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Inside:

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E-learning



E-Learning Goes Mainstream

By Robert Kravitz

A professor of sports medicine at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, N.M., has been teaching there for several years. Prior to that, he was an instructor at a large California university. A few years ago, there was a major change in how he instructed his students. Plain and simple, unless they request a meeting, he never sees them anymore. For years he conducted classes in auditoriums with 200 to 300 students present. Now those students take his courses on computers, iPods and iPads, and other e-readers from a variety of vendors, all in a format broadly referred to as e-learning.

Because most of these students were brought up with a computer as an appendage, being instructed online is natural to them. They can take the courses when they want and in most cases repeat them as often as they want. School statistics reveal that it is not uncommon for a student to take an e-learning course at 1:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m., with many taking or at least reviewing each class two or three times before moving on to the next “module” or e-learning program.

Being able to review a class two or more times should help enhance the learning experience. I’m sure many of us who went to school decades ago wish we had had this option. And taking the class when it fits their schedule instead of the school’s or instructor’s is another plus. How many remember drowsily walking into classes starting as early as 7:30 in the morning, wondering why it had to be so early?

However, it took a while for this professor to accomplish what he believes — and his students likely would agree — is a successful e-learning program. Many of the early attempts at e-learning were “e-nightmares,” according to Kerry Kalous, managing director of Resource Bridge, LLC, a 10-year-old company that develops customized e-learning programs for a variety of businesses and organizations. “Creating successful e-learning courseware is not as simple as posting training manuals and PowerPoint presentations online,” she says. “To be truly effective, the courseware should capture the ‘instructor element’ similar to a traditional classroom setting.”

Capturing the Instructor Element

So important is capturing the instructor element in an e-learning program that Kalous says if an organization does not have the understanding or ability to accomplish this, it should either “outsource [to an organization that can do it] or stick with traditional, if inflexible, training options.” So how do you capture the instructor element? A well-developed and successful e-learning program should be presented in a traditional classroom scenario and include these elements:

- Anticipate user (student) questions. Remember, the students are watching the presentation online and cannot raise their hands with a question or request a clarification. The instructor must anticipate which areas of the course may be confusing and need more in-depth review.
- Provide answers. Most e-learning programs include a quiz or a formal test that must be completed at the end of each module. Providing answers to the test questions after the quiz adds to the learning experience in real time.
- Encourage ample practice opportunities. In a college setting, students are often encouraged or may be required to attend laboratories or study groups to review and/or practice what they have been taught. Businesspeople undergoing e-learning may be able to practice what they have learned in real-life settings, which can ultimately prove the success or failure of their experience and the e-learning program.

In addition, there are many other major considerations that must be thought through and planned before beginning an e-learning program.

Mark Warner is president of the Low Moisture Carpet Cleaning Association and director of training for Enviro-Solutions, a manufacturer of green cleaning chemicals. He spearheaded an e-learning program for the company and provides these e-learning considerations:

- What are the goals of the project?
- What information needs to be taught?
- Who will present the information?
- What technologies will be used to develop and present the e-learning program?

Warner says to address these considerations requires four key ingredients: people, communication, process and technology.

Keys to a Successful e-Learning Program

Some organizations develop their own e-learning programs, while others outsource the projects to companies that specialize in this type of work. Whatever direction is taken, the following keys to a successful e-learning program will likely apply:

People: In most cases, an e-learning program is best developed with a team of people who have ample background knowledge on the material that will be included. Equally important, the individuals on the team must all be passionately involved in the project. In many work environments, developing an e-learning program is just one of several work duties. If team members really believe in the program and what they are trying to accomplish, it has a far greater possibility for success.

Communication: Because developing an e-learning program is just one of several work tasks team members will likely have, it is essential to develop some type of communication system devoted strictly to the e-learning program. This is especially true if team members are geographically dispersed. One option is to set up a separate intranet e-mail system used only for the e-learning program.

Process: Deadlines are important when developing an e-learning program. The reason is that they help set up a step-by-step process. Team members know that “project A” must be completed by a certain date in order to begin “project B.” Once the program starts missing established deadlines, the entire project will get delayed and, as the workload piles up, result in a failure to develop the program.

Technology: Technology is the “moving target” for an e-learning program because it can change — and rapidly. At one time a PowerPoint presentation was the essence of many online courses. Then came PowerPoint voice-overs, which added more interest and personalized the presentations. Podcasts are still used, but the hoopla for them has definitely faded. Now, without question, most e-learning programs are videos — YouTube-like presentations — and may also include PowerPoint presentations as well as other learning materials. Videos are the best way to capture the look and feel of a traditional classroom setting.

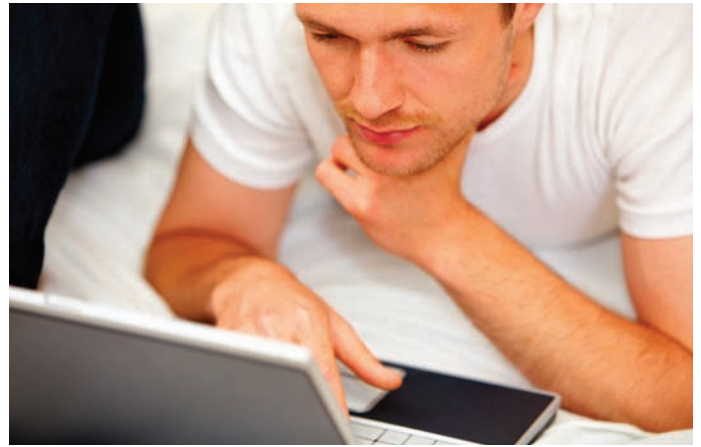
Results and Return on Investment in a Business Situation

Ultimately, the signs of a successful e-learning program are that people use it, find it relatively easy to use, find it interesting, learn

from it, and believe it is valuable. But because developing a program can be costly, whether it is outsourced or done in-house, most businesses want to know if there will be some sort of tangible return on their investment.

This may be difficult to determine, and much depends on who is taking the e-learning courses and why. Possibly most important is how “passionately interested they are in the course,” says Warner, who recently conducted a survey of distributors and distributor sales reps (DSRs) who have taken the e-learning program he developed. The findings, in many cases, were quite startling. For instance:

- The distributors who were enthusiastically interested in the e-learning program reported their sales had increased 45 percent since taking the classes.
- Energized DSRs reported sales increases that ranged from 19 percent to 847 percent.
- Moderately interested distributors experienced sales increases of minus 2 percent to 5 percent; the range for moderately interested DSRs was 5 percent to 48 percent.
- Distributors who had no interest in the program and may have taken it only because it was a job requirement or they were paid to do so saw their sales decrease by 2 to 50 percent over the evaluation period.
- Similarly, DSRs with no interest experienced sales growth rates of minus 8 percent to as low as minus 60 percent.



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“Our survey would likely not qualify as a scientific survey because there are scores of variables that could cause many of these results,” says Warner. “However, the sales increases for those passionately interested in the courses simply cannot be ignored.”

Overall, an effective, well-thought-out, and well-executed e-learning program should be an efficient way to improve work processes “and provide your company with a distinct competitive advantage,” says Kalous. “In my experience, if an organization invests the time [and] has the focus, people, procedures, and technology in place, there are significant benefits from developing e-learning programs.” ■

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