CREATING YOUR E-LEARNING STRATEGY

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E-learning continues to grow at a tremendous rate. Brandon Hall, editor of *e-learning* magazine predicts that by the year 2003, half of all training may be online. E-learning companies are springing up everywhere. It seems as though you can't pick up a business or training magazine without seeing articles about the benefits or the problems that are a result of e-learning. The field is growing at an amazing rate and its standards have yet to be developed or even agreed upon. So how in the world does a training department go about implementing an e-learning program in an organization? One way is to develop a strategy for creating e-learning courses that can serve as a guide or road map as you are working your way through the chaos.

To create your e-learning strategy, you need to:

- Link e-learning goals with business goals
- Ensure support from top management
- Work with your IT Department to develop an understanding of your baseline technologies
- Work with your IT Department to establish standards for working together
- Create a plan to help your training department handle the change
- Determine e-learning specifications
- Determine how you will measure the results
- Prepare a rollout plan

LINK E-LEARNING GOALS WITH BUSINESS GOALS

Training efforts are frequently questioned—do they add value to the organization or are they simply a cost? These questions have resulted in a shift from training for training's sake to training for performance. Training professionals who want to be seen as providing value to an organization must create programs that are tied to business problems and opportunities, and these links must be understood and supported by management.

By linking the e-learning strategy to business strategy, you strengthen the training department's position in the organization and the perception of the value of the training that is provided. It is essential to link e-learning goals to business goals to ensure the ultimate success of the entire e-learning program.

In order to link the e-learning goals with business goals, you must first look at your business goals. It is probable that your organization is dealing with one or more of these pressures:

- Global employees
- Global competition
- Speed to market with new products
- An effort to implement cost savings
- The exponential rate of change in technology
- Demand for exemplary customer service
- Demand for high quality goods and services

Many of the advantages of e-learning offer support in alleviating these pressures. For example, there can be significant cost savings when implementing an e-learning program, especially when travel of trainees is involved. IT departments have already made the leap to e-learning, with many departments relying on courses that are available over the Internet to keep their employees up-to-speed with the rapid pace of changing technology.

E-learning courses are available at any time, for employees working different shifts, or on other sides of the globe.

It is important to keep in mind that e-learning is not an absolute solution. E-learning should be integrated into ongoing training programs and should be viewed as a supplement to face-to-face instruction. This is called blended learning.

ENSURE SUPPORT FROM TOP MANAGEMENT

Without support from top management, an e-learning program will probably not survive.

E-learning programs require significant resources for development and support and the cooperation of several departments within the organization. If the support from top management isn't there, it needs to be developed. Aligning your e-learning strategy with business goals can be an important first step in gaining support from top management.

Do your homework to ensure that the development of the e-learning program isn't sabotaged. Prepare a project plan that includes a budget and a schedule, as well as any unusual resource needs and the assumptions that were used to develop the plan

WORK WITH YOUR IT DEPARTMENT TO DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR BASELINE TECHNOLOGIES

There are two environments that you need to gather information about. One is the authoring environment, or the hardware and software that is required to create the e-learning course. Before selecting an authoring software, check with your IT department to make certain that it is consistent with company standards, such as programming language, and browsers and plug-ins that are supported. Other issues to consider include:

- Does the software accept the word processing and presentation software that your IT department supports?
- Does the software use a different graphics or database package than those that are currently supported in your organization?
- Will the purchase of this software require the upgrading of the computer systems that your training developers currently use?
- Will the purchase of this software require additional hardware, such as a zip drive or CD-ROM or a DVD drive?

The other environment is the delivery environment—the hardware and software that is needed to actually take an online course. Some of the issues to consider are:

- What are the minimum system requirements of the viewing equipment?
- What are the hardware and software platform requirements?
- What browsers will be used? Will there be multiple versions and which ones will be supported?
- Will any type of plug-ins be required, and if so, how will users obtain the plug-ins?

These are just some of the issues that you will need to make decisions about before you can move ahead with implementing an e-learning program.

WORK WITH YOUR IT DEPARTMENT TO ESTABLISH STANDARDS FOR WORKING TOGETHER

It is critical to include your IT department early in the development of an e-learning strategy. Often IT is not included until the actual implementation and this can lead to the failure of the e-learning program. You will need to partner with IT because your e-learning initiative may require:

- Software installation
- Server space
- Customization
- Application development
- Maintenance
- Ongoing support

- Legacy system interface
- Help Desk Services

The implementation of an e-learning program will require collaboration between the training department and the IT department. This collaboration will most likely be new to both departments, hence the need for establishing standards for working together. The standards should be established jointly, with both departments agreeing to expectations and roles. Many organizations already have well-staffed IT departments and contact centers to provide technical support for computers and software. However, those centers are not generally organized, staffed or trained to address the complex issues of e-Learning systems. The service level requirements for supporting users, and trainers should be outlined in detail to avoid complaints that the e-learning system "doesn't work," when it is actually a customer service issue. The *e-Learning Help Desk should be* equipped and trained to address issues that involve a wide array of hardware, internet and knowledge management software, and web delivery technologies. The end result for users will be increased system reliability, more course completions, and effective knowledge management.

CREATE A PLAN TO HELP YOUR TRAINING DEPARTMENT HANDLE THE CHANGE

When delivering e-learning courses, the locus of control shifts from the instructor to the learners. Training departments that are converting from instructor-led courses to interactive online courses will face the following issues:

- Level of effort. If the online course is truly a student-centered learning event, rather than a form of teaching media, it will take more time on the part of the trainer. There will be e-mail messages from students to answer on a regular basis and the course may need to be monitored in order to encourage all of the learners to participate.

- Role shift. The trainers will need to become comfortable making the shift from being the expert or the "sage on the stage" to facilitating the learning process or being the "guide on the side." Instead of relying on lectures, trainers will need to provide examples, demonstrations, and written materials.

- New techniques and instruction methods. A powerful instructional method is the asynchronous discussion. Asynchronous discussions between teachers and learners take place intermittently, not simultaneously, through links to HTML content or email, news, or discussion groups. Instructors need to provide insight, motivate learners, summarize discussions, keep the discussion on track, and coach learners.

- Evaluation tools. While many online courses include standard tests, these tests do not show if a participant has integrated the concepts and skills and is using this new knowledge on the job. If you require special projects

to show this level of learning or enhanced performance, your trainers will need to provide facilitator support during the project, and assessment and feedback when the project is complete.

DETERMINE E-LEARNING SPECIFICATIONS

If your organization does not currently maintain standards or guidelines for training materials and written documentation, this would be an excellent time to begin to establish those standards. Your guidelines should include:

- Style guidelines for headings, numbers, names, punctuation, and capitalization
- Corporate identity
- Graphics guidelines
- Screen designs
- Page layouts

In addition, you may want to consider these specifications for e-learning technologies in your organization:

- Quality or design requirements for new applications
- Maximum time that a web page takes to load
- Maximum graphic size per web page

DETERMINE HOW YOU WILL MEASURE THE RESULTS

Ask management what measurements they expect before you expend a lot of resources collecting evaluative data. Some management teams expect very little in terms of metrics. This may be especially true for management teams that value education and training, because they feel that what is important is providing training opportunities for employees and they are not as concerned about results. Be aware that this attitude can change with the addition of new members to the management team, changes in the financial position of the organization, or any number of other business factors, and be prepared to establish measurements very quickly.

If you decide to measure results, think about the current methods that you are using to measure training results. If you are currently using participant evaluations or standardized tests to measure training results, these methods are easily incorporated in e-learning programs. Some training departments measure the number of hours of training that each employee receives and report that metric to management. One of the problems with using such a metric is that when e-learning is introduced, the number of hours of training per employee is likely to go down. Unfortunately, that may lead some managers to believe that the training department can be streamlined, when in actuality trainers are spending more time per program than they did when the course was delivered using conventional methods.

Some companies, like Verizon, IBM, and Ernst and Young, are measuring performance, competencies, and intellectual capital. The tools that they are using include certification programs, portfolio assessments, and online job assessments by supervisors.

It is important to measure business results such as gains in productivity or the shortening of a learning curve. For example, perhaps after implementing an e-learning course, a production worker learns how to use a new piece of equipment in a week, compared to the month that it took using the previous method. The productivity gains that are a result should be measured and reported to management.

PREPARE A ROLLOUT PLAN

Choose carefully the courses that you will convert from traditional delivery methods to online delivery. The first courses must be successful, or the entire program may suffer. When selecting a course, consider these issues:

- Is the subject matter objective, or does it require judgment or subjectivity? Objective subject matter is a better candidate for e-learning.
- Have training materials been developed? If so, are those materials already divided into sections or chunks of information? Does it incorporate multimedia? These types of programs don't take as long to convert to e-learning.
- How quickly does the subject matter change? There is an advantage to using e-learning when the subject matter changes often because updates are quicker to implement.
- What size is the intended audience? Small audiences generally are not cost-effective.
- Does the intended audience have the necessary technical skills? One of the major hurdles in implementing an e-learning program is getting learners accustomed to technology if they are not already technically adept.

Start with a small number of courses and create a plan for integrating e-learning into your current training programs.

Marketing your e-learning program should also be a part of your rollout plan. Marketing includes introducing the e-learning program, promoting it, and maintaining and increasing usage over time. Some ways to accomplish the marketing of your e-learning program include:

- Integrating e-learning programs into new employee orientation programs
- Incorporating e-learning programs into employee development plans and performance improvement initiatives.

- Educating managers and supervisors about the program and how they can incorporate it in employee development and performance improvement.
- Using e-mail to promote e-learning and its benefits by promoting specific courses and providing information about the benefits of e-learning programs.
- Providing for recognition of employees who take e-learning courses.
- Evaluating your e-learning programs so that you can improve the areas that are weak.

There are many issues to consider when you begin thinking about creating an e-learning strategy. This article should help you start creating a strategy that is customized for your organization's needs.