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*Shares of companies that spend the most on employee
training and development outperform those that spend the least...*

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Getting the Organization to Adopt E-Learning: From Challenge to Action

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It shouldn't be surprising that e-learning has not yet been wholeheartedly adopted by corporate management, training departments, and end-users. Despite the increasing use of the Internet, many employees can't imagine learning at a computer and are reluctant to try. Others worry about security and privacy.

An article in *Information Week* cited a typical example. Air Canada decided to implement e-learning for maintenance workers. They discovered that some of these learners had not only never used a computer but also had never even seen a computer mouse. Didn't know what it was. Another organization, the Office of the Clerk of the Superior Court in Maricopa County, Arizona decided to allow registration for *classroom* courses over the Internet. 30% of the registrants refused to go the website to register while another 20% printed out the registration form and mailed it!

Resistance to learning on a computer shouldn't be surprising. Our very first experiences with education, in nursery school or kindergarten, have always involved a teacher in a classroom. We sit at desks or in chairs and a teacher stands in front of the class...teaching. That approach has been consistent all through our schooling life, right through college. It's a style of education that humans have used since the Greeks.

It's perfectly understandable, then, that education or training in the corporate environment primarily relies upon the classroom to dispense information. The classroom approach makes most of us comfortable; it touches something very deep in our collective educational experiences. Even if we hate being in a classroom, it's familiar and not intimidating.

Many end-users find the change from classroom to desktop training disorienting. They feel reassured in the standard classroom environment and even enjoy going off-site for a day to take a course. Off-site training represents a welcome departure from the daily routine, especially if the training requires travel to a different location.

Jerry Cappel, who runs IT training for health care giant Humana, reported to me that the classroom offers students a comfortable haven for learners in which one can relax. “If you go to an instructor-led class,” he said, “the teacher owns half the energy in the room. But you must supply all the energy to participate in e-learning. Classroom training offers learners a change of pace, a change of environment. They now have someone else who is responsible for the day.”

Therefore, when companies decide to use e-learning tools not every manager and employee jumps on the bandwagon. Employees like taking courses from somebody who talks to them. It’s what they’ve always done and, as Jerry Cappel said, it makes them comfortable. To managers and supervisors, training means that employees leave the job, go someplace, take a class, and then come back and go to work. Neither group is accustomed to the idea that an employee can sit at his or her desk, not working but learning.

Even *Information Week*, a technology-based magazine, described e-learning as a dramatic culture shift, especially when users aren’t computer savvy. In addition, the publication pointed out that “e-learning can have a steep technology learning curve when products aren’t working together or when e-learning is perceived as a bandwidth problem.”

As a result, despite the enormous range of e-learning materials available, individual acceptance has not been as rapid or as broad-based as the learning industry might hope. A quick poll conducted by CIO Online revealed, in fact, that 84% of its readers had no e-learning initiative underway. Though CIO attributed this in part to a weak economy, it also commented that CIOs don’t understand e-learning’s potential. Most of the respondents attribute this lack of understanding to the problems that companies have making the cultural shift necessary.

Training Supports Business Strategy

Before we go into the nuts and bolts of how to manage the change inherent in e-learning and how to actually market e-learning to executives and employees, it is important to recognize that training is a critical tool in achieving the organization’s overall strategic goals. One way to accelerate the acceptance of e-learning is to identify those areas in the organization where training is specifically supporting business strategy—whether that is team building for productivity increases, creating more knowledgeable IT workers, accelerating new product rollouts throughout the organization and supply chain, or other objectives. When e-learning is clearly used to help achieve business objectives and the link is made clear, managers, executives and employees have a greater incentive to support the e-learning and take the courses. Business strategy alignment applies as much

to the training department as any other part of the company and is an important incentive to the adoption of training of all kinds.

Establishing a Plan

Obviously organizations wishing to commit to e-learning must address some of the fundamental issues surrounding shifting from a style of training that dates from the time of Socrates to a new way that results in a true shift in learning styles and delivery.

The benefits to making just such a change can be substantial. E-learning enables organizations to deliver training to people all over the world without bringing them to one location. It delivers just-in-time training for people when they need it. Courses delivered over the Internet or an Intranet save money by limiting time away from the job, lowering travel costs, and much more. There are many sound reasons to shift to this new style of education.

It became apparent early on that command and control will not do the job. Telling an employee to “Just Do It” often fails when the “It” is e-learning. Recognizing this reality, some people have said that training departments need to launch a basic marketing campaign to encourage both line managers and end-users to use these materials, once they’ve been purchased. Employing a combination of internal messages, small group gatherings, point of purchases displays, and so forth, training departments could, it would seem, “market” e-learning to learners.

That, however, has proven to be only part of the answer. First, trainers must deal with people’s fundamental resistance to change in the manner in which they engage in training and managers are part of the problem as well. Intellectually many managers accept the idea that training takes less time at the desktop than sending employees off to training. But they remain uncomfortable seeing these same employees learning at the desktop. Therefore, some managers feel less anxiety if an employee is out of the office for the day doing the training.

Organizations need to address these attitudes as part of an on-going marketing campaign to encourage people to actually take the courses.

Manage the Change

It’s important to carefully and thoughtfully manage the change from traditional classroom training to e-learning at the desktop. Once a company has shifted from one style of training to another, both managers and employees are ready for the change and willing to adopt.

Remember, first of all, that any communications effort will be addressing two sets of people – managers and employees. It’s important to talk to them in their own language

about the issues important to them. By doing so it's possible to present the change in a manner that illustrates the positive results for each audience.

Don't automatically assume that everyone fears and resists change. Changes are often positive rather than negative. For example, e-mail represents one of the biggest changes in people's lives in the last ten years and most people consider it a positive development. In fact, people only resist the changes that threaten them or that make no sense. Most people will eagerly adopt changes that make what they do easier, more rewarding, more enjoyable, or more secure.

Here are some specific actions to manage the change to e-learning.

- **Get managers on board first.**

A good way to do this is to have managers test the new courses themselves. Naturally, be sure to offer managers the best courses available.

Enlist the support of a high level executive who believes in the benefits of e-learning. Brandon Hall, an e-learning expert has followed this field since it began, has found that e-learning needs a "vocal, respected advocate."

Online Learning reported that Gord Haverluck at Ontario Power Generation in Pickering, Ontario, where he is project manager of computer-based training, recommends installing pilot projects in which key people take a sample course. "It reassures management," he says.

- **Foster consensus among managers.**

Start by helping the company devise a list of objectives for e-learning that everyone agrees upon. In addition, make sure that all the managers understand why the organization has decided to use e-learning tools and the associated benefits.

- **Assemble a team to foster support for the change in the company's training methods.**

Include representatives from both managers and employees from all the internal groups that will be affected. Team members who become believers will help spread the positive word about e-learning. That's why organizations should include people from every level and job description.

It's often helpful to have this group pilot the courses. That way the organization can get the group's feedback and make appropriate adjustments to the training materials before rolling them out.

- **Marketing Training to the Organization.**

Once an organization has prepared people properly for the transition to e-learning then it's appropriate to market the training to both managers and their employees. Trainers should undertake a campaign that resembles any marketing campaign.

Communication is critical. It provides the key to both changing people's perceptions about e-learning and, at a later date, their active participation in new training programs. Proper communication involves people in both the decision making and implementation processes. Be sure to involve the initial team in this communications effort. This is a brief list of key communication tools, which are amplified later in paper.

The messages should go to everyone and can include:

- ✓ Initial memos
- ✓ Newsletters with information about what's coming
- ✓ Press releases in the regular company newsletter about the change
- ✓ E-mail newsletters
- ✓ Posters and bulletin board announcements
- ✓ Small group gatherings such as coffees
- ✓ A large kickoff party that includes all those affected
- ✓ Videos playing in the company cafeteria or over an Intranet
- ✓ Live talks by senior management, group managers, or plant managers

Do **not** cease communication after the initial announcement is made.

A company launching a new e-learning initiative should make sure to keep everyone who is involved updated on the progress being made as well as on any necessary alterations that may be required in the implementation plan. Again, training departments can use memos, posters, lunch meetings, and bulletin boards towards that end.

Establish a realistic time line and realistic priorities.

It's important for companies to allow adequate time for the transition. It takes people a considerable amount of time to accept innovations or large changes. Therefore, roll the program out slowly. Start by piloting a few courses with the support team.

- **Reward successes**

When the group has achieved a critical milestone, the company should celebrate with all the employees involved in the training effort. Positive reinforcement encourages a continued effort. Recognition can take the form of prizes, bonuses, perks, or even parties. Don't forget that a reward can also just be a word of praise or encouragement.

While this suggestion is a no-brainer it's amazing how many organizations fail to properly recognize and reward employees when they make significant changes and improvements.

That said, in some instances it's important to make e-learning mandatory. Recently a Fortune 100 company decided to switch to a new e-mail system, in this case Microsoft Exchange in place of Lotus's cc:Mail system. The new system functions through Microsoft Outlook. Clearly, the company couldn't afford to have some people *not* take the training so they made it mandatory. The company simply didn't allow anyone who didn't take the training to get an e-mail account. Of course, it's much easier to implement technology-based training for the use of new technology than it is for soft skills training.

- **Show that e-learning works**

One of the advantages of e-learning is that, working in conjunction with learning management tools, it enables a company to track learner progress and subsequent results. LMS tools will quickly and concretely reveal your successes.

- **Conduct public demonstrations of the technology** so that anyone who wishes to participate will be able to do so.

When Oracle started an e-learning initiative, the company recruited its best instructors to actually create some of its initial online courses. Once those instructors saw the real benefits of e-learning, they spread the word to others.

Arrange a series of coffees or open houses at which people can try the technology and sample some of the courses. These events should include incentives to make sure there is solid participation. People won't take time out of busy schedules just to try out e-learning. Be creative here. Use small give aways that people really want – T-shirts are always popular – serve food, or even, if the company will allow it, beer or wine. That always gets a crowd.

Carrier Corporation, a manufacturer of heating and cooling systems, scheduled an open house around 6 weeks ahead of planned training on a new e-mail system. They set aside a two-hour block of time when people could stop in for coffee and doughnuts, learn more about the new computer application, and then find out more about the training itself. Carrier included a training provider at the open house who gave away small incentives such as a mouse pad to encourage people to participate in the upcoming training. The company also made sure to include an internal person at the same open house, registering and signing up people and coordinating the training.

- **Publicize the initiative through memos, letters, e-mail, posters, and other similar vehicles.**

Well before launching an e-learning initiative, begin a campaign that lets people know what is coming. In the campaign always remember to stress that old acronym: WIFM or what's in it for me. Stress the benefits of e-learning in any communications campaign. Those advantages will, of course, be different for managers and for employees. Managers will appreciate cost savings, less time away from work, documented compliance training, the ability to train a worldwide workforce, and other similar advantages. Employees will appreciate

the elimination of travel, the shorter time blocks required for training, and being able to work at their own pace.

- **Consider from whom people receive messages about e-learning.**

Just as with change management, it's important that the right person is sending the message. If, for example, the CEO in a worldwide organization with offices and plants everywhere proclaims his positive attitude towards e-learning, few will pay serious attention to that message. People – managers and their employees – pay attention to whomever they think has the most power over them. So, it's important to examine how the organization is structured and market by sending the right message out from the right people.

Ideally the message should come from the immediate supervisor of each individual learner. A person's manager has the kind of influence – and, yes, power – over them that can make a real difference in their participation. A manager can make the case for e-learning in a group meeting, in individual sessions, or during regular employee reviews.

Give the relevant managers a basic outline of the key benefits of the new program. Doing so not only helps ensure success but also allows all concerned to focus upon the real benefits of the new approach, and to give a consistent organization-wide message.

- **Selecting Best Content.**

Point employees toward the best content. When people are confronted with hundreds of courses, they become overwhelmed and tune out. The “build it and they will come” approach will not work.

One way to solve the dilemma of too many choices can come through systems that offer the ability to match needed individual skills with appropriate course modules. The result is a personalized curriculum for each employee. Or, managers can choose courses that meet the employees' career plans. In either case, it's important to give each employee direction.

Clark Aldrich, an analyst formerly with the Gartner Group, indicated that an employee's first exposure to e-learning is critical, so companies shouldn't take a chance by making end-users plough through a mountain of titles on their own. Instead companies should provide course recommendations that will lead to a positive first experience.

Jerry Cappel at Humana reinforced this through actual experience. He admitted that his organization has made the classic mistake by telling everybody there are several hundred titles available and allowing people to pick what they want. “We should have made sure that people select what absolutely works, guaranteeing their first experience is a good one and meets their needs,” he said.

- **Create an environment that facilitates e-learning**

If corporations want their employees to take training courses via computer, those organizations should make time available in an environment that's conducive to training.

The desktop may not be that spot. Jerry Cappel from Humana told me that, "If people are not away from their desk they will not be left alone. We know that and so we have made an appropriate accommodation. We set up workstations in one of our training rooms. There we have lab days."

If no training room is available organizations should try to find appropriate space in which to set up learning carrels – empty offices, unused storage areas, portions of a cafeteria.

If such an arrangement is simply not possible, then the training department or department manager needs to ensure that the learner can engage the training in an uninterrupted fashion at the desktop. Certainly the person's desk, cubicle, or office should be roped off in some way. One suggestion here is to use a variation of police tape. In this case it's emblazoned with admonitions that no one should enter because learning is taking place. Or, instead of the "crime tape," the department might put up a sign that says "Shhh. Learning in progress. Do not disturb."

In addition, the learner's calls and e-mail should be blocked for the time they are learning and other personnel, including their manager, should be informed. If they are using audio material, then learners should be provided with headphones.

Some organizations are tying e-learning to promotions and incentives. In some cases companies have tied employee rate of pay to the completion of particular courses and found that employees are willing to work at home to secure that pay raise.

- **Break courses into manageable segments**

Oracle's training department realized that e-learning courses were often dull and didn't keep users' attention. Chris Pirie, who manages curriculum development for the company, discovered that no one wanted to be online for an hour or two. As a result, Oracle broke the courses down into segments that learners could complete in ten to fifteen minutes. They also broke up the courses with demos, hands-on exercises, pre-recorded streaming video lectures, and quizzes.

One current technology – reusable learning objects – focuses on enabling this form of education. Companies using it have broken down courses into small pieces, which can then be reassembled in a variety of ways. In addition, these knowledge bits may provide a just-in-time piece of information that a learner needs at a specific time.

No matter how an organization delivers the information, it's important to do so in short pieces - none longer than 15 minutes.

- **Enable learners to interact easily with other students.**

Students often miss the social interaction that classroom training provides. In fact, people often learn as much from their peers as from the classroom instructor. Organizations should create collaborative groups to enable this kind of interaction electronically. Online courseware should certainly include the capability for chat rooms, listservs, or other devices that enable students to interact with each other and with a mentor or instructor. People always have questions, want further information, need elaboration on certain topics, or simply need to validate their own ideas. The lack of that kind of interaction turns people off to e-learning very quickly.

Students taking synchronous courses should be able to interact online, asking questions or making comments during the course. Many products exist that enable that kind of interaction. However, these learners should also be able to engage in follow-up activities through the same kinds of e-mail exchanges or listservs that students taking asynchronous courses have access to.

Blended Learning—the future rooted in the present

Many companies are finding that one of the best ways to introduce e-learning involves blended learning—a combination of training from leader-led classroom to video to elearning. A recent story in *Information Week* highlighted just such an example. Ford Motor Company's engineering department set an ambitious goal of providing 160 hours of training to 20,000 employees. One form of training alone was not going to get the job done. As a result, the company now offers seven courses on the Web, seven on CD-ROM, and five in the classroom. In addition, after each web or CD-ROM course, Ford requires students to attend a two- to four-hour classroom training session to review case studies.

Circuit City used a more mature technology – the VCR – to enable students to see live video in conjunction with web-based training. When employees reach a point in a course that calls for video, the students stop the course and watch that video on a VCR. It's a terrific solution to an on-going bandwidth problem that will not be resolved in the near future.

Others believe that, at least in this transitional period, learners should be given a choice of training styles. Just as some people adapt to using computers rather easily while others never overcome their anxieties, in similar fashion there will remain for some period of time people of all stripes who cannot, for one reason or another, learn on a computer. Some fear the technology, others don't have the discipline to actually work on the course, and some prefer the collegial atmosphere of a classroom with its real-time give and take.

Conduct an ROI study:

At this point an ability to prove a return on investment in the training area is considered important—some would say essential. We strongly recommend that at the beginning of the rollout you establish criteria by which you can judge ROI and track against that criteria throughout the rollout. In this way, not only have you aligned your training to the organization's business objectives (see page 2) but you have also demonstrated that training is an investment that shows a solid return.

Conclusion

It's clear that the entire corporate community stands on the precipice of major changes in the manner in which it delivers training. It's also abundantly clear that these changes are far more fundamental than the enthusiastic advocates of e-learning may be willing to admit. E-learning offers many advantages over the traditional classroom model that will enable it to succeed. However, e-learning will never completely replace classroom learning but will take a prominent place among the various training options.

The enormous changes that e-learning requires – changes that challenge literally thousands of years of teacher-student interaction – mean that organizations undertaking this shift should be prepared to help all employees with the transition. That implies both change management and marketing within the organization.

About Hawthorne Associates

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