

Have you got an e-learning strategy yet?

**Rapid business improvement and ROI through tailored e-Learning.
By Philip E Atkinson, Gareth Howells, Mark Reilly and Christopher Ross.**

Business success leaves behind a path of clues

When you flick through the *Harvard Business Journal*, scan the *Economist* or *FT* for success stories in bringing about effective organisational change you will often be drawn by articles that focus on leadership, customer focus strategy, innovation – but with very little reference to communications and L&D strategy, and, in particular, the substantial role that developing an e-learning delivery system can play in enabling that process to happen.

You will find that a lot of business transformation relies of the primary factors of change, and pays very little attention to the 'secondary factors' which actually determine whether the change becomes a living reality or just another 'flavour of the month'.

Effective change requires 'prime drivers' and 'secondary enablers'

You'll find in many change projects that the real strategic catalyst or 'primary factors' are leadership, customer service, strategic vision and innovation but very little reference will be made to how those elements of the change formula are leveraged into effective implementation by 'secondary enablers'. Having great 'primary' ideas and cascading them down

through and across the organisation is not enough anymore. Those 'primary' ideas have to be debated, discussed, critiqued and more importantly incubated, so that they generate a climate of curiosity and exploration that enables further innovation to take place. Sustained change only arises when original ideas are grown after incubation, improved and then installed.

You know as well that effective organisational change requires a degree of adventurous curiosity, innovation and exploration and, even more important than that, a process and

delivery system that reflects and encapsulates that philosophy the change initiative will logically shift the business to the next level of operational efficiency and is much more than just 'words written on paper'.

Design and delivery critical to change implementation

We can confidently predict that this comes about by the thoughtful design and delivery of a strong learning and development strategy, delivered by a powerful set of communication tools. Asked how well this is achieved

currently, our response has to be less than positive. Ask yourself the question 'how well did our organisation implement and install the change initiative into 'business as usual?' You may then realise that too often the secondary enablers are largely ignored. There is a degree of certainty that these, currently ignored tools and strategies, can be full developed and installed through a carefully crafted e-learning strategy.

Great theory, lousy implementation

There is no doubt about it – successful organisational and



cultural change is associated with strong leadership and effective communication. Most initiatives don't make it. We know that about 85-90% of change initiatives fail to achieve the synergies for which they were originally devised, partly because we fail to have a learning and communications delivery system which will bed down the great ideas and convert them into reality. Theory expounded in workshops is great, but implementation is the real acid test of whether or not change is working, and that only comes about by developing learning delivery systems that create and sustain specific and actual measurable changes in behaviour.

Until behaviour changes nothing changes

Organisations can adapt and improve only when people start doing new things that promote and grow error free service delivery and stop doing things that inhibit that delivery. It's a fact that until core organisational behaviours change, very little else changes. Until key individuals perceive that their new leadership behaviours instil enhanced team performance and further learn those 'things' that support and contribute to those behaviours then the situation will remain the same. Words mean little in the process of organisational change. Decisive action is actually what breeds progress.

Organisational culture shaped by learning and communications infrastructure

From our perspective the 'organisational culture' of the enterprise is strongly dependent on and influenced by, the educational, learning and communications infrastructure that dominates.

You may think the word

'dominates' is a little strong – but unless we market, sell, influence, educate and promote a learning climate and culture that supports the change then very little, if anything is going to change.

E-learning is the key to change implementation

E-learning has much to offer any change process, and this is especially the case in large scale business transformation projects. In our experience, e-learning does not currently appear to play a large part in this process yet it could deliver way beyond its limited and defined role in focusing on delivering orthodox, low level, unexciting content, error-free at minimal cost!

Some reading this may be horrified by our exclamations, but they are true reflection of how e-learning is applied in organisations. Way back in 1999 when the concept of e-learning was born in a conference in LA, e-learning was described as the secret behind building the true 'learning organisation.' If that is the case, those seeds of wisdom have not been allowed to flourish to their natural level for organisations to really benefit from its applications. Applications have unfortunately been delivered as a vehicle for 'sunk cost' projects.

If you explore how most organisations have applied e-learning, generally speaking you will find it is used 95% of the time on fairly routine, unimaginative mandatory or administrative subjects and projects. This is unfortunate when it could be used on major transformation projects to install and implement the core elements of effective behaviour change.

We suggest that the role that e-learning can play in being the catalyst for improvement can be

significant. However, currently, e-learning, is at best, seen solely as a low cost strategy to deliver regulatory, mandatory and statutory training to a large group of people quickly, rather than a powerful organisational change tool.

E-learning delivers a strong ROI

In eyes of many, this is one of the few benefits of e-learning over traditional L&D activity. Other benefits are associated with what we call 'mass baptism' – which is a basically putting a large group of people through a training experience which in turn can be validated, recorded and discussed.

Issues in e-learning for business improvement and culture change

1. Why and where has it been used in companies?

When someone asked at a conference why e-learning was so popular and well used the response from a speaker was threefold

- It was cheaper,
- It didn't require users to be away from their jobs and
- It was cheaper.

Of course the speaker was being cynical of course but it is merely the veneer to a fundamental and inconvenient truth for those who really should be driving organisational change, rather than focusing their energies solely on compliance issues.

Where is it used? We see it used most frequently in compliance training and meeting statutory and mandatory requirements for such subjects as health and safety, induction training, legal compliance with specific legislation and topical subjects such as equality and diversity at work. What that generates for the organisation is the

E-learning, its history and its future

1840 and Isaac Pitman offered shorthand as a correspondence class to students worldwide. In 1874 the first distance learning degree was devised by the Illinois Wesleyan University and became popular in 1915 when the national Extension Association was created to provide accreditation in distance learning. The development of media such as the radio and TV further promoted distance learning in the early days.

The term 'e-learning' was used at an LA Conference in 1999. The phrase specifically referred to learning using the Internet or other interactive or electronic media sources. Sometimes it is referred to as 'on-line learning,' E-learning is a very powerful process because the student has the freedom to learn outside an academic institution.

Nowadays e-learning is a broad term that includes methods of learning and using packaged software programs, usually on the Internet.



Examples of the potential applications and delivery of innovative e-learning solutions in the arena of organisational change	
Innovative e-learning opportunities	Outcome and focus
Organisational restructuring & redesign	Clarifying changes in reporting relationships Job redesign Equipping people with the skills and competencies to arise to new roles Exploring matrix management reporting relationships
Organisational change initiatives	Defining the current and future state for the organisation Roles of managerial staff as change agents Equipping managers with core change agent skills Creating virtual teams with shared platforms Developing effective communication processes
Leadership	Exploring the leadership role Defining and assessing leadership capabilities Self and 360 degree assessment Action planning for improvement
Personal Development	Tailored programmes organised around specific corporate competencies – personal stretch Integrating organisational needs and individual objectives Assessing personal effectiveness competencies and how this aligns with the business
Performance Management	Assessing self motivation and assessment of teams and direct reports Setting up a performance management system and developing expertise in appraisal Dealing with poor performers and high potentials
Team Building	Assessment of team culture Self scoring and analysis of what makes a cohesive team Team dynamics and interaction with other organisational teams Resolution of win-lose Team conflict
Culture Change	Defining global HQ culture Assessing regional or satellite cultures diversity Measuring organisational cultural components Explore the role of the line manager as innovator
Post Acquisition Integration	Smoothing the flow of integration between two cultures by creating a new entity Preparing staff for issues for resolution Equipping people with a common and shared language and means of communication Highlighting decision making processes and the managers role in the process

Some key e-learning concepts

- Engage and Prepare the Learner before e-learning starts, set the scene using emails, posters or even stage events
- Have the e-learning be relevant to the learners situation not just list of facts and figures
- Allow the learner to explore the e-learning and virtual situation – they are adults not children
- Provide realistic and intrinsic feedback related to the situation and scenario
- 'Tell and Test' is about short term memory and doesn't transfer to the workplace

simple actions of looking at company records to see whether your people comply with requirements. That's why so many L&D professionals are disappointed and refer to e-learning as a tick the box exercise!

Of course, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with that but it would only take a little imagination to apply it to corporate growth strategies

such as customer service, client retention, market penetration, competitive behaviour, continuous improvement etc.

2. What was the key motivation to using e-Learning?

It was motivated by the promises made for it by its suppliers in leading companies. Unfortunately, there is too little passion in

many e-learning experiences. It can be used fundamentally as a transfer of information for many staff linked with reportable statistics on how many attended, the completion rate and whether it meets the required compliance with whatever standards or legislation.

The promises it failed to deliver are due to significant misunderstandings and misinterpretations of what it could achieve. We know it can deliver on its promise – you just need to think beyond the typical e-learning page-turner – it could, given the chance, be a real brand ambassador and a sales driver in terms of L&D and organisational change.

Research into effective e-learning delivery is sadly lacking. If performance

improved after undertaking e-learning we need to know. Was the improvement because of or in spite of the e-learning? Nobody knew unless they had the foresight (and a large enough organisation) to set up a control group and do some serious research before and after the implementation of e-learning.

Unfortunately, cost still seems to be the driver for most businesses when using e-learning and the lowest cost provider wins the deal rather than the most innovative, learning behaviour specialists who can prove how their process can lead to significant leaps in performance improvement.

3. Does e-learning and its delivery equally provide large scale organisations with a competitive edge?

Of course it does – or at least it can. Large organisations can instigate distributed learning, and learning environments and bring the workforce together around the learning initiative. Done well, it fosters collaborative learning and sharing and then performance working.

Tailored for their needs – e-learning improves morale and helps people feel valued. Of course that isn't to say that plain vanilla e-learning has no use. Unless you have a specific build or configuration of Microsoft Office for your company, then why not get an off-the-shelf training package? But you have to ask yourself – is this training and not learning? In some cases, it is no more than a step up from the Help menu but overall, it can nonetheless be useful.

4. What about ROI and how can it be measured?

We referred to this before and this is a key issue to make e-learning a powerful business tool. Instead of counting the

costs of learning provision in the simplest terms, L&D professionals need to sit down with purchasing managers and help them understand the real potential of effective e-learning design.

ROI can be measured in a multitude of ways. It usually isn't measured at all though, and so many see no value attributed to e-learning – and often for good reason whether you have measured it or not. We can measure changes in attitudes, skills and knowledge and easily apply these measures to e-learning beyond the compliance box being ticked and indicating that the learner has completed all modules in order to comply with statutory – or other requirements.

E-learning can be used as the medium and the driver for performance improvements to be modelled, transferred and installed to increase and improve the bottom-line. We suggest it is relatively easy by increasing operation efficiency and reducing failure rate in products. Often, it can be focused on increasing customer satisfaction and service delivery – this again ultimately affects the bottom line in a positive way. E-learning can instil very positive attitudes, as long as learning objectives are refined to focus on developing more than 'recall of knowledge' but actual shifts in behaviours, values and mindsets. Too much 'trivial many' concepts of the Pareto principle rather than the 'vital few' business activities. We all know that motivated, knowledgeable and perceptive employees increase their individual and team contribution, and this gives companies a competitive edge.

5. Currently what are your views on e-learning in bringing about change and performance improvement in organisations?

Treat e-learning as you would

any other Learning and Development intervention; as an investment. Work with designers who understand the difference between behaviourism – and cognitivism. Even constructivism is possible too with the right e-learning. But also understand that this shift away from learned responses requires the six stage change model we use to span the e-learning, and be the top and the tail and only then is it going to happen. E-learning can and will deliver.

More purchasers need to understand how people learn and how behaviour is shaped and can change through e-learning. They need to understand the learning process in terms of acquiring and recalling information, creating and practising new skills and integrating new behaviours and attitudes into their style of communication and management. Currently 'cost' appears to be the chief criterion behind buying behaviour.

6. What is your opinion on the biggest challenges for purchasers of e-learning?

It really is to do with suppliers of e-learning like us changing long established negative perceptions. I think that the purchasers of e-learning set out with the best of intentions only to find that those that are in charge of the purse strings simply see it as a way to spend less money. So learning and development can be three things – something you do to gain or retain competitive advantage or something you do because 'the staff' expect it or something you have to do to comply with standards etc. In the first case e-learning (for reasons we now understand and appreciate because of failing to define specific behaviours) failed to deliver so is used to a much lesser



Stage	Learner Perceptions & Behaviour
1. Pre-contemplation (not ready)	Not ready to start new behaviours and maybe unaware of their need to learn and change Encourage to think of the pro's of learning Learners become mindful of changing behaviour
2. Contemplation (getting ready)	Self realization and are aware of the advantages of learning and behaviour change More committed to learning Understand what potential they could realise
3. Preparation (ready)	Take committed steps to learn and improve Understand the need to be better prepared for learning and change Self liberated from past behaviours
4. Action	Strengthen their commitment to learn and change behaviours Develop behaviour that is 'self rewarding' and aligned to the new behaviours and learning Integrate helping relationships with others
5. Maintenance	Stabilising and seeking support from others for the learning to become the norm Engage in new behaviours and seek feedback from others Self reinforcement of new learning and behaviour

extent. In the second case e-learning is great in reducing the investment in a sunk-cost (something you spend for no perceivable return). So that is where it finds most favour for a lot of businesses who need to know that there is better to be had.

Those that see the value and need to improve company performance and those that spend the money have different approaches to and perspectives of e-learning.

The challenge therefore is changing perception. And those involved in e-learning need to help make that change.

7. What are your comments on the relative contribution of e-learning to effective change management?

Any learning intervention should set out to foster change. But change happens when we take the learner through our change model based on Prochaska's work and integrated with basic learning theory and Kubler Ross's Transition Curve

Designers of e-learning really should be practitioners in change management or work with those who do this daily. This is where true integration really bears fruit when the technical IT

specialists, the behavioural scientists and the learning and communication experts come together. E-learning designed around an old template that worked in a different context will not be applicable. Every e-learning intervention needs serious research to define outcomes, processes and methods of assessing learning. Technologists cannot achieve this by themselves and need input from behavioural scientists or change makers.

We have many views on the scope for improvement, in the design and delivery of e-learning. In terms of scope it is almost without limit.

We believe it is not only important but practically a pre-requisite to initiating behavioural change. It is critical and has not happened except in rare cases when enlightened teams have been able to make it happen.

The technical delivery of e-learning has become a huge industry to the point that it has overtaken the content of e-learning. This has imposed its own limitations and restraints but thankfully these systems (based on SCORM / AICC standards) are changing to the benefit of the learner and the instructional designer.

Summary and final thoughts

Generally speaking, we believe that e-learning has never really achieved the status it could be awarded as a serious model for change. We referred to the 'primary drivers' of change being totally dependent on a communications and learning strategy to achieve its objectives which we refer to as 'secondary enablers'. There is a lot of confusion about what e-learning can achieve, and its potential is nowhere near realisation in terms of equipping organisations and their people with the ability

to learn and practise new behaviours. We believe that the behavioural competencies and capabilities of e-learning are far superior to the 95% of projects which currently occupy its agenda in most enterprises.

We have highlighted the key issues for those who are purchasing e-learning and hopefully demonstrated the flexibility that e-learning can play in bringing about organisational change.

Perhaps as a last thought, e-learning should also be thought of as 'empowerment-learning' because that is what is really should be designed to achieve – to give individuals freedom of action to enjoy and seek new innovative learning experiences – rather than just logging into a standardised learning modules. E-learning is much more than a lowest cost provision for boring repetitive programmes – it really has the scope if designed and delivered with verve, to shape an organisation and individuals within it to achieve their true potential.

Current Thinking on e-learning solutions <http://www.philipatkinson.com/e-learning-solutions.htm> .

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