

TOWARDS THE END of the last decade, e-learning was seen as the ‘darling’ of the training market. Companies were drawn to its low costs and apparent flexibility. Unfortunately, e-learning didn’t live up to its initial hype.

For many HR departments, e-learning didn’t lead to the cost saving and enhanced learning experience originally anticipated. Sometimes budgets for live training actually increased to compensate for the lack of quality in e-learning content.

Too often, e-learning was positioned as a niche learning delivery method, technical in application and most commonly used for specialist business areas, such as compliance training and production orientation, rather than professional skills development such as leadership and management.

So why this unfulfilled potential? The main reason was that the initial launch of e-learning almost exclusively focused on the technology. Too often, learner needs were forgotten, leading to a collection of diverse online modules cobbled together and lacking a framework reflecting where the learner was and where they wanted to go.

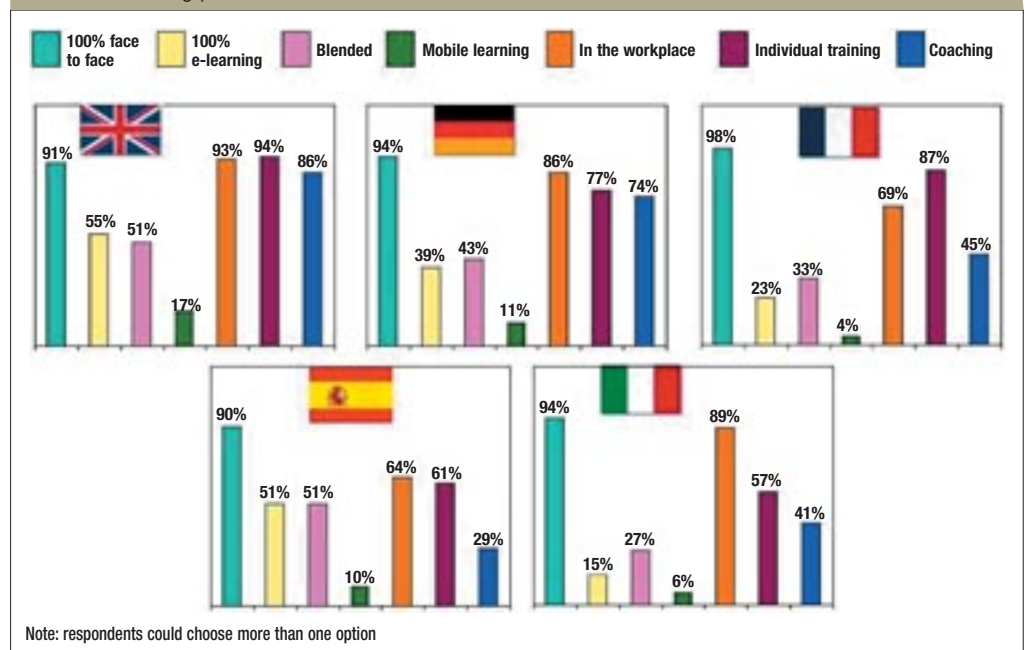
But times have now changed, with a renewed take-up of e-learning.

A 2008 survey of training practices across Europe, conducted by Cegos, found that more than half of all UK employees now take part in e-learning activities and blended learning courses – courses which combine a plethora of training techniques, including face-to-face learning, coaching by line managers, on-the-job training and online training modules (see Figure 1).

The results show that the UK is well ahead of countries like France and Germany in e-learning adoption. And individual company figures back this up. At BT, for example, over 70% of all training is now delivered electronically.

So what are the main reasons

FIGURE 1: Training practices used



E-learning passes the test

Gary Weinstein of Cegos tracks the ‘second coming’ of e-learning.

for this ‘second coming’ of e-learning?

One key driver is the current economic climate and the need to reduce costs, while at the same time ensuring that employees remain productive.

The economic downturn has provided a prime opportunity to re-evaluate training programmes and explore some of the more flexible and cost-efficient training tools on the market, such as e-learning.

There is a clear trend today for training activities that are condensed into bite-sized chunks and fit around day-to-day activities. E-learning suits these criteria with modules that are delivered on-demand to the employee’s desktop, mobile phone or BlackBerry.

Shorter courses are also good news for training budgets. The Cegos survey found that UK companies are currently training

more employees with smaller training budgets than their European counterparts – and much of this is down to their more technology-enabled blended and e-learning solutions.

The second driver is the growth in learner demands. The new generation of learners are more technology-savvy. They want to see training delivered through innovative and customised delivery channels rather than solely through the more staid, classroom environment.

And thirdly, there are the new technological developments that have brought e-learning firmly into the mainstream.

Rather than the initial experience of e-learning, which in many cases consisted of just issuing a handout online, the rise of Web 2.0, blogs, wikis, social networking sites and online

communities which transcend organisations has resulted in e-learning now operating in a very different environment from the 1990s.

A recent survey of members of the eLearning Guild found that 70% of respondents plan to apply more Web 2.0 technologies – what is described as Learning 2.0 – in the coming year. And the difference between this iteration of e-learning and previously, is that this time the learners are defining what the technology should be.

Sceptics, however, still remain and it is important to acknowledge this.

A 2008 survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) found that only 7% of 729 learning & development managers included e-learning among their top three most effective training practices.

Likewise, November 2008

research from IMC Learning found that only half of HR professionals have invested in learning management systems or rapid authoring tools in their organisation, despite more than three-quarters believing it is important to be able to produce inhouse training quickly and cost-effectively.

So how can e-learning become an integral part of companies' training strategies? How can it be more effectively implemented?

Top tips

First and foremost, e-learning must be learner-driven, with the trainee at the heart of all activities. The environment must be stimulating, with e-learning modules actively engaging the senses and rooted in real-life situations that participants can take back and implement in the workplace. In this way, there is better retention.

As the learning population becomes younger, with generation Y entering the workforce, there is also an incentive to introduce new technologies, such as gaming and mobile phone learning, into e-learning.

Games-based e-learning combines graphics, game play and training technologies to create a more interesting and competitive training experience. One of Cisco's e-learning games, for example, uses a Space Invaders scenario to teach network security, with players gathering firewalls, intrusion detection systems and anti-virus software to defend their planet from alien intruders.

But while new developments such as gaming, online quizzes and 3D simulation have a role to play, it is important that such interaction remains focused on the subject matter.

It is also vital that there is a flow to the e-learning. Every individual should know what path their learning is taking, where they are now and where they need to be at the end. E-learning should never drift.

Linked to this is the need to

provide the trainee with control and ensure learner engagement. Too often in the past, e-learning has been technology rather than people-led, with unsupported learners overwhelmed by both the technology and a lack of clear focus to their training.

So how can control be established? The learner must know what is expected of them when undergoing an e-learning module; and assessment and feedback mechanisms should be in place so that the user never feels alone.

E-learning programmes also need to be properly piloted with the end user.

To maintain the trainee's attention and focus, an e-learning module should last no more than 30 minutes, and have the learner interact and do something every 15-30 seconds. It must also back up all training activities with a series of steps, including a validation and summary stage.

Questionnaires which make the learner reflect on the training programme they have undergone can also be an important tool.

Another key prerequisite for e-learning to become part of a company's training strategy is that it should never be viewed in isolation – a mistake from its previous incarnation.

E-learning should be part of a broader learning strategy which includes other methods of delivery. The same CIPD survey which saw only 7% rating e-learning in their top three training strategies also found



Gary Weinstein

95% of organisations agreeing that e-learning is more effective when combined with other forms of learning.

Through a combination of self-assessment, face-to-face training and e-learning sessions, all parts of the learning path can link to one another, with e-learning often reinforcing the process of skills development acquired in the classroom and *vice versa*.

It is also important that e-learning remains flexible and can react to changing circumstances, particularly in today's uncertain economic environment.

No e-learning training strategy should be set in stone. It should have a balance between informal and formal; accommodate different employees' working environments (staff with home offices who spend most of their work days in the car, for example); have the ability to move seamlessly between live online learning and other blended learning activities; adopt different delivery mechanisms, from laptops to PDAs to iPods; and accommodate different learning styles.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Companies must investigate how e-learning modules can have an impact on different business functions – customer service, finance or sales, for example – and customise them accordingly.

As previously suggested, it is also important that e-learning should embrace professional skills development such as leadership and management, negotiation, and customer relationship management.

Industry is typically spending up to five times more on health & safety, quality, compliance and technical training than on professional skills, yet it is the professional skills which have a direct impact on every organisation's bottom line.

Management support and the ability to communicate is also instrumental to the success of an e-learning strategy.

Senior executives will need to support the plan fully and agree to milestones, costs, dates and deliverables and let employees know this.

It is also essential for e-learning's longevity that it can be measured effectively. Training as a function has matured, with almost half of UK corporates now measuring return on investment according to the Cegos survey.

ROI measures for e-learning need to be agreed at the outset, to ensure that the impact of training on the growth of the individual and the organisation can be tracked and evaluated successfully.

One way of doing this is to link e-learning into individual performance measurement systems within the organisation. Not only will this result in more robust measurement, but will also produce more personalised learning and support in career development.

But what of the technology?

Technological developments have played a crucial role in the delivery of personalised learning content and creating as close to a live interactive, senses-focused environment as possible.

The last few years have seen the introduction of ever more innovative modules and methods of delivery, as well as the continued growth of web-based platforms such as Web 2.0 alongside more traditional learning management systems.

The key difference from the 1990s, however, is that today's e-learning has a better focus and is operating within the right context. It is meeting market demands – from the need to ensure training remains competitive in the current economic climate, to the changing work environment and the growth in learner demands.

E-learning is finally starting to deliver.

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