



E-Learning is the delivery of learning and training using electronic media, for example: using computers, internet, and intranet. In principle, e-learning is a kind of distance learning; learning materials can be accessed from the web or CD via a computer, and tutors and learners can communicate with each other using e-mail or discussion forums.

E-Learning can be used as the main method of delivery of training or as a combined approach with classroom-based training. E-Learning is also helping to embed learning within work processes, as organisations begin to recognise that learning is not something that only takes place in a classroom.

In fact, 70% of all learning occurs whilst a person is on the job, that is not in formal training or education but in everyday working life as employees carry out their jobs - finding out information, reading documents, talking to other colleagues etc. It is these kinds of informal learning activities that e-learning can also support and encourage within an organization. In many industries competition is based on talent and knowledge. Also the global character and geographical spread of organizations are becoming wide. Providing learning services in such a geographically wide spread structure, ensuring consistency, crashing lead time in providing service at the same time reducing cost are the concerns for organizations. E-learning is an important learning tool that organizations are increasingly putting to use to achieve the mentioned results.

Some pioneers are already well advanced in the use of e-learning, while others show varying degrees of interest and many remain to be convinced. Yet despite disillusion caused by past hype, there is a growing sense among executives and analysts that e-learning - the use of IT and the internet to enhance training - is a market with huge potential. "Corporate e-learning is one of the fastest-growing sectors within the education market," says KPMG Consulting. "E-learning is moving out of the early technology phase into a more mainstream business market." As well as connecting employees through e-learning, companies can also link up with partners, suppliers and customers, KPMG adds. "Huge benefits will accrue when content flows seamlessly - often over mobile networks - throughout industry value chains."

Modes of E-learning

Apart from the traditional methods of e-learning like CD-ROMs and presentations using computers, web based training (WBT) has revolutionized e-learning. Margaret Driscoll has identified four kinds of Web-based training characterized by goals, instructional strategies, and roles of the instructor and students.

There are several key differences between these four kind of Web-based training programs. The most obvious difference is between the synchronous and asynchronous kinds of Web-based training. Synchronous programs require that the students and the teacher establish an agreed-upon time to meet online for class. (In some distance education circles asynchronous delivery is seen as solely developed and delivered online, whereas synchronous would be associated with meeting at a specific time and place in a traditional educational setting) Synchronous programs are similar to audio and videoconference and require scheduling. Asynchronous programs allow the students and teacher to log in to class at their convenience. In these programs the students and teacher do not have to be online at the same time.

The second distinguishing feature is group learning versus individual learning. In group learning programs, students work together building team projects, solving case studies, and developing presentations. Group learning can take place in synchronous or asynchronous classes. In contrast, individual learning programs allow learners to set their own pace and move at a rate that meets their self-directed study and learning needs. One student's pace and success has no effect on another learner's success.

Benefits of e learning

1. Anywhere, anytime, anyone factor

Approximately 80% of the professional workforce already uses computers on the job. Technical obstacles, such as access, standards, infrastructure, and bandwidth, will not be an issue two years from now. The growth of the World Wide Web, high-capacity corporate networks, and high-speed desktop computers will make learning available to people 24 hours a day, seven days a week around the globe. This will enable businesses to distribute training and critical information to multiple locations easily and conveniently. Employees can then access training when it is convenient for them, at home or in the office.

2. Consistency of method

Compared to conventional teaching methods, e-learning brings in consistency across various parameters. This will be greatly helpful in the areas of value education, spreading the

vision/mission of the company, policy deployment etc. where consistency becomes critical. Distribution of content to the entire organization would be possible allowing organizations to rapidly deploy learning throughout the organization without being tied to the constraints of the classroom.

3. Substantial cost savings

Many companies are trying to cut down on all expenses that are not directly related to revenue. With e-learning, the bulk of training expense is invested in learning, not travel and associated costs. E-Learning lowers the overall costs of creating a workforce that performs faster and more efficiently than the competition. Costs can be cut without completely sacrificing training efforts. Web based training is less expensive when considering the distribution of training, in relation to the limited number of participants in a traditional classroom environment. Web based training can be easily updated for additional content without much cost.

4. Learner centric program

Participants in an e-learning program have more control of the pace of the course and also more opportunity to concentrate on content most applicable to them. Furthermore, they can apply what they are learning during the course and come back online at any time for more help and clarification. Also individuals are able to take advantage of lifelong learning without relocating or quitting their jobs. It even brings in the entirely new concept of “safe failure” which allows employees to experience challenges and failures in a simulated environment without affecting the success of the organization.

5. Just-in-time access to timely information

Web-based products allow instructors to update lessons and materials across the entire network instantly. This keeps content fresh and consistent and gives students immediate access to the most current data. Information can be retrieved just before it is required, rather than being learned once in a classroom and subsequently forgotten. Similarly, organizations can quickly roll out a small piece of targeted learning that focuses on solving an immediate business problem.

6. Improved collaboration and interactivity among students

Distance education can be more stimulating and encourage more critical reasoning than a traditional large instructor-led class because it allows the kind of interaction that takes place most fully in small group settings. Participants in the internet learning environment are unaffected by gender, race, and age differences. For e.g.: in USA, Web-based training manuals, newsletters and support for training to help female science and engineering students are done. In addition, for asynchronous conferencing, students may read and reflect for as long as they

like before posting their comments to the class.

7. Better use of resources

E-learning helps in bringing together groups of learners from around the globe. It provides new opportunities for collaborative learning and instruction with new groups of people. Trainers can coordinate instruction with colleagues from other locations and organizations that they probably would have never had the opportunity to work with in other instructional settings. Computer based training helps in knowledge management in organization. This is done in two ways, a) CBT holds the knowledge onto the intellectual capital even if a person leaves; b) Allows the reuse of work across organizations, so that best practices and products can be found and used.

Issues and concerns

Low Acceptance

Although the benefits of e-learning are manifold it is found that teachers were often not willing to move from a face to face model of imparting learning to the technologically advanced system of e learning. One for the main reasons for this rather ironic situation seems to be because e-learning is viewed more as a supplement tool rather than as a complete substitute for the traditional method of imparting education. Secondly, although most instructors (traditional) are familiar with computers most of them may not possess the technical know-how to conduct a successful e learning program. In many cases, the students have been found to be more familiar with the use of various packages. Therefore the integration of computer technology into learning programs has been a little slow in gaining acceptance amongst the educational community although corporate organizations have realized more quickly the importance of integrating the new technology and have begun taking steps in the right direction.

Student initiative and completion of courses

The success of any e-learning program depends much more on personal initiative of the participants than in a traditional learning system. The learner has more responsibility not only in choosing when and to what extent to participate, but in maintaining and organizing course materials, which are accessed electronically and may or may not be selected by the learner for later reading and reflection. Experts suggest that poor instructional design increases the

likelihood of learners dropping out. One recommendation for managers and e-learning stakeholders to improve the quality of their e-learning courses is to conduct an initial front-end need analysis of employees' learning gaps so that right learning objectives and content can be created. Interaction, curiosity-driven content, user-friendly graphics and interfaces, familiar examples and cases, and application exercises are all design elements that should be considered, where appropriate, in order to create engaging online courses.

The Future

Forces that are aligning to shape the future for e-learning may be categorized as technical, teaching and development practices or organizational initiatives. Dramatic changes in hardware and software and the continued mainstreaming of technologies into our lives through e-commerce and entertainment are providing a powerful and unstoppable force for the growth of e-learning. A new generation of learners is growing up with technology and will increasingly expect it to be deployed in undertaking training. Organizations, including corporate houses, are developing better IT infrastructure and systems for efficient business and will be seeking to leverage off those efficiencies for the delivery of training. Businesses are seeking more skilled and flexible workers who can 'hit the ground running' and already possess some of those attributes thought once only achieved through experience.

The only certainty is change, and the only way to effectively accommodate change is through having sound processes. These are processes for identifying the needs of the learner, for designing experiences that efficiently meet learning objectives, for choosing appropriate technologies and creating motivating learning designs, and for measuring learning outcomes.

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Concluded.

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