

# Technology aiding better training

Most L&D professionals have adopted e-learning but there is a wealth of new technologies that can enhance learning delivery. **Eddie Kilkelly** examines the latest developments and explains why the technological revolution will achieve critical mass in a much shorter time than its predecessor

**T**he rapid pace of technological change in recent years has delivered an unparalleled opportunity for innovation in the learning market. However, L&D professionals may be bewildered about which application is best suited to their needs. Decision-making is made more difficult because these new solutions cannot offer the reassurance of a long, successful track record. Yet, just as some early adopters saw the potential of e-learning, now many L&D professionals are recognising that technology can be used in other ways to offer more flexibility to learners and potentially deliver better learning outcomes.

## **Uptake will be quick**

Use of these new solutions is likely to gain critical mass more rapidly than was the case with e-learning, for a number of reasons.

First, e-learning proved that learning is not just about the classroom experience, opening the door for other new technologies. Second, technology itself is now much more sophisticated and offers users a richer and more rewarding experience. Learners are using the Internet, social networks and mobile applications in their daily lives so they are more pre-disposed to trying new applications. Third is the increase in convenience afforded by these new applications; they can further enhance accessibility or usability in a way that benefits both the individual and the organisation.

When budgets are constrained and every organisation looks to increase its competitive advantage, there will be even greater pressure to fit learning around the daily work schedule – which is exactly what these new technologies can facilitate.

Perhaps most importantly, there has been a breakthrough in attitudes. Initially, e-learning was perceived as being outside traditional learning, leading to dedicated e-learning teams and a belief that organisations had to choose between online and offline learning. Now, e-learning is an essential learning tool that can be used alone or as an integral part of a blended learning programme. That same attitude is likely to be applied to new technologies.

So what options are available?

## **Opening the doors of the virtual classroom**

There is no doubt that the classroom still has an important role to play in organisational learning, particularly when it has to communicate complex subjects or behaviour change. However, many organisations need to cut costs – venue hire and travel costs associated with classroom training are prime candidates for cutbacks. Similarly, when workforces have been downsized and teams have to do more with fewer people, it can be difficult for line managers to justify time away from the office for training.

Virtual classrooms deliver the interactivity of the classroom without those costs, enabling learners to join a live video broadcast of the trainer presenting the learning content. Web conferencing functionality helps learners interact with the trainer and other learners much as they would in the classroom, and post-session interactive activities and quizzes reinforce what candidates have learned online. Then, immediately after the training, the learner can just get on with his normal working day.

The social aspect of attending classroom courses may also be replicated through



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technology, with online chat functionality or social networks and message boards made available to participants before, during and after the training. This can enable learners to network and develop real working relationships.

The exact format will depend upon whether the intervention was a public training course or a tailored in-house programme but, with the right tools, encouragement and management, learners can build up a community of practice through which they can develop relationships, share best practice and collaborate to solve problems on an ongoing basis.

Like any online learning, virtual classroom courses should be no more than an hour in length so, if the subject matter is detailed or

complex, it is essential that the learning can be broken down into concise, hour length modules.

Virtual classroom courses have a degree of complexity (organising many people to get access to the course at the same time from different geographic locations, potentially using different technology and connection speeds) and a technology cost that means they are not a cheap option. Therefore, they are most appropriate for public training courses or large organisations in which a number of learners have a similar need, so the cost of provision can be spread accordingly.

Initial offerings in this area have received highly positive feedback, indicating that these solutions could be very popular with learners.





### Learning on the job or on the move

Moving away from the traditional e-learning course, many organisations are finding it beneficial to embed nuggets of e-learning in the systems or on the internal networks that employees use every day. This just-in-time learning is perfect for refresher learning, for delivering hints and tips, or for addressing less complex, common or frequent learning needs.

For example, if the learner just needs advice on completing a task or filling in a form, or guidance on using a new system, embedded learning can deliver exactly the content the learner needs, at exactly the point in time when he needs it.

Similarly, employees are often more mobile than in previous generations – travelling between

customer and corporate sites, or different corporate offices. It can be difficult to schedule training for field sales or engineering staff or, indeed, for busy executives on the move. Mobile learning, iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad applications can be invaluable for these audiences as the learning content is not tied to the desk or a particular time.

The biggest constraint for these learning applications is optimising the content for the available screen size and device functionality. Some organisations have made tentative steps in this direction, without having the internal expertise to develop interactive or multimedia applications. For example, one government department publishes key course reading content to learners' mobile devices. It may not be aesthetically ground-breaking, but it fulfils a need in a cost-effective way, for an organisation whose employees are constantly moving between different offices right across the United Kingdom.

At the other end of the spectrum, vendors can develop mobile games that are centred around learning content, giving learners the chance to play alone or compete with colleagues via Bluetooth connections and compare their scores on online scoreboards. Pilot programmes indicate that healthy competition and learning in a fun way can have a significant impact on learning retention, particularly when the content is somewhat dry, and can help to build confidence in advance of examinations.

### Leveraging informal learning

It is said that 80 per cent of all learning is informal, so in the 1990s organisations tried to introduce formal knowledge management systems. However, formal systems can never truly capture the informal interactions that comprise the majority of informal learning.

Today, the rise of online social networking means that organisations have an opportunity to provide the technology that can help facilitate those informal interactions away from the water cooler and effectively capture critical knowledge on corporate systems.

Corporate message boards and social networking programmes can be implemented to bring employees together online, no matter where they are physically based, helping project teams or subject matter experts share knowledge, interact and collaborate across different offices, countries, organisations and time zones. Because the interaction is online, it can be searched, discovered and used by a different learner at a later date.

However, while such a strategy can be relatively cheap and easy to implement for any organisation, it must be managed carefully, with

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moderation rather than control of content and encouragement of key champions to drive usage among the target audience.

### Reducing interference

Greater opportunity to learn at the desktop is beneficial to the individual and the organisation, but care must be taken to avoid disruption to the learner and his colleagues.

Audio content can be channelled through high-quality headphones but, even then, some residual noise can sometimes be heard. Similarly, if the learning intervention allows the learner to ask questions or contribute to the session verbally, that may be a distraction for others sitting nearby who are not undertaking the same training.

Conversely, a busy, noisy office can be a difficult environment for the learner to follow and retain the learning.

### Analysis and management are key

These new technologies are enabling L&D professionals and learning vendors to make subjects

more accessible, interactive and engaging; they are helping learners connect with their instructors and colleagues in a way that has never before been possible. But it is essential they are used in an appropriate way.

The organisation will have constraints on time, resource and budget; the corporate culture will need to be taken into consideration, as will the objectives of the learning programme and the technological infrastructure. It is up to the L&D manager to analyse these needs and constraints, evaluate all the possible options and select the best way of delivering learning content to the right people at the right time, within a blended approach.

Tracking learning outcomes is essential for evaluating success – even informal learning can be measured by using activity on a corporate network as a proxy. So, in spite of the prevailing economic gloom and the spectre of future budget cuts, L&D professionals should be confident that technology can deliver a more exciting and rewarding future for learning. **TJ**

## Designing an outstanding e-learning programme

Successful e-learning puts people at the centre of the development process but other considerations are equally important:

- 1 Location** Where are your learners based? How far afield and in what environments may the learning be used? Will it be rolled out to international offices, to field or home-based employees, or used on public transport as employees travel between offices or meetings? Every different location will influence the way in which the learning needs to be designed and delivered.
- 2 Accessibility** Consider all of the ways in which people might get access to the learning. Apart from desktop PCs, this might include laptops, web tablets, mobile devices or iPods. Will learners need to get access to the e-learning in real time (for live learning) or outside normal office hours? Is the learning integrated into a system, or accessed via a corporate portal or Learning Management System? What wider accessibility issues need to be addressed for employees with visual or other impairments?
- 3 Equipment** What technology is available to learners? Design the programme accordingly – there is no point optimising learning for a platform like the iPod, if very few learners have that device.
- 4 Stakeholders** Outside the L&D team, who are the other appropriate parties who need to be brought into the planning, development and rollout process? For example, in-house IT professionals can provide essential advice in the early planning stages about whether the organisation's technological infrastructure can support your learning programme.
- 5 Price-point** How many learners do you need to train and what budget is available? Cut your cloth accordingly and make the best use of available, affordable resources. As corporate budgets are frozen or cut, it's even more essential for L&D professionals to budget wisely, monitor costs closely and measure learning programmes to ascertain the return on investment.
- 6 Culture** What is the prevailing organisational culture and what importance is placed on L&D? Build a learning programme that reflects the organisational constraints; if learners will be regularly interrupted at their desks, designate and equip a dedicated training room they can use instead.
- 7 Innovation** Learners' expectations have changed massively because they are becoming accustomed to using online games and social networks in their personal lives. This provides L&D professionals with a real opportunity to challenge the 'norm' as they need to become more creative to engage learners' attention. Could you develop a company TV channel? Push the envelope and don't stand still!

### Eddie Kilkelly

is chief operating officer for the ILX Group plc. He can be contacted via [www.ilxgroup.com](http://www.ilxgroup.com)