



LEARNING IN EXTREME CONDITIONS

As e-learning becomes more flexible and cost effective, can the increased demand be explained entirely in terms of economics? Eddie Kilkelly explains why technology enabled learning lends itself to harsh working environments and identifies invaluable lessons for all organisations.

For any company with dispersed operations, the fiscal benefits of delivering training via electronic media are easy to quantify. By negating the need to physically bring trainees together, the associated costs – travel, room hire, trainer fees, accommodation, loss of productivity due to time out of the office etc – are eliminated. But the story goes beyond cost savings.

Technology enabled learning solutions are developed by taking strategically aligned

course objectives and high quality course materials, and delivering them through the medium that best suits the target audience.

This can include, but is not limited to, video, virtual classrooms, interactive discussion boards, blogs, mobile learning and even gaming applications. Consequently this method of training is perfectly suited to large, dispersed organisations as it accommodates multiple trainees with a wide range of learning styles, preferences, and needs.

This principle applies to the harshest of environments. Lack of dedicated training rooms, limited computer access and unremitting shift patterns are just some factors that make on-demand training access an absolute business necessity.

Solutions such as e-learning empower employees to complete training at a time and location convenient to them, and to dip in and out of the course at any time – all without jeopardising the quality of their learning experience.

Such solutions allow large organisations to gain visibility – and control – of global training activities and to implement common systems and procedures. Organisations can assess individual training needs, regardless of the size of the work force, and address those specific needs with targeted training courses, regardless of geography, time zones or language. The online nature of the content also means that materials can be changed instantaneously to reflect changing regulations or market conditions.

LEARNING EVOLUTION

Yet as none of these benefits are particularly new, can they explain the current rise in popularity of technology enabled training solutions? Certainly, reduced budgets are a huge push factor, but this doesn't explain why organisations are investing in completely new training programmes. For example, KCA DEUTAG Drilling Group, a global drilling and engineering contractor, has created a project management training solution for its global workforce (see boxout). There are two elements at play – both of which act as pull factors for technology enabled learning solutions.

Firstly, companies with international operations are by their nature attuned to the global economic climate, and are preparing for the global upturn. While cost efficiency is still front of mind, they are beginning to focus on increasing market share, and not simply minimising losses. Key to this preparation is renewed investment in training, not only to ensure consistency, standards and best practice across the board, but also to prepare the – perhaps reduced – workforce for the challenges and opportunities ahead. These organisations recognise that electronic media can deliver this training quickly, efficiently and cost effectively.

The second factor is the greatly improved quality of these solutions. This evolution is a welcome surprise to organisations that have not been involved with technology since the earlier days of e-learning. The best of today's courses are media rich, interactive and engaging and not just electronic page-turners. A good analogy for this rapid evolution is Ceefax. Pre-internet, it was often the first to report breaking stories, but advances in technology have transformed our perceptions of news 'on-demand'. Similarly, global organisations find that technology has transformed training. No longer simply a cheap way to deliver courses, implemented correctly, technology enabled learning provides an agile and valuable learning infrastructure that is tailored to meet the day-to-day



needs of the most demanding of organisations.

CONSIDERATIONS

The ability to accommodate large numbers of trainees with different learning styles, preferences and abilities has been key to the success of technology enabled learning in organisations of all sizes. Consider the similarities of training needs in harsh environments to those in normal organisations:

1. Location and environment

In global companies operating in extreme conditions, training has to be available on-demand, and employee-paced. While locations may not be as demanding, all organisations can benefit from offering 24/7 access to training. Quite apart from the associated cost, there is never a good time to take people away from their desks to train. Enabling employees to access training at their convenience – during business hours, on the train or at the weekend – and to learn at their own pace, is paying dividends. Employees report increased satisfaction with training and organisations are seeing improved training outcomes.

2. Small workforce or few specialists need to be trained

Global organisations have to train specialists dispersed across global operations. For smaller companies, the issue may be that it has very few, perhaps only one, specialist that needs to be trained. Using the latest training technology these isolated employees can collaborate with other trainees, while receiving full support from experienced tutors all day, every day.

3. Bringing the benefits of the classroom to the web browser

One of the criticisms levelled against

earlier e-learning solutions was that they removed the interactive element of learning. However, state of the art learning technologies now make it possible to deliver the benefits of the classroom directly to the web browser through virtual classrooms.

For example, trainees can access a calendar of scheduled live instructor-led video broadcasts and post-session interactive activities and quizzes to reinforce what they have learned online. Virtual classroom sessions are modular so that they can be delivered in one hour blocks.

Technology enabled learning has come a long way since the early e-learning solutions. While maintaining original benefits of speed, flexibility and cost effectiveness, it has broken new ground by harnessing the latest technologies and applying them to learning. Organisations can now expect technology to help them deliver everything from on-site training to live web courses, blended and mobile learning.

This evolution has transformed solutions that provide real business benefits through the delivery of high quality training to the right people, at the right time, regardless of geography or language barriers. A testament to the excellence of technology enabled learning can be seen in its continued success with some of the world's largest organisations, working in punishing environments. Yet the benefits – 24/7 access, reduced costs, measurability, better learning outcomes etc. – are relevant to organisations of all sizes. And even better news is that there is no one size fits all resolution. Every solution is tailored to fit the needs of the individual organisation.

Case Study

KCA DEUTAG Drilling Group

KCA DEUTAG is one of the world's most successful onshore and offshore drilling and engineering contractors with turnover in excess of \$1.7 billion. It operates in more than twenty countries, employing over eight thousand people. A multinational, multicultural employer with a diverse workforce, its operations are based in some of the most demanding, extreme and isolated environments on the planet, ranging from the deserts of Africa to the arctic conditions of Siberia. In order to support ambitious growth plans, KCA DEUTAG identified the need for comprehensive, standardised project management training across its global operations. However, the company had encountered problems with implementing large scale, formal training in the past. Its dispersed workforce ruled out traditional classroom teaching, a problem further exacerbated by shift patterns, language barriers and a highly peripatetic workforce. Although e-learning was therefore the only practical solution, the company had to tackle negative perceptions which had resulted from connectivity problems with earlier e-learning solutions.

The organisation revisited e-learning, discovered the quality training products now available and created a training solution tailored to its needs. Launched in April 2010, the KCA DEUTAG Drilling Group best practice e-learning portal now delivers a new, media rich, online Project Management training course to 350 senior and supervisory managers based across twenty two countries. The rollout was within budget with no technical problems reported by any of the global operations. ILX's APM Introductory Certificate in Project Management, PRINCE2® Foundation and PRINCE2® Practitioner courses are currently available via the portal. It has been extremely well received: over 78% of the target audience signed up immediately and within two months of rollout, trainees have completed the APM courses and begun PRINCE2® training. KCA DEUTAG credits the interactive and highly collaborative course content for the portal's unqualified success with employees.

A range of learning media includes the written word, animations and interactive diagrams suiting different learning styles, and supporting non-native English speakers. The portal's ease of use and innovations have kept employees enthusiastic and engaged. These include: a Snakes and Ladders game (which reinforces key elements of the training by testing users with prompted questions within a familiar gaming environment), an exam simulator, a revision pad (to plan remedial activity if scores are low) and a strength and weakness analysis tool (to help employees gauge readiness for the exam). The courses are supported by comprehensive back-end reporting which allows line managers and training support staff to monitor progress and exam scores etc. This data is used for progress reports and guidance on future study. Ian MacKenzie, director of projects, Technical Services and Business Excellence: "We believe that by deploying ILX's world class training courses to our remote workforce in a flexible and cost-efficient manner we will ensure consistency in our quality of work and ensure that all members undertake best practice methods in whatever they do. We are committed to investing in our greatest asset – namely our employees – and we are confident this approach will help us meet our ambitious business objectives."

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