

e-Learning

Some Basics

THE FACT THAT E-LEARNING *can* be done cheaply does not always mean it *should* be done cheaply—or, in fact, always done at all. E-learning is a great approach when used thoughtfully and for the right reasons. But I've seen it used badly and seen costs cut to the point of rendering the final product useless. This chapter provides some basics about the uses of e-learning, its benefits, and the decision to move online. We'll also look at considerations when working on a shoestring budget, including the crucial issue of avoiding costly mistakes. Finally, we'll take a look at one of your biggest decisions: whether to buy your solution or build it yourself.

What Is e-Learning?

E-learning has many definitions and takes many forms. My definition—as someone working with very limited funds—is broader than most others. I think of it as anything designed to improve work performance delivered by

any electronic means. So my terms would regard e-learning as any training or performance support delivered with any mechanism provided by computer: on the web, through a CD or DVD, or by performance support tools, like checklists and descriptions of processes, available electronically. It can be a pre- or postclassroom activity involving online chat or e-mail discussion; it can be a blended event, in which cognitive information is offered online with an accompanying follow-up group workshop; it can be a relationship with a virtual mentor or community of practice. Basically, I think of e-learning as anything that solves a training or performance problem through the use of computer technologies.

Why Use e-Learning?

E-learning offers many advantages. It provides for just-in-time training; a new supervisor needing to hone her delegation skills needn't wait until the live class is offered again. It can save travel costs, because employees don't have to go to a remote site (which is inconvenient for them as well). It can reduce other costs associated with training, such as trainer salaries, classroom rentals, equipment purchases, and printing expenses. It can reduce the costs and inconvenience associated with having employees away from work. It can ensure consistency in delivery; everyone gets the same message every time. Finally, good e-learning gives the learner some control over when and where to take the program, in choosing when to take breaks (or not), and in deciding which elements of the training are relevant. Used appropriately, e-learning is not only "just-in-time" but also "just-for-me."

But e-learning, one way or another, *is* expensive. Even "free" approaches incur costs in terms of time and energy. When deciding whether e-learning is right for your organization, give some thought to the items in Table 1.1 and check off those that describe your situation. If more than half of them fit, an online training approach is appropriate.

TABLE 1.1. E-LEARNING OR CLASSROOM DECISION CRITERIA

Source: Terrell Perry, Coastal Training Technologies Corporation
(<http://coastal.com>). Used with permission.

Criterion	Describes My Situation
Organization seeks to reduce worker time spent away from work in training	
Organization/topic demands consistency in delivery	
Content is stable or can be changed in predictable, manageable amounts	
Content is largely cognitive or informational in nature	
Target audience is large or widely scattered	
Target audience has diverse skills or varied proficiency levels	
Target audience has wide-ranging learning styles	
Content is dangerous to perform or requires equipment that is costly to take out of service, scarce, or sensitive	
Qualified trainers are scarce or unavailable or hard to schedule	
Workers find it difficult to take time from work to attend training	

Moving from Classroom to Online

In thinking about using e-learning, consider the activities and approaches that typically make up the classroom experience:

- Lecture
- Lecture and PowerPoint shows
- Stories, anecdotes, and metaphors
- Asking and answering questions
- Videos
- Music
- Quizzes, tests, assessments, certifications, and feedback

- Case studies
- Role plays
- Group activities
- Self-disclosure exercises, in which learners share something about themselves
- Reflection activities, such as journal-writing, in which learners are asked to reflect on course material or personal experiences
- Having the learner demonstrate a skill
- Pre- and postwork
- Working with equipment, such as in a computer lab
- Readings
- Meetings outside class

All of these things can be done online, most as well as, and some better than, in the classroom. Throughout this book, we'll look at low-cost ways of replicating many of these activities and examine some new ones as well.

Some New Ways of Thinking

This book assumes that you have some experience with classroom training and workplace learning. You already know the basics of engaging an audience, creating interesting activities, and gearing instruction toward desired outcomes. You know how to develop a lesson plan, choose visuals, and facilitate group interactions. And you know a lot about your learners: their reading levels, their work schedules, and their general attitude toward training. As you prepare to move toward e-learning, particularly if you're working on a shoestring budget, it's important to develop manageable expectations and anticipate some adjustments to your knowledge base.

For one thing, you will need to be realistic about the size of your e-learning initiative. If you are a small, or poor, or one-person training shop, your first move into e-learning may be as simple as just putting a manual online.

Then you might add a homemade PowerPoint show, gradually develop a roster of courses, and eventually find the need to look seriously at a robust learning management system (LMS).

You may also discover that in some cases, it makes more sense to blend your e-learning programs by combining online materials with classroom activities. Many e-learning programs use the web to supply learners with pre- or postclassroom work, with supplemental case studies, or with manuals, forms, and other documents that are cumbersome to copy, bind, and hand out. Time in the classroom can then be spent on action learning activities such as role plays and hands-on practice rather than on lecture or presentation of material.

Another adjustment for those experienced with classroom training is the idea of size or length of training programs. Effective e-learning typically consists of small chunks or nuggets of information and instruction. Online, there are no three-full-day courses: as a rule of thumb, fifteen to twenty-five minutes of asynchronous training (with the learner working alone at a computer) at a stretch is about all a learner can remain alert for. Although this may present a change for you, learning to chunk information brings a big advantage for those working with limited funds: small pieces of instruction are much easier to create, reuse, recycle, and repurpose, which can help enormously in saving costs.

Although much of your classroom experience will transfer to the online training environment, the move to e-learning will require you to develop some new skills. Do-it-yourself approaches may require developing knowledge of web design or instructional planning. Buying solutions and negotiating for deals will demand that you educate yourself about products and technologies. I hope you see this as a challenging opportunity and find it an enjoyable and satisfying way to stretch and grow. There is a bonus to this as well: learning some tech talk will go a long way toward helping you build a relationship with your information technology (IT) or other computer support staff or outside designers and developers. You'll have a better understanding of what you're asking them to do—like whether it's a five-minute or five-day task—and you'll be better able to articulate what you want. Perhaps

they, in turn, will be willing to learn a little more about training delivery and instructional design.

Finally, realize that while good e-learning solutions can be had on limited resources, there are going to be some trade-offs. Doing things cheaply sometimes means they won't be elegant. Although you don't want to end up with shoddy or poorly designed work, neither will you always be able to obtain top-of-the-line animation or custom multimedia. I'm not suggesting that you should launch amateurish programs, but if I were a learner with the choice between playing a homemade PowerPoint game or driving three hours to sit in a classroom and be presented with the same material, I'd take the PowerPoint game. You will need to make some decisions about acceptable quality and must-have versus nice-to-have features and capabilities. Keep in mind that many expensive e-learning products come with lots of glitter, bells, and whistles but nevertheless fail in their intent to teach. Whatever resources you do have, try to invest them in the things that matter. Though it's true that learners can be seduced by pretty pages and gimmicky animations, I'd argue they care more about a quality learning experience—and feeling that their time was used well—than in using a flashy, expensive product that wasted their time.

Avoiding Costly Mistakes

As you work to develop e-learning solutions, it's important to act carefully and thoughtfully. If it's any consolation, the fact that you have limited resources may actually work in your favor. Having little money can save you from the expensive e-learning missteps some organizations have made:

- The large government entity that estimated first-year use at 30,000 and purchased licenses accordingly. Actual first-year use: 2,000.
- The agency that bought a product unaware that running it would require the purchase of another product.
- The school that bought an authoring program so complex that no one could ever figure it out.
- The training unit that purchased an LMS that didn't fit with any of the organization's other data systems.

- The midwestern state government system with such poor internal communication that at one point, forty different agencies had negotiated forty different contracts—with the same e-learning vendor.
- The organization that spent half its e-learning budget on expensive game creation software: only one person can run it, and employees are already bored with the games.

This book is meant to help you leverage your resources, avoid expensive mistakes, and craft or purchase your own good solutions without breaking your bank. Take your time and think through what you really want to accomplish. Also, seek out other resources and experts to help you learn about e-learning. The more educated you are as a consumer, the less likely you'll fall into one of the traps listed above.

The Case of the Early Adopter

In the early 1960s, Emmett Rogers (1995) introduced his theory of diffusion of innovations, outlining the ways in which people tend to adopt technology. A handful of us are what Rogers calls “early adopters.” You probably know the type: they buy the new gadget or product the day it's introduced, when it's huge and complicated, with many bugs still needing to be worked out. Of course, the world needs early adopters; without them, no new piece of technology would ever get off the ground. But it helps to have less-early adopter types around to temper things.

A training colleague, formerly a middle school teacher, tells this story. In the late 1970s, the school's principal returned from a conference enamored of a new technology he called the “VRC.” (That is not a typo. He thought it was “VRC,” not “VCR.”) At the next faculty meeting, the principal announced that the VRC was the “wave of the future” that would “change classroom instruction forever.” He then said he'd spent more than half of the next year's budget on beta-format video cameras and other equipment. His plan was to tape his teachers delivering their “best lessons” (fractions, geography, and so forth), which middle school students would then be eager to watch at their leisure.

The result: unwatched videos, wasted time, and the loss of half the annual budget.

Using e-Learning: Buy Off-the-Shelf or Build It Yourself?

Once you've decided that e-learning is right for your situation, you have a big decision to make: Will you build a custom solution, or will you buy a ready-made off-the-shelf (OTS) product? And if you decide you need a custom solution, will you build it yourself or hire an outside contractor to do the work? Although those with scarce resources say hiring a contractor or purchasing an OTS product is out of the question, assess the real cost of doing the work yourself: your time and salary, including whether you'll have to learn a new piece of software from scratch. Consider too the time and salary of coworkers who may need to be involved. If there's any chance at all of finding money, you may want to try to make a case for outsourcing the development or purchasing an OTS program.

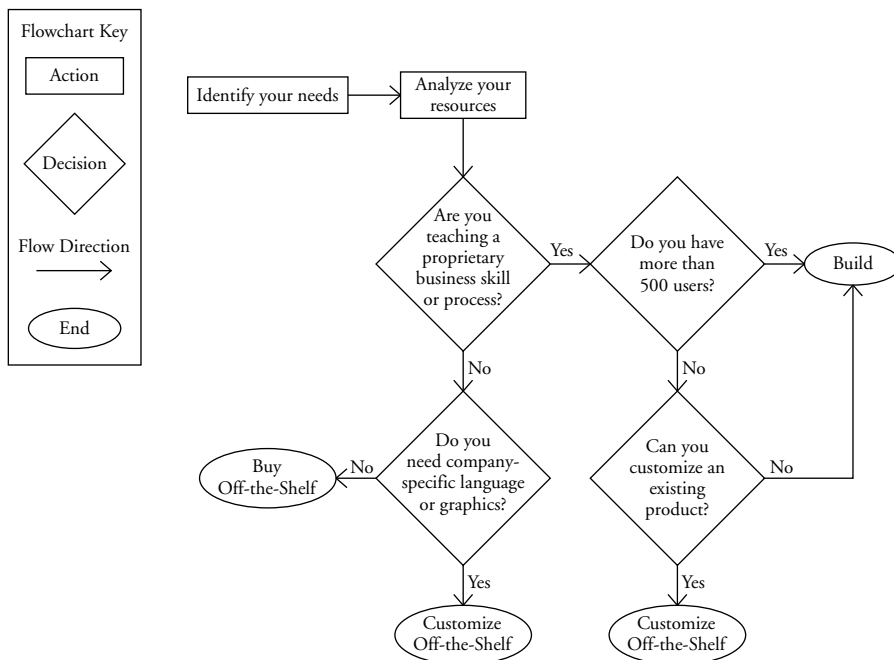
In making this decision, consider how many people will use the product. It doesn't make sense to spend two hundred person-hours creating an online program that will be used by only fifteen people. Unless the information is proprietary and absolutely requires company-specific language or graphics *and* will be used by more than five hundred learners, then using an off-the-shelf product will likely be your truly less expensive choice. Figure 1.1 presents a flowchart of the buy-versus-build decision.

You'll notice that an alternative to buying an OTS product outright is customizing one. This can be done not only by the vendor reworking the product (an expensive proposition) but also through providing your own introductory, supplementary, or concluding content. Think of this as adding on to, rather than renovating, the OTS program. We'll look at this further in Chapter Ten with an example of a how a simple clarifying "welcome" page made it possible to use a great off-the-shelf product at minimal cost.

Another option is that it's possible to obtain an OTS solution entirely for **free**. For instance, there are dozens of free web tutorials on common computer applications, such as adding narration to PowerPoint or creating spreadsheets in Excel. One of these may very well solve your problem. (There may

FIGURE 1.1. BUY-VERSUS-BUILD FLOWCHART

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even be a more local solution for you. Many people don't realize that Windows XP installs with built-in animated, narrated tutorials for many of the functions of Microsoft Office products.) You may need to do some homework first—the tutorials vary widely in quality—but searching the web for “Excel spreadsheet tutorial” or “adding narration to MS PowerPoint” might give you a no-cost ready-made solution.

Another issue to consider is your vision. What do you want your e-learning program to look like next year? In two years? Do you want a few quick modules to cover your organization's mandatory topics, a single online orientation program for new employees, or a robust catalogue with a thousand courses? Factor these considerations into your buy-versus-build decision too.

Summary

Good e-learning has the potential to change the face of workplace performance improvement. Apart from the many cost savings are the opportunities to make training more accessible and useful to learners. Another plus is that once you've demonstrated some small successes with your thrifty approach to e-learning, your managers and budget staff might be more willing to start talking about money for additional projects. In Chapter Two, we'll look at getting started in building e-learning solutions by taking stock of the assets you already have.