

e-Learning Strategy and Management

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If You Only Look Under the Street Lamps . . . Or Nine e-Learning Myths

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The E-learning Industry is obsessed with finding the answers to the question, “Why hasn’t e-learning been more successful?” Perhaps we have been looking in the obvious—but wrong—places because our mythology of e-learning is misleading us. Follow along as a consummate changemeister examines the myths and suggests new ways to understand e-learning.

YOU KNOW THE STORY. A man (of course) has lost his keys. After searching diligently for them, he returns to his house, empty-handed. When asked by his family why he didn’t find them, he replies, “I looked under each street lamp and they just weren’t there!”

It seems to me the e-learning industry is a good example of that man. We keep looking for answers to why our e-learning isn’t “successful.” We keep talking about the technology, instructional design, and content, when the

real issue is getting people to use what's developed, and getting organizations to truly integrate e-learning into everyday life and operations.

The e-learning industry has had its chance. We've been in the spotlight for the last few years. Most organizations have deployed some form of e-learning. Learning management systems (LMSs) are now standard tools. Thousands of people have come to conferences. The term e-learning is in common use (without a common definition I hasten to add, but that's another issue). Large investments of time, money, and resources have been made. And yet, there still exists a high degree of skepticism at all organizational levels about e-learning. It's safe to say the honeymoon, however short-lived, is over. We are beyond "proof of concept" and "pilots"; results are now expected—and often mandatory.

We all know the hackneyed (and often misquoted) line from Kevin Costner and his movie, *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." ASTD and others have modified that phrase to ask, "If we build it, will they come?" Any way you phrase it, the answer is, "Only in Hollywood!" (See Sidebar 1.1, Field of e-Learning Dreams.)

The simple truth is that designing and building the very best e-learning program does not guarantee that learners will use it and that organizations will support it.

But the simple truth may not be all that "simple." There still exist many myths about what you can and should do to ensure your success with e-learning. Let's explore nine of those myths and what you can do to make sure your e-learning implementation is based on fact and not on fantasy.

SIDEBAR 1.1. FIELD OF E-LEARNING DREAMS

ASTD: *The Learning Technology Acceptance Study* (2001) asked, "If We Build It, Will They Come?"

- 31 percent of learners fail to register for compulsory e-learning
- 68 percent of learners fail to register for voluntary e-learning
- Dropout rates of 50 to 80 percent are not uncommon

Myth 1: Everyone Knows What You Mean When You Talk About e-Learning

The truth is that the term e-learning means different things to different people. When the phrase was first popularized in 2000, it most often referred to computer-based training delivered over intranets and the Internet. “e-learning” replaced “web-based training” which, during the high-flying dot-com days, was just not sexy enough. It was a time when we were putting an “e” in front of everything, “e”-letters, “e”-toys, “e”-commerce, “e”-banking, “e”-pets—the “e”-list goes on and on. But the constant was a reference to delivering courses online.

Then in 2001, ASTD published a report that offered an expanded definition of e-learning. They wrote that e-learning is, “instructional content or learning experiences delivered or enabled by electronic technology . . . that is designed to increase workers’ knowledge and skills so they can be more productive, find and keep high-quality jobs, advance in their careers, and have a positive impact on the success of their employees, their families, and their communities” (ASTD, 2001). Now *that’s* a mouthful! And one that you don’t often hear repeated.

At the same time, reflecting the buzz and enthusiasm of the dot-com world, Gene Ziegler, former chief learning officer (CLO) of Corpedia Education, suggested: “What is different is the ability of the Internet to build all this [rich learning] on the fly, on demand, and almost independent of time and place. Unlike the written word, the experience is only as linear as we want it to be. We can allow our whimsical personalities to drive us to any place in the world of knowledge that our imaginations desire. And we do so using both halves of our brain, firing on both cylinders, learning at unprecedented speeds” (Ziegler, 2001).

This certainly reflects my experiences using the world’s most powerful e-learning tool, Google (www.google.com)! Somehow, no matter what I start to search, I end up spending hours exploring—and learning about—related and unrelated topics I’m led to both consciously and unconsciously.

By the end of 2002, many of the industry’s experts were offering a definition of e-learning along the lines of, “The use of technologies to create, distribute, and deliver valuable data, information, learning, and knowledge to improve on-the-job and organizational performance, and individual development.”

(This is my paraphrase of a great many different versions.) The number of e-learning vendors and resources and tools was now vast. Everything from LMSs to authoring tools to content management systems (CMSs) to virtual classrooms to enhanced Microsoft® PowerPoint™ presentations to courses online to portals to performance support systems. The list goes on and on.

At the same time, there was a constant debate about what the “e” actually stood for. Responses I heard included, “everywhere,” “extending,” “enhancing,” and “enabling,” as well as the obvious “electronic.”

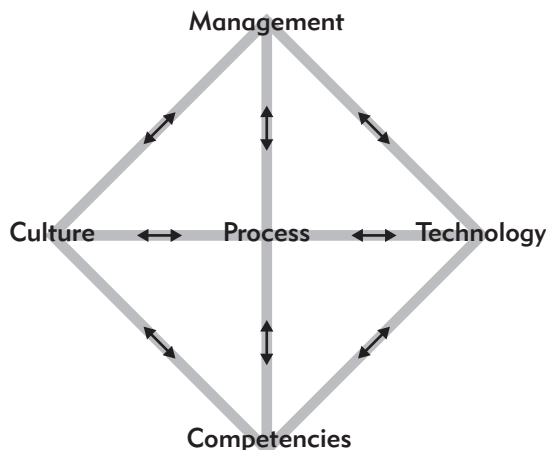
So it is no wonder that learners, managers, and executives are confused about what we do mean when we talk so confidently of e-learning.

Myth 2: e-Learning Is Really No Big Deal

The truth is quite the opposite. e-Learning *is* a big deal because it represents a change that ripples through an organization. And change is always a big deal to adults, with most of us reacting to it based on what seems to be only 30 percent logic and 70 percent emotion.

Organizations are complex systems that balance culture with technology, management, competencies, and business processes. Visualize a diamond with these at the points and at the center. (See Figure 1.1.)

Figure 1.1. Any Change to Any Element of the Organizational System Immediately Affects the Other Four



Which ones are at the points and which one is at the center may change with time and point of view. The important thing is this: if you connect the points, it becomes clear that any change in one will have an immediate and direct impact on every other point.

With e-learning we seem to be changing the *process* of learning in an organization. And, by definition, the technologies, management systems and structures, competencies and culture will be changed, along with business processes. Our choice then is whether to try to manage these changes, or to ignore them and just let them happen.

Myth 3: The “Hard-Stuff”—The Technology—Is What’s Really Difficult

There exists more than ample evidence that, in fact, it is the “soft stuff”—the human issues—that are really the most difficult. After all, technology itself has no emotions to respond to or feelings to be hurt. It’s a world of ones and zeros, whereas we humans are one complicated species!

Much has already been written about the change process and how humans move through their own personal change journeys, so I won’t go through that again here. (Jay Cross and I also addressed the change process in our book, *Implementing e-Learning*.) But I do highly recommend that every e-learning professional learn about these models and theories. Whether we like it or not, we are in the change business.

Once you understand change, you can then make a plan to manage your implementation. My colleagues and I at Dublin Group developed, over many years, the “Ready-Willing-Able” model for implementing large-scale change. This model works well to ensure that your e-learning is accepted and used by the learners, and for it to be embraced and supported by the organization as a whole.

Ready refers to the fundamental systems and structures that must be in place and working. For e-learning this means that the technology itself must work, and help desks and support systems must be in place in case it doesn’t. It also means the learners have the means to access and use the e-learning (that is, properly equipped PCs, correct passwords, and so on) and the organization has the systems to support it (that is, manager approval, registration, tracking, and so on).

Able refers to the education, training, and job aids required to make sure the learners know how to access and use the e-learning you develop and distribute. Although your e-learning adheres to standard conventions, you must make sure learners know how to log on, how to use all of your program's features and functions to optimize their learning experience, and how to get help (such as when to call the training department, the IT department, or the vendor).

Finally, *willing* refers to the change management systems and internal marketing activities necessary to ensure learner acceptance and organizational integration. This entails winning the hearts and minds of your stakeholders. Although it's hard, by having the necessary sponsorship and leadership, change communications and education, and linkage with ongoing organizational processes (for example, performance management), it can be done.

Myth 4: It's the Learners Who Really Count

Yes, learners do count—but so do many other people within the organization. A wide range of organizational stakeholders includes the “C”-level types (CEO, CIO, CFO, EVPs), middle and line managers, the human resources training staff (including trainers, instructional designers, and training managers) and anyone else with a vested interest. Add all these people together and you will realize that this is a large number.

The good news is that you don't have to get all of them on-board and embracing your e-learning at the same time. Through the work of Everett Rogers (*The Diffusion of Innovations*) we have learned that people adapt to new innovations (and change) along a bell curve. Some percentage of each stakeholder group are innovators,” while those on the other end of the bell curve are “diehards.” In between are the “early adopters,” the “early majority,” the “late majority,” and the “late adopters.”

The fact is that if only 5 percent of each stakeholder group embraces your e-learning, it will eventually become embedded in the organization. Once you get 20 percent of each stakeholder group supporting your e-learning efforts, the integration picks up tremendous momentum and becomes unstoppable!

Myth 5: Learners Know What to Expect from e-Learning

Actually, learners typically don't.

One of the root causes for this is that there isn't one accepted definition for e-learning, and therefore we don't have a common understanding to begin with. Another factor is the poor job we do of marketing our e-learning to all our stakeholders, especially to the learners.

The purpose of marketing today is to maintain profitable long-term relationships with customers or, in our case, stakeholders. As Spencer Johnson and Larry Wilson said in *The One-Minute Salesperson*, "People love to buy but hate to be sold." Therefore, critical elements of an effective marketing strategy and approach are branding and positioning.

Walter Landor, the renowned marketing guru, is often quoted as saying, "Simply put, a brand is a promise. By identifying and authenticating a product or service it delivers a pledge of satisfaction and quality." Think about the implied promise of brands like Coca Cola, BMW, Nordstrom, McDonald's, Lexus, IBM, Apple, and Revlon. What does each of these brand names promise the user? What mental images do these names and logos evoke?

What's interesting about brands is that there are really two views to consider: (1) the company's desire or hope concerning how the buyers and users will feel about it and (2) the buyers' or users' perceptions. When both of these views are aligned, strong brands develop. When they don't, you end up with an Edsel or Pet Rocks.

Are your hopes aligned with your stakeholders' perceptions? Try answering this question: If your e-learning were an automobile, what brand or make would it be, and why? What brand or make would your stakeholders perceive it to be, and why? Does your perception match theirs?

In other words, how have you positioned your e-learning? Is your e-learning to be used for professional development? Or for on-the-job support? Is it infotainment? Or is it entertraining? Unless you have a clear position defined *and communicated*, your learners and the organization will not know what to expect or why.

Myth 6: Communication Enables Us to Tell Our Stories

The American Heritage Dictionary defines communication as “the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information.” The key word in this definition is “exchange.” Exchange implies a two-way process, not a one-way flood. All too often, organizations develop “communication plans” that, in reality, are simply marketing communication plans. Their purpose is to tell a story in a convincing way, rather than to foster true two-way exchange.

To effectively implement e-learning, you need both a change communications plan and a marketing communications plan.

A marketing communications plan must tell all of your stakeholders about the vision and mission for your e-learning initiative. It has to present a memorable tag line, a 60-second “elevator” pitch, and accompanying project identity (such items as logo, font and colors, “look and feel”). You might create and distribute brochures and posters, tent cards and door hangers, mass emails and voice mails, mailings, and giveaways (for example, mouse pads, mugs, pens, t-shirts). The purpose is to make sure the message you want your stakeholders to hear is broadcast loud and clear.

A change communications plan is necessary to support your change management efforts. Its purpose is to support the learners and the organization as a whole as they move through the three phases of change adoption: awareness, engagement, and involvement. For each of these phases, the plan must present specific activities, messages, and timing for each key stakeholder group.

Myth 7: Success Is Getting It to Work

Getting your e-learning to work—completing the installation—is really only the first stage in being successful. And it is the easiest. It’s the next two stages, implementation and integration, that are the really difficult ones.

You know you’ve succeeded at installation when your e-learning runs error-free, the sound can be heard, the video images played, and the LMS tracks whatever it is you decide you want to track, and then some. Your focus during installation is on the technology.

You know you've succeeded at implementation when your targeted audiences are accessing what you've developed. It's at this stage that there is a lot of conversation about the e-learning and the ROI (return on investment) anticipated and delivered. Your focus during implementation is on ensuring that your e-learning is used in the way you intended it.

Getting through the next stage, integration, is the hardest. You know you've succeeded at this stage when your e-learning is invisible. You are no longer absorbed with the technology or even talking about e-learning. Your focus is on your organization, and e-learning is just another part of any business process. Your e-learning has been absorbed into the fabric of your organization.

Myth 8: Once Is Enough

Oh, how we all wish this could be true! To be successful, you have to be in continual and overlapping cycles of preparing, launching, and sustaining. Within each of these cycles you must be in the process of learning → planning → developing → implementing → supporting → learning.

Almost as soon as you have done the preparation and launched Version 1.0, you should begin the preparation for Version 2.0. And, in parallel, you should be working within the organization to sustain the initial momentum. This is then repeated with Version 2.5 or 3.0 and on and on.

Think of e-learning as if it is organizational software that is in a continual process of improvement and refinement. Plan regular reviews and conduct what I've come to call "tune-ups." In these tune-ups, you might decide to look at some or all of the following: learning/e-learning strategy; business case (including ROI, if established); e-learning architecture, components, and delivery mix; content and instructional design; tools, technologies, and infrastructure; marketing; change management; evaluation and metrics; supporting organization and processes; sponsorship and governance; and roles and responsibilities.

Myth 9: It's Magic

Clearly, being successful with e-learning is not magic. There is no one model or formula to follow that will guarantee your success.

e-Learning enables you to change your current learning processes to be more efficient and more effective. If done right, e-learning becomes a critical force to improve the performance of your workforce and your organization as a whole. This is not the same as “converting” an instructor-led course. This is big stuff, and therefore requires the best thinking from the best people inside and outside your organization.

One-Minute Summary

In order to ensure your e-learning is used by your learners and embraced by your organization, remember:

1. It's about business and providing a business solution, providing a “Return on Expectation” not just a Return on Investment.
2. It's about enabling learning and driving performance, not training.
3. It's about people, not technology.
4. Marketing and change management are critical, not optional!

Good luck with all of your e-learning endeavors!

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Lance Dublin has been an advocate for innovative approaches to learning and change throughout his career. He went from designing a weeklong “Experiment in Free Form Education” program in high school to co-founding one of the nation’s first full accredited “University Without Walls” in his twenties. Then, recognizing the impact of technology on the intersection of people, business, and learning, he founded and built Dublin Group, a company that became a leader in improving individual and organizational performance and implementing large-scale change.

Lance is now an independent management consultant, international speaker, and author based in San Francisco, California, and serving clients world-wide. He specializes in strategy development, program design, and implementation for corporate learning programs, and organizational change management. He brings to his work more than thirty years’ experience in adult education and training, communication, change management, and organizational design and development.

Lance has worked across a wide range of industries, including financial services and insurance, technology and information services, pharmaceutical and health care, manufacturing, oil and gas, chemical, communications, hospitality and food services, and non-governmental agencies. His clients have included The Royal Bank of Canada, Bank of America, Wells Fargo Bank, American Express, Visa International, Novartis, Microsoft, Apple, Sun Microsystems, Cisco, Intuit, Texas Instruments, OxyChem, Pioneer Hi-Bred, Chevron, BASF, Pacific Gas & Electric, Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts, Bechtel Corporation, John Muir Health, Brinker International, Wendy’s International, Sheetz Corporation, Charter Communications, California State Automobile Association, United Service Automobile Association, and International Finance Corporation.

Lance is a regular speaker and keynote presenter at regional, national, and international conferences. In addition, he is the author of numerous published articles, co-author of the capstone book in ASTD’s e-learning series, *Implementing e-Learning*, and a contributor to ASTD’s *Handbook of Training Design and Delivery*, Elliot Masie’s *Learning Rants, Raves and Reflections*, and Marc Rosenberg’s *Beyond e-Learning*.

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