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Myths and Warning Signs

Learning is a much more complicated phenomenon than can ever be limited to a classroom. In organizational learning efforts, the confusion of learning and training is fatal.

—Peter Senge¹

Training has a significant role to play in any successful business. Organizations need highly skilled employees and great skill-building programs. Faced with the ongoing challenges of constant change and an insatiable need for knowledge, organizations have embraced technology-enabled learning as a way to keep up. But sometimes the implementation of learning technology becomes the objective rather than the means to a valued end. There is no question that learning technology is getting better and that it can support successful, sustainable learning. But the perfect use of technology to deliver bad or unnecessary training, or training that's offered to the wrong people at the wrong time, is worthless for the most part. E-learning is indeed a revolution in the way people learn and improve their performance. But like most other things, overindulgence (or, more often, misapplication) seems like the right thing at the time, but afterward, you wonder what the point was, or whether you should do it again.

This chapter is about where e-learning is and where it is going. Once the hype of the e-learning craze has gone, what's left? What's myth and what's real? How can another binge be avoided? What's worth keeping, and what needs to change? It is

a wakeup call for e-learning zealots and Luddites alike as the field embarks on new paths.

Overpromised and Underdelivered

The future of learning technology is full of promise, but charting its trajectory is not easy, as can be seen from its shaky past. Although computer-based training (CBT) has been around in various forms for more than thirty years, until recently, most business and training leaders considered it marginal or were not quite sure how to best take advantage of it.

In the past, training organizations dabbled with CBT, putting out an occasional course that promised to revolutionize organizational learning, only to find that poor design and a lack of workstation standards and network connectivity hampered the program's effectiveness. Furthermore, course content required continuous updating, and development cycles were long. It's no wonder that classroom training continued to dominate the learning landscape. Then the Internet was born, and the common Web browser platform began to mitigate technology challenges. Because programs could be updated instantly, online training could keep up with the pace of change, or so it seemed.

The Hype

With the advent of the Internet and the "e-enablement" of many business operations, such as customer care, sales support, e-commerce, supply chain management, and customer relationship management, investment and enthusiasm in e-learning exploded. Like every other industry in the Internet economy, e-learning company valuations went through the roof. The hype was on, fueled by industry experts whose books, speeches, and company Web sites proclaimed the revolution to be in full swing. There was nothing e-learning could not do. Consider this single well-meaning comment by Cisco Systems' CEO, John Chambers. Of all the pronouncements about

the e-learning revolution, Chambers's remark was one of the most quoted and perhaps the most famous: "The biggest growth in the Internet, and the area that will prove to be one of the biggest agents of change, will be in e-learning."

The same organizations that once touted their classroom offerings now wanted to put much of it online. Training organizations were eager to do with online training what they had done with classroom training: become a one-stop shop for all training needs throughout the enterprise. Content was purchased by the bucketful, loaded onto servers, and made available to all. Some companies put all or part of their training operations in the hands of third-party service providers. Many organizations operated on the assumption that more training was always better than less. But many training organizations that "went online" continued to measure themselves the same way, advertise courses the same way, and use the same processes, skill sets, and organizational structures as they had for classroom training. They applied their old business model to the new "e" business. This was a mistake. In their study of the use of e-learning in higher education, Robert Zemsky and William Massy note, "The hard fact is that e-learning took off before people really knew how to use it."² At the end of the 1990s, this was also true within many corporations. And just as the irrational exuberance over e-learning was peaking, the Internet bubble collapsed.

The Fallout

In the rush to turn online education into a business, the roof caved in.

—New York Times, May 2, 2002

What a difference a few years make. The e-learning industry was hit as hard as any other by the Internet crash. Investment slowed

significantly and in many cases came to a screeching halt. Most critical, executives looked at their e-learning investments and wondered where the value was.

E-learning became marginalized in some organizations; the bills for the large investments that were made in the previous years were now coming due, and e-learning was seen as an expense that could no longer be afforded at anywhere near the current pace. When business value proved to be more elusive, it was harder to build the case for e-learning. Although a solid business case is certainly appropriate, getting a hearing and a favorable response became much more difficult, and many training organizations were ill prepared for the type of scrutiny they were now getting to their requests for funds, personnel, and even permission to move forward. Organizations were questioning not only the value of technology-based learning but also the value of training in general. Training looked increasing like an unnecessary cost. Layoffs increased, and whole training functions were outsourced.

In many cases, business managers at all levels either had differing views from each other or didn't completely understand what technology could do for learning. For example, a study of senior human resource (HR) managers noted that while most managers had ideas for learning solutions, they were not sure if their approach was correct; they had a weak or nonexistent strategy. As far as technology was concerned, most solutions addressed only part of their needs, and they didn't quite fit the most pressing issues. Complementing this lack of clear direction for learning technology was the fact that implementation was often in silos, different areas of the organization were doing different things, and budgetary constraints were significant and long-term.³

Of course, lots of companies have maintained their commitment to training in all forms. But in many organizations, there is no doubt that the overselling of learning technology, sometimes without a comprehensive strategy or clear vision, combined with new economic realities, has caused a lot of rethinking about learning.

From customer to analyst to investor, the consensus is that e-learning still has a few things of its own to learn.

—Information Week, May 13, 2002

Is the Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full?

For all the efforts of two generations of research and practice, the most recent data suggest that e-learning is still a small piece of the overall training pie. A 2004 *Training Magazine* survey reported that only about 17 percent of all training is delivered by computer (another 8 percent is delivered by an instructor via a “virtual” classroom), and as much as 70 percent of all training is delivered in the classroom (another 5 percent was allocated to “other”).⁴

In many cases when e-learning does get off the ground, it fails to deliver on expectations. Martin Sloman and Mark Van Buren reported that as much as 62 percent of all learning technologies fail to meet expectations. These researchers also cited a study by DDI (Development Dimensions International) that, after studying 139 companies in fifteen countries, found that 75 percent of the respondents rated the effectiveness of e-learning as less than five on a ten-point scale.⁵

Do these findings suggest failure or greatly diminished expectations, or is e-learning advancing out of the wisdom gained from past experience? Can training organizations alter their mission to more effectively employ e-learning even as e-learning continues to evolve? Is the glass half-empty or half-full?

Those suggesting the glass is half-empty argue that e-learning can never live up to its promise and that those associated with it are not to be taken seriously (or as seriously). They say that advocates of e-learning have squandered opportunities to demonstrate real value and have lost credibility. The half-empty contingent suggests that

training organizations are failing to get outside the classroom model in a serious way. They note that with lots of money already spent, it will be hard to get more and that a critical mass of funds and personnel will be almost impossible to bring together. Naysayers point out that the emphasis of technology over instructional design has so diminished the professional skill sets of practitioners within many organizations that those skills are no longer identifiable, and that too much time and effort is still being spent on “Webifying” classroom courses rather than redesigning learning to leverage the true interactive nature of the Web. Those who forecast the end of e-learning, as it is practiced today, say that layoffs, downsizing, outsourcing, and offshoring are not just a short-term reality but represent a significant and permanent shift in how organizations will run training. Their perspective is that e-learning has not demonstrated that it is consistently better than classroom instruction from a learning perspective, so why bother?⁶ This points to a not-so-promising future, where past disappointment about e-learning will make it harder for people to accept the next iteration.

Everything looks like a failure in the middle.

—Rosabeth Moss Kanter⁷

For their part, proponents of a glass half-full suggest that e-learning is embarking on a new phase or journey that will be both different and more valuable. They suggest that there are real success stories that need to be found and used to reeducate key constituencies about the power of e-learning. Furthermore, they note some positive trends. The increasingly competitive and information-rich marketplace has finally gotten the attention of executives around the power of the knowledge-centric workplace, new technologies promise greater abilities to do it right, with better integration and lower redundancy, and customer e-learning, as an adjunct of successful e-commerce initiatives already in place, presents a huge

opportunity for all forms of e-learning. They argue that a poor economy (global, national, or industry specific) is not a time to cut back; rather, it is an opportunity to retool, relearn, and start fresh. They point to a revitalized training and e-learning industry that is trying to respond with new ideas and better, easier-to-use products, a hopeful sign. Although learning effectiveness from e-learning is often only as good as classroom training, this is not a reason to abandon it, say e-learning proponents. E-learning is significantly more efficient, accessible, and updatable, which provides a positive business rationale. And in some situations, e-learning techniques can do better, especially when live training is too risky, complex, time-consuming, or expensive to be done with the necessary authenticity to be effective. Finally, those in e-learning's corner say that the e-learning hype, and subsequent disappointment, has caused everyone to take it all more seriously, carefully, and thoughtfully. The field has sobered up.

Now that we've cleared out the riff-raff, we can get down to building the future.

—John Perry Barlow, originator of the term cyberspace
and former lyricist for the Grateful Dead⁸

While the downside indicators are all too real, the upside potential of e-learning is tremendous. Business research firm IDC sees corporate training, including business skills and information technology training, rebounding from the downturn, with a robust expansion going forward. And e-learning will be a significant part of the recovery, IDC notes, with “increased use of the Internet as a training creation, delivery, and management tool; increased familiarity by U.S. workers with collaborative technologies, which will drive demand for synchronous content and shared learning technologies; and new technologies and services that foster e-learning implementation, richness of content, and other improvements.”⁹

The glass is indeed half full, but it's a different glass than the industry drank from in the past.

The Myths of E-Learning

myth (n): a notion based more on tradition or convenience than on fact.

—American Heritage Dictionary

The overhyped promise of e-learning was in part fueled by nine myths:¹⁰

1. Everyone understands what e-learning is.
2. E-learning is easy.
3. E-learning technology equals e-learning strategy.
4. Success is getting e-learning to work.
5. E-learning will eliminate the classroom.
6. Only certain content can be taught online.
7. E-learning's value proposition is based on lowering the cost of training delivery.
8. If you build it, they will come.
9. The learners are the ones who really count.

Buying into these myths has led individuals, organizations, and entire industries to make decisions based on beliefs about the ease and acceptance of e-learning that are, at times, naive. But the myths are not historical in nature; they continue to influence e-learning strategy and decision making. Understanding and getting past them is the first step toward moving forward to a more sanguine, successful, and durable strategy.

Everyone Understands What E-Learning Is

There continues to be significant confusion about the term *e-learning*, as with a host of other terms, like *online training*, *Web-based training*, and even older terms such as *computer-based training*. This is complicated by differentiations between *asynchronous*, or completely self-contained e-learning, and *synchronous*, or virtual, leader-led e-learning (sometimes referred to as a “virtual classroom”). Adding in new fields and technologies makes defining *e-learning* more complex. Even the word *learning* attached to the expression is a source of confusion. Without agreed-on definitions and a common framework for thinking and talking about e-learning, confusion reigns.

Sometimes a change of name is significant—and sometimes it’s not. To many practitioners, e-learning equals e-training. To them, e-learning is simply courseware online or e-training. The paradigm that e-learning equals e-training keeps the field moving down a path that’s much narrower than it should be. Even the continued confusion between training (the means) and learning (the ends) lingers in the professional collective psyche.

E-Learning Is Easy

Wish it were so, but in fact, it is hard work. Better tools do not equate to better skills. Building and deploying great e-learning that is both effective and efficient takes real effort, discipline, and experience in fields such as instructional design, information design, communications, psychology, project management, and psychometrics, not to mention a healthy consideration of needs assessment and evaluation. Think about word processing; the tools are getting easier all the time, but that doesn’t mean everyone can write the next Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.

The general assumption is that technology is the hard part and that most of the work and investment goes into getting the technology right. This is partially true. New technologies are often fraught

with bugs, cost overruns, and a more significant learning curve than expected. And if you're not careful, technology issues can be all-consuming. But getting the technology right is nothing compared with getting the learning right. As the saying goes, "The delivery truck may be important, but it's what's in the truck that really matters."

E-Learning Technology Equals E-Learning Strategy

One of the biggest mistakes organizations make is leading with technology before a strategy is established. Too much money is spent too soon, resulting in disappointment and resistance to investing more when the proper time for the investment arrives. This isn't just an e-learning myth; organizations have often invested too much in new technology before they really knew what they were going to do with it or what its value really was. This is not to say that learning technology is unimportant—far from it. But you can't select the right learning management system, authoring tool, or any other part of your e-learning infrastructure before you have a comprehensive learning strategy (not just an e-learning strategy) that positions the technology appropriately.

Success Is Getting E-Learning to Work

In this context, what does "getting *it* to work" mean? For too many, it means getting the technology to work. This leads to a false sense of security that once e-learning is "out there," you've accomplished your mission. But from a value standpoint, deploying e-learning is meaningless. It's what's done with e-learning that matters. True success for e-learning is in how well it strengthens performance and the business. And that takes careful measurement and a long-term view—a learning and performance strategy.

If you agree that just getting it to work is not an adequate success criterion, you might believe that having a large online catalogue of courseware is. Having fifty, one hundred, or even five hundred courses online, or having 10 percent, 50 percent, or as much as 90 percent

of all training online certainly defines quantity, but it doesn't define value. A library of courses, large or small, is of little use by itself. Real success is what impact these courses have on the organization. How targeted are they toward business needs? What performance outcomes are you expecting? These are the types of questions you must answer when defining success.

E-Learning Will Eliminate the Classroom

In order to get approval for the money and resources to see e-learning deployed, many organizations promised dramatic reductions in classroom-based offerings, even to the point of agreeing to get rid of the classroom option altogether. But it hasn't turned out this way, and promising to eliminate the classroom is a promise that cannot and should not be kept. Classroom-based face-to-face training continues to have an important role, albeit a somewhat changed one. One way the classroom may change, for example, is by moving from a heavy emphasis on disseminating facts to providing an environment where collaborative teams can discover, invent, or otherwise solve complex problems. Those who believe e-learning will kill the classroom are as misguided as those who believe e-learning is a passing fad.

Only Certain Content Can Be Taught Online

This argument, often raised by sponsors as a reason not to support e-learning, is untrue. With the right instructional design approach, almost any type of knowledge or skill can be developed and delivered online, including so-called soft skills like leadership or critical thinking. Of course, some skills development may require reinforcement through other formats, such as classroom training, opportunities for practice, online tools and resources, or access to coaches and experts. If you think broadly enough about the possibilities e-learning affords, you will find a way to employ it successfully in almost any discipline.

E-Learning's Value Proposition Is Based on Lowering the Cost of Training Delivery

E-learning does lower the cost of training delivery. And while executives may appreciate any cost savings they can get, they will really appreciate the substantial benefits e-learning can generate in worker productivity, speed of learning deployment, and shortened times to competence. E-learning's real economic value is in the money it saves its clients by shortening the time it takes to improve worker skills and knowledge so they can be productive sooner.

If You Build It, They Will Come

In the movie *Field of Dreams*, Kevin Costner's character built a baseball diamond in the middle of an Iowa cornfield because he heard a voice telling him, "If you build it, he [his father] will come." Getting employees, or partners, or customers to rush toward e-learning just because it's there is wishful thinking. More likely, getting people to use and accept e-learning, especially over the long haul, will take work—in change management, communications, and leadership—and time.

Although it's true that users need help in getting comfortable with e-learning, if you communicate well and provide the help and encouragement they need, they will likely give it a try. The biggest roadblocks often come from executive sponsors and other senior stakeholders. Some are quick to provide support in words only, but when it comes time to pay for it, they're nowhere to be found. Others create nearly impossible hoops for you to jump through before they will support e-learning, and sometimes, even when you meet all the requirements, support really isn't there. Although it can be difficult, finding executive sponsors who will truly commit resources, including people and money, and invest their personal time in your cause is a beautiful thing and an important criterion for successful e-learning.

The Learners Are the Ones Who Really Count

Sure they count, but a focus on learners to the exclusion of other constituencies reflects traditional training organization thinking at a time when the training function must be much more integrated into the business mainstream. If all you think about is whether learners learn, you are likely missing where the real value is: in the job performance and business impact. This means satisfying executive sponsors, frontline managers, partners, suppliers, customers, and others who may certainly appreciate that people learned, but really want to know what it all means for the organization, and for *them*.

Don't Call Them Learners!

Another myth to consider is that the people who take training or e-learning are “learners.” Of course, they are engaged in learning, and perhaps during that time, the term fits. And while everyone, by their very nature, is a learner and is constantly learning, referring to people who participate in training only as learners rather than who they really are—workers or employees (salespeople, engineers, accountants, technicians), managers or executives, customers or suppliers, or any other role that is a more accurate description of what these people really do—can be too simplistic and tends to encourage a perspective that often fails to get beyond traditional training thinking. This myth is more semantic in nature, and some might find it too picky. But thinking about e-learning in new ways has to start with existing paradigms that might be holding you back. Calling people what they really are is a good beginning, but if you must use a generic term, a better one might be *performer*. Although learning is both essential and at the core of what this book is about, this book will not refer to those in a learning mode as learners.

The problem with myths is that they are often assumed to be truths. The old adage, “garbage in, garbage out,” is more likely

“garbage in, gospel out.” In other words, people act on what they believe to be correct and are sometimes slow to recognize that the direction they are heading in may be the wrong one. When your actions are based on false assumptions or inappropriate practices, the negative impact of the decisions you make can be significant.

There is one thing that should be said loudly and clearly: trainers need to realize that things are going on that don't fit their assumptions, their own training backgrounds, and the way they typically have been doing their jobs.

—Peter Drucker¹¹

Warning Signs

Most organizations have e-learning strengths and weaknesses. E-learning strengths open doors of opportunity, innovation, and value. Weaknesses, if left unattended, can lead to waste and disillusionment. Knowing where you stand, and what to do about it, makes all the difference. If you're inside a business or a government agency, how do you know if your learning (and e-learning) initiatives are in jeopardy? From the perspective of an outside consultant or service provider, how do you know that your client is moving in the right direction? Look for these nine warning signs:

- 1. Technology without strategy.** Are you focusing on technology first and above all else? Are you implementing technology without close collaboration with your IT department? The tendency of many organizations is to overstate the role of technology as a component of a successful and sustainable e-learning strategy. Technology is important, but it is a terrible place to start and insufficient, by itself, to sustain a successful e-learning program over the long-term. And if you pursue a technological course of action that is incom-

patible with the capabilities of your organization's IT infrastructure, you may be headed for disaster if critical business operations are adversely affected.

2. Weak focus on business and performance requirements.

Are you in the training catalogue business? Trying to be all things to all people? The inability to directly link e-learning programs, or any other training program, to specific business and performance needs dramatically reduces your value in the eyes of your constituents and sponsors.

3. Minimal e-learning expertise. Is your e-learning program getting ahead of your e-learning capabilities? Insufficient skills in e-learning management, design, development, and deployment and an inability to leverage talent from other sources (such as other parts of your business, external partners and suppliers, academic institutions) can significantly slow your progress.

4. No attention to the unique attributes of e-learning design.

Do you see e-learning as simply an online manual, lecture, or slide presentation? Failure to apply specific techniques in instructional, informational, and software design to truly take advantage of the unique interactive capabilities of e-learning diminishes the quality and innovativeness of your efforts.

5. Weak assessment. Do you know whether people are actually learning? Do you know what they are learning? Can you determine if their on-the-job performance has changed? Too often, learning and performance assessment and other measures of quality are put on the back burner as everyone's energy is focused on other aspects of e-learning, such as technology issues and content presentation. This can leave you guessing about the real impact of your work.

6. No focus on informal, workplace learning. Are you limiting the role of e-learning to formal, online courses? Failure to extend the power of learning technology directly to the workplace and provide knowledge sharing, collaboration, and support to workers in the context of their jobs constrains your role to a much smaller sphere of influence than is necessary or desirable.

7. No governance. Are you unable to make collective decisions about e-learning strategy and operations? Failure to control redundancy and infighting across multiple training organizations, and no vehicle to represent the potential of e-learning to senior management, are two major contributions to inefficiency and waste.

8. Weak sponsorship. Do you get lots of positive words from the top but little action? Misidentification of leaders most likely to support e-learning over the long term or pursuing an e-learning strategy without solid executive support can leave you much more vulnerable when budgets are cut or priorities change.

9. Failure to manage change. Are you launching e-learning programs without getting people ready for this major change in how they'll learn? Embracing a new way to learn is not so easy for many people. Winning the support of employees so that they will willingly accept and ultimately prefer e-learning is a major challenge. Without a change management and communications plan, your e-learning initiative might just be a flash in the pan.

Additional details on these nine warning signs are provided in Appendix A.

Rethinking E-Learning at H-E-B Grocery

Organizations can defy the myths of e-learning and mitigate the warning signs. They can think creatively about how to use technology to enhance learning and performance. When they do, the rewards are there. But the result may not look like the e-learning they were familiar with. So companies, even those with little experience in e-learning, can succeed just by thinking a little differently. That's what H-E-B Grocery did.

San Antonio-based grocery company H-E-B operates hundreds of stores in Texas and Mexico. The privately held firm prides itself on the way its thousands of partners (its term for employees) serve customers, a point of differentiation for the business. This is espe-

cially important for frontline workers like checkers, who spend the most time with customers and in many cases are the only ones who speak directly to them.

H-E-B management noticed that the productivity of checkers fell if they couldn't identify produce items or took too long to look up the price of specific fruits and vegetables. When checkers have difficulty telling the difference between casabas and cantaloupes, for example, they have to take additional time to verify the right product in order to ring up the right price. In a business with razor-thin margins, even small delays or misidentifications can add up to significant monetary loss, not to mention slower checkout lines and frustrated customers. For checkers, produce is a moving target, as the assortment comes in and out of season all year long. For many years, H-E-B's solution to produce identification was traditional classroom training (for new checkers), manual produce identification tests (for existing checkers), and job aids.

Traditional E-Learning Is Not an Ideal Solution

Converting a classroom training event into an online course would seem a reasonable and flexible solution, but it was not. First, the specific performance problem—reducing produce identification errors—required the checker to differentiate among hundreds of products and then quickly look up the correct code. Any traditional online course would require lengthy recognition tests and undoubtedly many retests until mastery (accomplished through lots of memorization) was achieved. Then retraining would be needed as new products were added. There would likely be lots of training activity but little performance change.

At the time, H-E-B's infrastructure was not at the level it needed to be for complex e-learning solutions. The slow network speed would require too much wait time for lessons to download, and the information technology (IT) organization justifiably wasn't going to spend millions of dollars to upgrade the bandwidth just for checker training. So the company was faced with a dilemma: it needed to

solve the performance problem (accurate produce identification and pricing), but traditional training—classroom or online—was not going to work. An innovative solution was required.

A cross-functional team was assembled to create the solution. The result was the “Produce Challenge,” a program and a strategy to maintain knowledge and improve performance by creating a weekly online produce test with built-in content remediation and a little bit of business logic. The team recognized that the performance problem could be addressed only through an ongoing conversation with checkers about produce. In addition, the company could put some focus on new and current produce items in the stores, target individual weaknesses, and include a little bit fun and competition, all in a very short time.

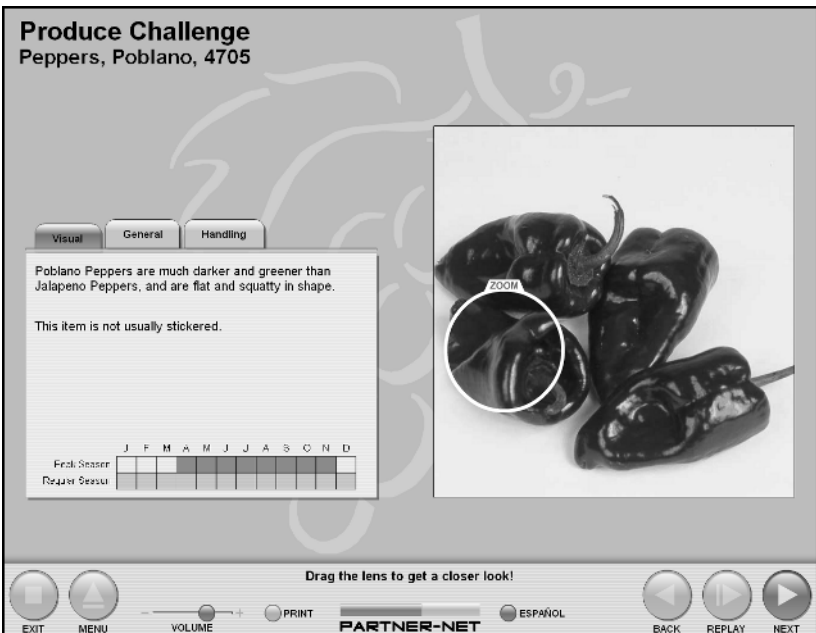
Bringing Learning Directly to the Workplace

The Produce Challenge is essentially a weekly two-minute drill consisting of ten questions from a pool of hundreds of items. It is designed to work within the existing infrastructure and bandwidth. Checkers might be presented with two images and be asked to select the correct one. For example, in Figure 1.1, the checker is being asked to identify a bell pepper. First, checkers select the right produce and then get a small nugget of instruction about it.

The clock is always running, and when time runs out, the checker gets a score that is compiled with his or her previous results in a database. Missed items are captured in the database and re-presented to individual checkers in subsequent weeks until they get them right. The program includes remediation for missed items, and the content is customized based on the store product mix.

There were more obstacles to overcome. Checkers didn’t have access to computers, and there was little room for e-learning workstations in the stores. The team compelled store leaders to use the computers on their desks for the Challenge. Levels of computer literacy were all over the place. Many checkers had little computer experience, so the design featured very simple mouse movements.

Figure 1.1 H-E-B Grocery's Produce Challenge



Source: H-E-B Grocery Company.

Results

From the partner perspective, the Produce Challenge was well received. More than 90 percent of H-E-B's checkers take the challenge every week. The amount of shrinkage (product loss) saved and productivity gained in the first year alone has more than paid for the program. J. R. Clark, a member of H-E-B's training organization, Partner Learning and Development, thinks this is partly because it was quick, easy to use, and a bit of fun (as with arcade games, everyone wants to make the top 10 list). The company also put a lot of promotion and measurement around it, not just when it launched but as a continuing element of the strategy, certainly a contributing factor.

Executive support has grown and deepened. The marketing vice president commented that he felt more comfortable increasing the product mix because he knew checkers would be more likely to ring produce correctly (thus generating better data and less shrinkage). Now, training supports a wider selection of products for consumers, which is consistent with H-E-B's customer-centric strategy. More "Challenge" programs are under way.

One challenge on the content design side was to let go of that conventional binders and classrooms approach. Designing training in two-minute repetitions instead of four-hour events required a mental shift. We never expected participation rates to be so high and sustainable. The culture has visibly shifted, and it sets us up to deliver more e-learning going forward.

—J. R. Clark, H-E-B Grocery

The lessons learned from H-E-B's Produce Challenge are several. An e-learning program does not always have to look or act like a course to succeed. The format of the Produce Challenge is part game and part test. Repeated, short-interval programs can be very

effective, with limited lost productivity. Each checker would have to take the Challenge every week for more than two years to equal the time off the job of the original four-hour classroom course. When there's a business problem to solve, predispositions about e-learning fade; what counts is whether it will work. Finally, the power of e-learning grows when it can be integrated with business intelligence—when the real world of business is fused into the way people do and learn their jobs.

Putting E-Learning in the Context of an Overall Training Strategy

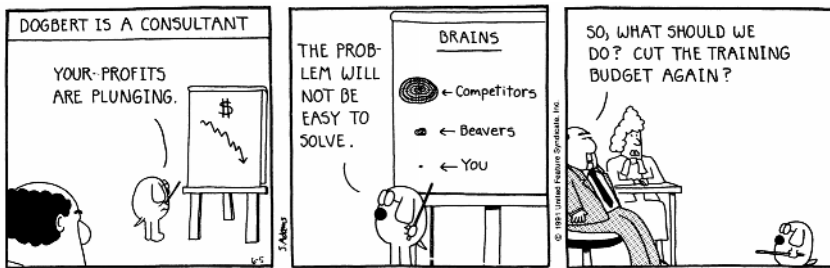
As the H-E-B story clearly shows, not all e-learning initiatives succumb to the myths and warning signs. E-learning can build confidence not just in e-learning but in training (and the training department as well). E-learning that solves business problems provides an opportunity for connections with upper management and fosters further innovation. But too often this is the exception rather than the rule.

Unfortunately, things here are not good. Our mistake was getting our corporate university recognized in the press as world class. Our executive management has felt for some time that they could not afford such a group.

—*Training professional who was subsequently laid off*

Companies often try to do too much with training, including e-learning, to solve problems the function is ill equipped to cope with, such as using training as the primary or only tool to change a culture. But does learning something new translate into a change in attitude or belief? Does diversity training *alone* create a more diverse company? Is sales training *alone* enough to improve the productivity of the sales force? Can customer care training *by itself* improve a call center representative's demeanor on the telephone?

Will simply adding e-learning to these questions fundamentally change the answers? Although training is often a part of achieving these and other business goals, it usually cannot accomplish them alone. Poor supervision, interpersonal rivalries and competition, a bad working environment, outdated tools and processes, unsatisfactory incentives and rewards, and unusable documentation are just some of the many other factors that block successful performance, achievement, and productivity. Training, whether in the classroom or online, is likely to be wasted, and ultimately lose its support, when it is delivered in an atmosphere where these issues are not considered, addressed, and incorporated into the solution.



DILBERT: © Scott Adams/Dist. by United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

How can the value and impact of e-learning be improved? Does e-learning represent a true revolution in training, or is it just one important step on a larger journey that will revolutionize how organizations think about and approach learning and performance improvement overall? The answer that is emerging, from past experience and from a more realistic view of the future, is that it is the latter: part of a fundamental transformation that is much bigger than training.

Notes

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In the Land of E-Learning Myths

A Knight's Tale

Lance Dublin

Myths began as invented stories that the ancient Greeks used to explain why things are, where things came from, who did something, and how human beings should be (that is, what human ideals and values are). Think of them as entertaining stories with a serious purpose. Although the word *myth* means “untrue” to some people, to others the word embodies a different kind of truth—one that expresses their deepest and truest values, fears and concerns, hopes, and beliefs.

Myths have been powerful forces for centuries. From ancient times right up to the present, they have been used as the basis for the most critical decisions, ranging from war to exploration to invention. They are powerful forces because they are larger than life—almost mystical, in fact. They hold the promise of wondrous accomplishments, great feats, and superpowers beyond imagination. People want to believe in myths: fire-breathing dragons to slay, wizards and sorcerers casting spells, superheroes leaping the tallest buildings in a single leap.

I am constantly amazed at the role myths play in the learning business today. Based on myths, I've seen careers made, strategies developed, vendors engaged, technologies installed, and monies spent. All too often these myths formed the basis for justifications and served to obfuscate the real issues at hand. Since myths by their very nature are not fact based, it becomes easy to fit the myth to the “truth” we want to believe, such as “all learners want e-learning.” It is hard to debunk a myth, be it that thunder comes from Thor's hammer or e-learning is “always better-faster-cheaper.” Myths seem to take on a life of their own, seeming to be true because they represent plausible explanations.

If we let our worldview and our decisions be governed by myths, we can be sure that we will be living more in the land of fantasy than that of reality. We will continue to find ourselves spending more time justifying and explaining than making things happen. We will continue to find ourselves with a false sense of certainty as we become ever more convinced that the myth is in fact true or even *the* truth. This is a slippery slope, and we will soon find ourselves unable to change our perceptions and see clearly, unable to distinguish fact from fiction and myth from reality. And we will never reach the pot of gold at the end of the e-learning rainbow. (Or is that just a myth as well?)

I am frustrated by the power and long life that so many of the e-learning myths seem to have. No matter what the data show, the myths continue. It's as if we are afraid to challenge a myth because it would cast doubt on our very purpose and the very existence of a whole industry. So we end up making excuses and creating explanations to prove that the myth is true.

I have been in situations where people have held on to a position based on their belief in the myth even when confronted with hard data. "If you build it, they will come . . . and be happy" is a great example. The data show that learners don't flock to e-learning courses because they are online. Nor are they always happy with whatever they can find. Nor do they even always want a course, "e" or instructor led.

In fact, the data show that people in business settings want just-enough, just-in-time answers to questions and solutions to problems rather than abstract concepts and knowledge checks, no matter how good the Flash animation. They register for online courses, search the table of contents to find just what they want, work through that module, and then log off to go apply what they've just learned. The learning management system records this as a failure, a dropout, when in fact they got just what they wanted just when they needed it.

But this myth about e-learning prevails, and hours are spent trying to figure out the cause of this "failure." Was it the wrong content,

bad instructional design, or not enough interactivity? Was there not enough simulation, or too much entertainment and not enough application? Seldom do I find anyone challenging the myth itself.

Maybe businesspeople just want to use a search engine to find the right content! Maybe they value speed over entertainment. Maybe they value simplicity over animation for animation's sake. The reality may well be that in today's world, e-learning should really be learning to the power of "e."

Ah, but were not all e-learning myths actually true and the world really full of fire-breathing dragons and damsels in distress. That would seemingly make my life much easier because debunking myths and finding truths are indeed the work of knights. And I could then engage the knights of the e-learning roundtable in this quest. But, alas, these knights do not exist, and I do not believe in these myths.

So I continue on my own quest to challenge e-learning myths whenever I hear of them and wherever I find them. For although I am not a knight, I know we'd all be better off replacing the wishful thinking of myths with some hard doses of reality.



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