

eLearning for Corporates

eLearning can be defined as an approach to teaching and learning that utilises Internet technologies to communicate and collaborate in an educational context. This includes technology that supplements traditional classroom training with web-based components and learning environments where the educational process is experienced online.

eLearning has moved the possibility for training to any Web browser. It allows for learner time and place independence, expanded distribution of course materials, greater control over the quality of the learning materials, the shortening of training time, lower travel costs, the tailoring of instruction to individual needs, smaller units of instruction, automatic creation of student activity records and completion logs, easily updated content, and the potential for greater interactivity.

A recent report cites statistics related to the need for more skills and knowledge to compete in the new economy. Fully 85 percent of new jobs will require at least a high school education compared to just 65 percent a decade earlier. The need for more education at all levels combined with extremely hectic lifestyles has forced individuals, companies, and governments to deal with eLearning issues perhaps faster than any other educational innovation of the past two centuries.

The Corporate world has been the main driver of eLearning. The main uses have been corporate training and knowledge management initiatives that are gradually merging, as organisations become more and more knowledge driven.

Corporate Training

eLearning has quickly impacted corporate training in a variety of ways. It has altered training goals and expectations. It has also created a mechanism to develop and implement programs when and where needed. eLearning is shown to be effective in changing organizational culture so as to facilitate the sharing of knowledge instead of continuing to reward the hoarding of it.

It has been predicted that the number of corporate universities will exceed traditional ones by 2010 (Fortune, 2000). With these trends, there are movements away from single event-based live training, to continuous and collaborative learning where learners share best practices and ideas.

There are many reasons why eLearning is entering the workplace. Firms view it as a new way to deliver instruction, boost worker productivity, broaden training opportunities, reduce costs, improve instructor productivity, stay competitive, improve motivation and morale, and implement strategic initiatives. Travel costs are reduced since training is now locally available for off-site personnel, instructors are not held to certain geographic boundaries, and more students can view presentations simultaneously. There are also cost savings from fewer hours away from the workplace and lower internal training expenses. And after the events of September 11, 2001, there is a distinct psychological advantage in attending training virtually,

instead of physically, given the pervasive fears of travel and hassles of additional security precautions.

“There's a better way to build technology and business skills. Web-based courses let people learn in their spare time - 20 minutes here and 20 minutes there. The material is always available for quick reference...Best of all, you don't have to have a super-fast Internet connection or lots of money....and since they're on the web, all you need is a browser to get started.”

In terms of motivation employees will perceive eLearning as a fun and engaging learning opportunity rather than as electronic page turning.

Reusable Learning Objects

Instructional designers and corporate trainers working with eLearning often use the term “reusable learning object” (RLO). RLOs are granular chunks of information that teach one or more objectives and can be meaningfully incorporated into multiple training contexts. To be useful for an organization’s knowledge management strategy, RLOs must provide user access, content modifiability, content standards and interoperability in terms of platform and delivery mode, consistency in the design and development of content, and the scalability of digital entities. Other applicable terms include flexibility, durability, adaptability, customizability, interchangeability, and affordability. In effect, RLOs allow training to be updated instantaneously and constantly. Meta tagging of those knowledge bits will allow learners to find and utilize reusable knowledge objects quickly and efficiently. While knowledge may “never generate itself”, technology can help in the process of sharing, stretching, compacting, and re-purposing it. As template-based design and sharing of knowledge becomes the norm, the development cycle of content and courseware will hopefully be shortened. However, agreed upon standards and specifications will be needed and a number of such standardisation initiatives have started producing results (AICC, IMS, ADL, IEEE, etc.).

Knowledge Management

Recent business buzzwords, such as “e-learning,” “learning organizations,” and “communities of practice,” indicate that the management of learning is growing in importance. Chief Learning Officers (CLOs) and Chief Knowledge Officers (CKOs) are often charged with overseeing a company’s learning programs and new initiatives.

The informal sharing of knowledge between employees is common in most work settings. Whether the sharing of information is over cubicle walls, in the lunchroom, or at the water-cooler, the exchange is typically very local and often imperfect. Even when technology appears to drive the information flow, it is the social world or network that binds people together. “As corporations increasingly recognize knowledge as their most valuable resource of competitive advantage, they must devise systems for fast and efficient transfer of knowledge. It is not enough for a company to generate mountains of knowledge if it has no means of knowing what it knows”. Given that perspective, electronic sharing and exchange of education and training could become the most important task of a successfully functioning organization, if that is not already the case.

Online Communities

The development of the Web has allowed for the creation of online communities. A community is defined as “the set of people who occupy a given structural location in an institution or society...most communities engage in some degree of collective cognition—the interactions through which they learn from one another’s experiences, set common strategies, develop a shared vocabulary, and evolve a distinctive way of thinking. These interactions might take place through war stories, newsletters, rumors, speeches, philosophical tracts, music videos, management consultants, or bards who travel from place to place bearing news.” This notion has been taken a step further by pointing out that when people “congregate in virtual places” and develop new ways of sharing their common interests and pursuits, they are forming or participating in a “community of practice.”

Use of asynchronous (threaded discussion lists, content sharing, notice boards, etc.) as well as synchronous (chat, conferencing, co-browsing, etc.) modes of collaboration techniques are being increasingly adopted in implementing these online communities.