alone' and can't learn from others. The main challenges have now been identified and concern the following questions:

- If we build it, will they come?
- If they come, will they learn?
- If they learn, does it matter?

These questions are interlinked. In the sections that follow in this Change Agenda, we offer examples of the ways that our respondent organisations have identified and met the challenges posed by these questions. Their experiences are grouped under the following headings: strategic intent; introducing the system; blended learning; content; supporting the learner; and measurement and monitoring.

What has been most encouraging is the commonality of experience and the shared perceptions about the nature and extent of the challenges.

STRATEGIC INTENT

When embarking on a strategy for e-learning, some organisations are looking for efficiency, standardisation and cost-benefit effectiveness. They recognise that new technologies offer a means of transforming their approach to the delivery of training. Other organisations have less sweeping ambitions and adopt a strategy based around particular organisational issues that they have identified.

British Airways (BA) has responded to the need to provide training for employees who are working in a number of locations and a variety of environments. Because of BA's budget constraints, all non-essential classroom-based training has been put on hold. This offers a good example of strategic thinking based on externally driven imperatives which has resulted in major investment in e-learning.

Other organisations have not embraced such a wide-ranging approach but instead have adopted an iterative development based around initial test projects. Surrey County Council, for example, embarked on an e-learning pilot with a budget of only £30,000. They started by creating a learning web page on the County Council intranet, then purchased and evaluated generic suites of materials (which were not always well received) and went on to write their own e-learning modules using authoring software.

An important distinction can be made between e-learning as an open offer made to volunteers – and in some cases their families – and e-learning as something the learner must undertake to fulfil the demands of the job. The former can be seen as an attempt to advance a learning culture and a signal that the employer is committed to investing in its workforce. The latter is generally mandatory and may in some cases be designed to ensure that regulatory requirements are met.

Things don't always go smoothly:

'We are not always good at sustaining learning, and there can also be variance around the business with the quality of training. We are hoping that e-learning will help with both of these problems.'

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER – RETAILORG

An e-learning strategy can be critical to the achievement of business objectives. Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) used e-learning as a strategic tool during their merger with NatWest. They used the significant cost savings they had achieved with their e-learning initiatives as part of their successful merger bid to illustrate how they would achieve cost synergies in the merged company.

RBS introduced e-learning as part of a wider change programme that redesigned a large proportion of jobs so that computers were brought onto all staff desks within the bank. E-learning was introduced to retrain 26,000 employees in 650 locations.

The initiative was highly successful. The bank found that although e-learning is not quick to develop compared to rolling out traditional training to huge numbers, it gave speed to market. It also produced a consistent training model across the business as well as standardised and improved communication.

'It is a fundamental part of the learning and development strategy, which is about putting people at the heart of the business. The system is designed to support quality learning conversations between line managers and staff.'

SUZY BELL – ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND

INTRODUCING THE SYSTEM

Our study organisations were asked to estimate the percentage of staff that had access to personal computers at work. Their answers varied from virtually 100 per cent (Guidant) to 50 per cent (Glasgow City Council Housing) and 33 per cent (Surrey County Council). Access to corporate intranets closely reflected these figures.

The proportion of staff who regularly use a personal computer at work is seen as a critical consideration in the development of an e-learning training programme. Access issues often relate to the organisational context. For example, in our research, organisations reported that call-centre staff, non-office-based local government staff and customer-facing staff generally, all presented problems in terms of access to e-learning, as the nature of their jobs keeps them away from a computer during the course of a normal working day. Clearly any strategy to introduce e-learning must find a way of overcoming these shortfalls.

Even if access to the technology is overcome, staff may not have the experience and expertise they need.

'Because people have a PC at their desk it doesn't mean they know about the intranet and its e-learning content.'

DAVID GARRICK – SCOTTISH POWER

Those organisations with significant numbers of staff who do not use computers in the course of their work face special problems. Both of the local authorities in our study had seen the promotion of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) as a solution. The ECDL is a computer skills certification programme which is growing in popularity since it emerged in Finland in 1994.

Glasgow City Council Housing Services have introduced a special scheme to assist manual staff who look after common areas and facilities in housing estates, mainly in multi-storey developments. Each site has now been equipped with a personal computer. Plans are in hand to use the corporate intranet as a source of information for relevant procedures which will be networked and various communication tools installed. Of the 750 employees in this group over 400 are participating in the ECDL programme.

For many, this presents a major challenge, as they do not have basic computer skills or awareness. ECDL training was therefore offered to all. There was a considerable demand. Numbers increased from 200 to 456 during the training manager's holiday break. The delivery method is to use a module, produced by specialist IT trainers, consisting of paper-based material, and supported by CD-ROMs. Most importantly, six temporary IT trainers have been assisting these staff and encouraging them to engage and continue. Much of this training has taken place in a busy work station area where members of the public seek assistance and support. While it has been of benefit to have the trainer go to the trainee, there has been a downside concerning the learners' ability to concentrate and focus on the learning.

'People realised ECDL gave them a ticket to a type of competence.'

GRAEME HAMILTON – GLASGOW CITY COUNCIL

'One of our main challenges is training staff to use PCs.'

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER – RETAILORG

A high proportion of staff at Retailorg are not computer literate, particularly the older workers. Before introducing any mandatory e-learning modules, such as the planned customer service desk e-training, Retailorg will need to ensure that all staff have some computer literacy. They have therefore created a bespoke e-learning module to cover basic IT functionality which has been designed to be non-threatening, fun and very visual, with lots of animation, exercises and tests.

We found a range of views about the best location for learning. Some of the organisations in our study decided against providing learning centres.

'We won't be doing anything different to desktop learning, as our experience of learning centres is that they are not very well used.'

JOHN NEWELL – INTERBREW

BA has opened a number of learning centres (called QUEST centres) at head offices throughout the world and at airports for staff in transit. Personal computers can also be found in coffee rooms, training rooms and alongside other training materials in open learning centres across BA locations around the world. Learning centres are seen as better environments for people to learn because the risk of distraction and interruption is reduced.

Organisations differed in the extent to which they sought a high profile for the introduction of any e-learning initiative. Some respondents argued that successful initiatives 'spoke for themselves' and that this was a better approach than a high-profile launch which ran the risk of rebounding.

BLENDING LEARNING

The term 'blended learning' is so prominent in articles and in discussion that it is becoming the current orthodoxy within e-learning circles. There remains some confusion about the precise definition of the term. Some interpret it as simply combining e-learning with face-to-face transmission; others emphasise the range of ways that e-learning can be delivered when combined with multiple additional routes that support and facilitate learning.

Opinions varied when it came to the usefulness and spread of the concept. Some were convinced that little had emerged that was new. These organisations take it as given that training programmes consist of a number of approaches and have assimilated e-learning alongside conventional training methods. Other organisations see it very much as 'either/or', preferring to migrate to e-learning wherever possible, while recognising that for some topics face-to-face training remains the best and most appropriate option. Still others argue that blended learning, if properly understood, has the potential to alter the whole learning process for the individual.

'Almost all e-learning at RBS is blended – we rarely do e-learning on its own. The rationale is that "it seems the right thing to do".'

SUZY BELL – ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND

'Blended learning, if used strategically, can be a way of shifting the culture from passive to active learning. It can put the onus on the learner and the facilitator to share the learning experience.'

MICHELE MARTIN – NESTLÉ

Some organisations differentiate between processes when they are developing content, claiming that the 'soft skills', such as relationship management and negotiation skills, can best be delivered face to face, whereas other skills, such as IT literacy, induction procedures and health and safety, lend themselves more readily to online provision.

Others see blended learning as an approach where the knowledge components are delivered first through an intranet or CD-ROM, followed by the skills component delivered in the training room.


'We envisage a blended learning approach as one offering a variety of learning options. One potential path would be to use the initial learning as a knowledge dump, following this with face-to-face workshops to reinforce the theory and add practical sessions. Learning could then be continued through e-learning and online discussion forums to ensure that the knowledge is kept up to date.'

PAUL PIPER – DEFENCE MANAGEMENT TRAINING

Others are less certain:

'Telling people to do the boring stuff beforehand and the fun stuff in the workshops won't help the reputation of e-learning.'

JOHN NEWELL – INTERBREW



One other organisation, Shell Open University, who were contacted during the course of this study, have developed an approach which they feel extends beyond e-learning. They described it as blended learning, and it can best be viewed as an extension of the principles of action learning using the new opportunities of technology as an enabler.

Given this perspective, they felt unable to endorse the full arguments and conclusions of this Change Agenda. We are, however, grateful to Shell for permission to describe their approach to blended learning below.

Shell Open University activities are focused mainly on the learning needs of professional engineers, particularly those who have joined as recent graduates. There is a considerable emphasis on knowledge generation and sharing and on capturing the contribution of subject matter experts. Technical and operational sophistication in exploration and production is seen as the key source of business advantage.

Shell's view on the contribution of learning technology has evolved over the last two years and is now reflected in their specific style of blended learning. A development team involving some 15 people has been established at the Shell Open University in Noordwijkerhout, Holland.

The Shell Open University philosophy is based on a particular approach to blended learning – and a shift away from content-driven learning. Technology is seen as an enabler. The core of Shell's approach is based on the following principles: 'work-based activities are where people do their learning' and learning takes place when people are 'working on an authentic problem, which is relevant to their workplace and are guided in their learning'. Learners are taken through a series of activities during a course and are expected to contribute material in a way that allows it to be reused.

Such redesign is fundamental, and technology is only a facilitator. Previously, for example, a geology field trip was regarded as a learning activity in itself. The redesign involves participants contributing their thoughts on the learning opportunity in advance of the trip, analysing and commenting on the contributions of others, preparing and sharing a log book, undertaking the field trip, using a learning log, and sharing information after the trip.

The resource implications of moving to this form of blended learning are considerable. It requires commitment from the organisation and a change of attitude from learners and managers. It represents a real challenge to many trainers.

'A learning experience is more than just online, it's about learning from others in the workplace, connecting to others and finding out how to share information. All these aspects of learning can be supported, but resources must be devoted to the exercise.'

BETTY COLLIS – SHELL

CONTENT

The limitations of generic materials came in for repeated criticism in our study, particularly those which addressed interpersonal and management skills. There were, however, fewer negative perceptions with material designed to foster IT skills.

'E-learning is much more suited to knowledge transfer, process and systems training. It does not appear to work effectively for coaching, feedback, skills practice or personal interaction.'

DOROTHY WALKER – NESTLÉ

Differences in culture between the UK public and private sectors can also become an issue when generic online material is used. The quality of generic material is variable, and extreme measures are sometimes necessary when it becomes apparent that learners are reacting negatively. Nestlé found the problem so extreme that they decided to disable 25 per cent of a purchased generic suite of material, rather than risk the adverse effect on learners. Some of the sample organisations, while they had reservations about the use of generic material, felt that such modules could be utilised effectively as part of a blended solution with a classroom component.

'It is important to try and make e-learning content relevant, varied and above all interesting and we need to take account of individual perspectives, learning styles and ease with technology.'

PAUL PIPER – DEFENCE MANAGEMENT TRAINING

'Poor content means that users can't concentrate on the learning, as they are distracted by the bad quality content. It needs to be good, highly relevant, no dumbing down, good use of multi-media and an enjoyable learning experience.'

JOHN ADCOCK – SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

Although it is acknowledged that generic material has a longer shelf life than bespoke material, which can quickly date, problems with generic interpersonal and soft-skills modules make it necessary to seek alternatives. The difficulties have been attributed to a number of causes. One factor is simply poor design; a second is that a number of modules have been produced for international markets, but don't travel well. A third factor is recognition that, although the material may be perfectly acceptable as a stand-alone module, it does not fit well with the organisation's priorities and the direction of management and interpersonal skills training initiatives.

'US accents on material have proved a problem.'

DAVID GARRICK – SCOTTISH POWER

However, problems with generic material can be seen as an opportunity to develop in-house and bespoke alternatives, and this is the route that many in our study group have taken, with commendable results:

- RBS's first e-learning initiative was produced in-house. It consists of 60 hours for the customer service officer role and 40 hours for the customer adviser role. It covers all of the training for each role and takes approximately 18 months for the individual to complete the full suite.
- Surrey County Council introduced a generic induction package, and a specific induction for special educational needs case officers. Sustainable development awareness material has also been produced in partnership with a consortium of other organisations.
- Scottish Power are currently producing a model for call-centre staff on the steps to be taken in stormy/extreme weather conditions.
- BA have introduced a health and safety initiative for managers.
- Nestlé has delivered modules on IT end-user training using an in-house authoring tool.

- Defence Management Training are currently producing a module on their new performance appraisal system. Their need is to get information quickly across a large and diverse organisation.
- Retailorg are producing customer service desk training for a launch in early 2003. It is part of a new system designed to remove all the paper-based documentation in use at customer service desks in stores.

Many of the bespoke models were designed for important business needs. If this is the case they will require updating and so the administration and monitoring of usage assume greater importance.

'We always use tailor-made materials so we can use our own language in terms of competencies. People can get very confused, so we want to have as much consistency as possible. The big advantage of bespoke material is having consistency of language on all the tools used to measure and develop performance.'

TIM BERKLEY – GUIDANT

The production of customised web-based modules is a major area of current activity within e-learning. Some organisations have developed content in-house using authoring tools which are part of their e-learning infrastructure. Others have outsourced these activities using external software houses to produce material to a pre-specified design.

Most of the focus has therefore been on the 'stuff' of e-learning (the web-based modules) rather than the 'stir' (the collaborative tools of e-learning), but there are some notable exceptions.

A small, but worthwhile, initiative has taken place in Glasgow City Council Social Services Department. Here 16 care assistants have been participating in an online course, preceded by a one-day introduction, 'Understanding Drugs and Society'. Both the face-to-face introduction and the online module were the product of collaboration between the department and the University of Stirling.

Guidant, the smallest UK organisation in our sample, makes extensive use of net meetings managed by the US parent company. These allow participants to dial into a site where a subject matter expert delivers a presentation. A telephone link gives access to an accompanying commentary. Thus a synchronous (where all participants are involved in real time) learning activity is possible. Other organisations are experimenting with the use of asynchronous (time-shifted) activity mainly for post-course discussion groups. The Shell Open University approach to blended learning discussed earlier also makes extensive use of collaborative tools.

'I received training on changes to our performance appraisal system from the US through a net meeting. We are looking at the introduction of bulletin boards to support training in the future.'

TIM BERKLEY – GUIDANT

SUPPORTING THE LEARNER

In our study, we asked about the factors that have greatest influence on e-learning effectiveness. Overwhelmingly respondents mentioned motivation to learn coupled with appropriate support. Time to learn was ranked third.

Motivation often rests on the extent to which content was seen as relevant, culture sensitive, and reflective of varying learning styles where possible.

'Part of the role of the organisation is to support, encourage and motivate people to learn. You need to ensure that you provide learning and training that is flexible and takes into account a range of learning styles. For e-learning you may need to teach people to learn in this way.'

PAUL PIPER – DEFENCE MANAGEMENT TRAINING

Although support was frequently seen as crucial to the learning experience, the degree and effectiveness of what was offered was variable. Some addressed the issue purposefully. For example, Guidant has a 'phone the expert' option as part of its new online performance and learning system. If someone calls, they can leave a message and the appropriate member of the training department will call them back to discuss their question. On the other hand, often support is offered only through operational systems such as the regular staff appraisal, which may happen infrequently.

'One problem for BA is in the area of learner support. If people have questions during or following e-learning they don't have a specified person to ask. The only option they really have is to ask their manager, who is not always the appropriate person.'

ELAINE WILSON – BRITISH AIRWAYS

Time is an issue of importance for every organisation, with pressures to perform work-related tasks often taking precedence over the need to learn. Conventional training takes people away from the workplace and provides the possibility of total commitment during the event. Workplace learning doesn't offer the luxury of a complete switch-off from distractions.

Protected learning time is sometimes guaranteed, although problematic to implement. For its ECDL project, Surrey County Council has asked every learner and their manager to complete a learning contract. This states that Surrey County Council will give two hours a week of work time for employees to undertake this course; they have accepted that it is a significant piece of learning and requires a heavy time commitment.

'We have realised that there is no point in offering an e-learning programme for less than a year. People are generally fitting the e-learning in on top of their work, so you need to give them plenty of time to find opportunities to use it.'

ROSEMARY GOODWIN – SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL

Guidant's online performance and learning (OPAL) system links e-learning with their performance management system. They have built three main tools based on their competency framework. The initial starting point – the 'assessor' tool – is an online, 360-degree feedback tool to flush out development needs. Following this, the 'adviser' tool is used to suggest development actions, focusing on weaker areas. The 'developer' tool contains a range of e-learning modules, grouped by competency, which employees can access for their learning.

MEASUREMENT AND MONITORING

Measuring learning has always been difficult, and is rarely done with conviction by training managers. The emergence of e-learning has thrown the problem into focus as managers grapple with the questions of effectiveness and bottom-line impact. We asked: 'What proportion of total training time (ie time spent by staff learning) would you say was provided through e-learning?' Most of our interviewees had problems answering this question and for those who were able to provide an estimate, figures varied from 15 per cent at BA and 5 per cent at Surrey County Council to RBS where the figure varied across the organisation (65 per cent, retail business unit; 2 per cent, wealth management business unit). Not surprisingly, almost all organisations identified IT as the category with the highest proportion of the total training delivered by e-learning.

The key question in all of this is whether e-learning is actually effective. Are people actually learning as well online as they might face to face? This was seen as a very difficult question to answer. Current measurement practice concentrates on usage, and recording and reporting on time spent online. Several organisations mentioned that many of the generic modules they use have built-in tracking and recording systems, but when bespoke materials are designed, measurement and evaluation can be neglected.

'Our overall measure for all training is whether a person has been successfully up-skilled to carry out the job and can apply the skills they have learnt back in the workplace. This will be the same whether it is e-learning or classroom-based.'

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT MANAGER – RETAILORG

However, some organisations are trying to address this difficult issue.

'We measure anything between ten minutes and three hours, and to equate it to equivalent training days we multiply that figure by three as one hour online is equated to three hours in the classroom. Then we can calculate associated training costs.'

ELAINE WILSON – BRITISH AIRWAYS

This imaginative approach is the exception, however. More frequently the issue is avoided because of a lack of resources to track this kind of information. Reasons given varied from a feeling that the organisation doesn't want to use measures different to conventional classroom-based provision, which is seen as counterproductive, to a nervousness that people might feel they were being observed 'big-brother-like' if monitoring was too obvious.

For RBS, cost benefit was a key driver in the introduction of e-learning and it was considered important that they could calculate this in order to demonstrate its value to the business. The return on investment (ROI) they report is 7:1.

RBS considers a number of qualitative and quantitative measures for evaluation of their e-learning, but lack of data is still seen as a problem. For their bespoke e-learning their learning management system provides full tracking of completion of learning, online assessments and requests for learning materials. Quite a high proportion of their e-learning follows the 'show me, try it, test me' simulation training methodology and this provides data on preferences for different approaches to learning as well as the actual test results. Some business units evaluate the e-learning components of courses after a pilot, using focus groups, but this is done on a project basis and generally does not continue after the pilot.

SOME CONCLUSIONS – PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

The main conclusion of our study is positive. All the organisations believe that e-learning has an important (and in some cases pivotal) role to play in their future business and learning strategies. No one is seeking to cut back on their commitment to e-learning, still less withdraw. Many can demonstrate considerable resource savings that have arisen from the introduction of e-learning.

It should be apparent by now that e-learning has much to offer and there is potential for further progress. Our review has demonstrated examples of creative thinking and radical innovation among our study group of 11 organisations. The organisations vary tremendously in their strategy for learning, their pace of change, and their desire to be ahead of the field. Each has defined an approach based on a vision of where they want to be and how they can utilise e-learning to help meet their goals. Some want to be radically ahead, while some want to temper enthusiasm with the benefit of lessons gained from others.

As was emphasised earlier, every organisation must progress along its own learning curve in what is essentially a change management process. Evidence shows that organisations are not taking a herd-like approach to the adoption of new technologies. Recognition of the potential is balanced by reflection on what is needed by the individual organisation, and what can be prioritised and achieved within the many business constraints that accompany sound business practice.

Process innovation is happening. Variation in delivery methods and creative combining of alternatives is addressing the problems of wavering commitment, motivation and learning style on the part of learners. As with most new topics, time spent defining and agreeing terms and outcomes should ensure a common understanding. At present the term 'blended learning' means different things to different people but, as examples of good practice become more widely available, then clarity of purpose will follow.

So what has emerged from our survey in terms of practical guidance to others? Although generalisation is difficult, a number of propositions that have emerged from the study are set out in the appendix. Not all organisations would agree with all these propositions, but they can be regarded as received wisdom at this stage in the development of e-learning.

More generally, respondents see motivation as crucial for effective learning. Support can enhance this tremendously and again we have examples of good practice. There is a lot of scope here to develop the workplace as an appropriate and supportive environment for learning as well as for working. Line managers play a decisive role in fostering learning, and they in turn deserve support as they undertake a task for which they may get little acknowledgement. New initiatives and recognition for line managers in supporting learners might be the next step for many organisations.

While there is no universal blueprint, organisations stand a much better chance of making e-learning work if they approach the change management process systematically. Hard questions must be asked and appropriate steps taken in each of the areas considered in the main body of this Change Agenda: strategic intent, introducing the system; blended learning, content, supporting the learner, and measurement and monitoring. It's difficult to see how anyone could make e-learning a success if any of these critical areas are neglected.

One final conclusion is obvious, yet it seems to have taken an age to penetrate. E-learning is about learning and not about technology. A recognition of this fact is fundamental to the success of the e-learning strategies of our participant organisations.

Appendix – Received wisdom on e-learning

- E-learning should be regarded as a change initiative, not as a way of making short-term savings.
- E-learning has to be driven by training, not technology. Training experts need to have faith in their own knowledge.
- There is a choice to be made between introducing e-learning as part of a significant shift in approach to learning and proceeding through a controlled pilot project.
- The proportion of staff who regularly use a computer at work is a critical factor to be considered in the design of any e-learning initiative. The sophistication of these computers and any restrictions on their use must also be taken into consideration.
- Appropriate strategies must be developed for employees who do not have the necessary skills to use computers, such as promoting the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL).
- There may be merit in making an open facility for staff (and their families) to access e-learning, but this should be undertaken to demonstrate a commitment to learning rather than as a way of gaining immediate business benefits.
- Blended learning is seen by many as a process in which appropriate e-learning modules are a precursor to a training session in the classroom.
- Generic off-the-shelf material is most useful for IT end-users or in IT specialist applications.
- Generic soft-skills material will require careful selection and quality checks to test its relevance and appropriateness for the organisation. Even then it may be most effective in a blended solution involving face-to-face training.
- There is considerable interest in the generation of bespoke or customised material – either in-house through the use of an authoring system or by commissioning it from a specialist software supplier. Ease of updating content and monitoring of usage are critical factors.
- Bespoke material is often created to meet essential business needs (compulsory training). Other popular topics are performance appraisal, standard procedures and induction.
- Learners should be given the opportunity to carry out e-learning in chunks of time that suit them. Some people may like to work in a concentrated manner and complete a whole programme at one sitting, while others may wish to complete the programme over several sessions.
- Online learning is more easily accepted in a culture of trust and empowerment, rather than in a culture where managers react against the idea of people being allowed to organise their own time and work schedules.
- Smaller organisations should enter into partnership over the running of online learning programmes so as to achieve maximum economies of scale and other benefits.
- Learning resource centres are seen as a useful facility, especially where a significant number of employees do not regularly use a personal computer at work.
- If a learning resource centre is intended to serve a population which includes those who are not regular users of personal computers, on-site facilitation is essential.

REFERENCES

- 1 To date no agreed definition of e-learning has emerged. The one cited is that used by the CIPD in its training surveys. An inclusive definition would include the use of distributed products which do not require the computer to be networked – mainly CD-ROMs. An exclusive definition would exclude these products and include only those products delivered through the Internet or an intranet.
- 2 Every year the ASTD (American Society for Training and Development) reports the results of a survey based on respondents taken from its benchmark forum. The report published in April 2002 showed that there has been little movement in the amount of training delivered through learning technology (e-learning). It has remained steady at under 10 per cent. In fact the highest figure of 9.1 per cent was recorded for 1997 (there is an inevitable time-lag in surveys of this nature). Although the last two ASTD reports are positive on the future of e-learning, the figures suggest a plateau rather than a growth in e-learning in the corporate sector (Van Buren, ME, *The ASTD 2001 State of the Industry Report*, Alexandria VA. ASTD, 2001; Van Buren, ME & Erskine W, *The ASTD 2002 State of the Industry Report*, Alexandria VA. ASTD, 2002).
- 3 The organisations participating were British Airways, Defence Management Training, (part of the Ministry of Defence), Glasgow City Council, Guidant, Interbrew, Nestlé UK, Royal Bank of Scotland, Scottish Power, Surrey County Council and one large retailer which has been identified throughout this report as Retailorg following a request for anonymity.



Our aim is to share knowledge by making connections between research and practice in order to increase learning and understanding.

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