



E-learning – opportunities, limitations & the danger of letting the geeks control it!

With the ubiquitous nature of personal computers and the internet, reducing costs whilst expanding development possibilities through e-learning appears to be an attractive proposition.

Today's modern healthcare, office and home environment means that almost everyone has access to a PC with broadband internet access and this opens a world of opportunities for training and development of staff.

Missed opportunities?

There isn't a corner of a healthcare organisation that cannot benefit from continuous training and development and this is far from limited to the clinical space, where there are obvious implications of insufficient continuous professional development. However, with so much pressure to manage costs and balance budgets, many Trusts find the ever increasing requirements for statutory training, coupled to a growing need to develop leadership & management capability, whilst keeping up with job-related skills across all areas an almost insurmountable challenge. It is perhaps surprising therefore that e-learning has not been utilised more, with its obvious cost advantages.

So, why hasn't e-learning taken off in the public sector, or any sector for that matter, to a greater degree, given the huge time and cost advantage associated with no trainers, no venue, no catering, flexible access, simultaneous delivery to hundreds or more? Perhaps it looks like an opportunity missed,

or maybe it is an opportunity examined and then discarded because of the fundamental issue that most e-learning fails to deliver the learning impact that organisations desire. Perhaps then, if e-learning can be constructed in a manner that restores the training impact, then more organisations can benefit from the potential it holds. To examine this, we need to consider the what, how, why set of questions that could herald the solution to the e-learning enigma.

Keep the geeks at bay!

The root of the problem is actually easily identified when you start to assess the current and burgeoning array of e-learning possibilities.

The developmental pathway appears to look like this. Someone has had a good idea for important training that could be delivered as e-learning but then, conscious of their own technical limitations, has passed it on to their IT people (the Geeks) to implement it. On the face of it this appears sensible because after all it will rely on technology for construction, migration and delivery. However, the reality is often an end result that consists of a series of text-based pages amounting to a paragraph or two explaining the topic and a few questions with limited, quantifiable answers designed to test whether the

participant has understood the topic. If they get the right answers, they've obviously understood the topic, if not they just need to go back and read about the topic again. Simple...

The problem is that this is so simple that it is also not effective. You could be forgiven for asking the question "why didn't I just buy a book?" which you also know would have sat on the shelf because it too often fails to deliver the intended learning benefit. To be fair, this approach may work for the science and maths-based training that Geeks have undertaken – I know, I am a geek – but it falls way short for many other subjects – especially the "softer sciences" such as management training.

Another problem with letting the technical people run the project is that although it will work perfectly, just as it was intended to run, it will usually miss out some key element that Geeks feel isn't worth the space or programming time. Take for instance the human element. We 'technical' people tend to feel that human interaction is overrated – why risk the robustness and integrity of the project on something as spontaneous and unpredictable as a person, when all the information you could possibly need can easily be conveyed through a

few paragraphs, a simple table or chart or possibly, at a stretch, maybe an image or two?

The human element

In reality, few e-learning products deal meaningfully with the human element, whether it is the need to engage or how to encourage new learning into practical behaviour. The most obvious limitation of a purely electronic system is that it is difficult to build in true human to human interaction and yet most trainers will know that this element is fundamental. In truth, it is not so much the human interaction as the engagement with the training, proven by the impact of an engaging book that you can't put down. The trainer is purely the conduit for the information in a manner that promotes engagement, as well as the monitor who can bring things back when engagement ebbs.

Well constructed e-learning includes the human element. Whether it is video narration, a method of asking questions or even practical case examples involving real life application of principles, it is vital that the engagement issue is addressed. Furthermore, at a simple level, it takes a human to say "out of the last 5 pages of generally useful information, paragraph 4 on page 2 is the most important thing you need to know". If we can get that right then we are winning!

So, if that helps at an individual, what about group learning? As technology has progressed we've gained the ability to communicate in a more personal way through the internet and with much greater ease, access and speed. Gone are the days of needing dedicated video conferencing suites to communicate effectively over great distances – we now have video messaging that can allow groups to see and talk with each with setup costs which are less than the taxi fare to get across London to a training course. The predominant issue remaining is that use of these facilities is second nature to the Geeks, who sadly don't need or want to interact anyway, but frightening to real human beings who actually do. Geeks 1: Humans 0...

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Let's consider the products themselves. Probably the second biggest problem with current online training courses is that, for the most part, they appear to fall into one of two highly unsatisfactory categories:

An existing training course which has been turned into an online version, without careful design for the environment and which just doesn't work in that format
A new e-learning course created for a specific purpose, but done so without the right mix of elements for the material to be covered e.g. a purely technical description of leadership

The first I have seen too many times on the internet. A training company decides they have an opportunity to expand their training product (delivered courses) into a new market (millions of training hungry online punters) but achieves this by simply saving

Element	The solution
The subject matter	Needs an intelligent decision about whether it is suitable for the e-learning format. Goal for the humans.
Include the trainer	By using video embedded in the programme, engagement is improved and the viewer has someone to direct them to the most important content. Goal for the humans, again.
Function	It must work well. By working with competent IT staff, you can ensure that any interactive elements and tests work exactly as they would in a classroom environment. It may be more technically complicated and take longer to setup, but the benefits will be clear. Goal for the Geeks.
Embedding & transferring learning	The programme needs to build in appropriate reinforcement, as well as ways to transfer often complex learning to daily practice. This really requires an intelligent construction of exercises, self-directed processes and careful guidance. Drat, another goal to the humans.
Presentation is everything	By ensuring that the finished product looks good, presents the information well and is intuitive to the user, the overall result is a smooth experience with maximum learning. Actually, we'll claim that goal because most of that's in the construction.
Reliability	It would be amiss not to mention access, availability, system up time, bandwidth, redundancy, security and more and that's definitely techy territory. Another late goal for the Geeks!

Table 1

their current PowerPoint presentation as web pages and loading this onto their website. If you're really lucky there will be some extra annotations to explain the slides but that is usually it. You come away feeling cheated – simply sold a product because someone can, rather than a commitment to your development, which is what you really need.

The second is a tougher challenge to overcome. It is possible that there are some subjects that just don't lend themselves to e-learning. Take 'leadership' for instance. It's not that elements of leadership can't be covered in an e-learning approach but leadership is part acquisition of skills and part journey of self-discovery. The former can be covered in part by e-learning but the latter really needs careful facilitation that just can't be provided without one of those human-being things. Geeks 1: Humans 1, drat.

Resolving the challenge

So, with the score at 1:1, let's examine how we can improve the e-learning experience. (See Table .1)

The final score

Well, we've added up the goals and the final score looks like this:

Geeks 4: Humans 4

It appears that the sort of e-learning that delivers the sorts of results demanded by forward thinking, performance-orientated Trusts is actually a combination of intelligent application of learning science by experience human beings, married to rock solid technical structure and reliability. Ultimately, the humans can't deliver it without the Geeks and the Geeks can't construct it without the humans. The really good news is that combine the two and maybe, just maybe, we can fully harness the power of technology to increase reach, reduce costs and improve results. That's not so much a draw as a win-win.

Author:

Andy Wells BEng
Head of IT & Technical Support, Medicology Ltd