

E-Learning

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[Published March 4, 2002]

John Chambers, the chief executive officer of Cisco Systems stated in 2000 - *"The next big killer application of the Internet will be education (it) will make email look like a rounding error."*

Conventional learning, distance learning, e-Learning (Learning on the internet), and its recent spawn M-Learning (learning through the medium of mobile devices such as personal digital assistant, smart phone etc) have their niches and pitfalls.

Conventional learning follows a "push" approach, where the learned (instructor) pushes the information to the learner (student) in a relatively passive environment (class). This mechanism is extremely useful for complex subjects that call for deep and personal interaction. But then, it happens within a time, place and process format that limit the flexibility available to the learner. The time and place rigidity could also impose additional costs. For instance, the need to travel and stay in the place where the conventional learning is imparted.

Distance learning gives the learner the flexibility in time, place and process (reading / listening / watching). But it compromises on personal interaction. This form of education is extremely useful for content that is capable of being understood in self-study format, where the objective of the learner is to obtain some certification, without too much emphasis on 'learning through interaction'.

E-learning is "anytime anywhere learning" that seeks to combine the best features of conventional and distance learning. The medium used is internet, intranet or CD Rom, thus making it possible to have a classroom in any home or office with easy updating of content.

The e-learner freezes on learning objectives, sets the pace and decides the time and place of learning (which can be anywhere in the world). The nature of the media viz. the internet ensures that even the diffident learners, who would normally not be participative in a class room session, participate in the internet contact programs (e-discussion boards, e-mail groups etc).

E-learning operates on the "pull" approach, where the learner pulls the information of interest. The learned need not even be available while the learners are "pulling" information. The learned is required only for the contact programs. This ensures time and place flexibility to the learned and helps the whole e-learning program to be offered beyond geographical boundaries with a certain consistency in quality.

Software training is one of the early beneficiaries of e-learning. Why? The learners are comfortable with the medium and device viz. internet and computers. Further the content is capable of being structured comprehensively. Such comprehensive structuring makes e-learning even superior to conventional learning. It avoids a situation often seen in classrooms, where the instructor does not have a ready answer for some of the questions of participants.

M-Learning is currently constrained by the technology and devices. The match-box size screen is cumbersome even for reading internet jokes! Further, any learning is effective in an environment where the learner can concentrate. Learning on the move limits the learner's control over the environment.

Several organisations have jumped into the e-learning bandwagon. In India, Schoolnet.com was one of the early birds. More recently, the Royal Dutch Shell proposed an India e-learning initiative. Manipal Academy of Higher Education plans to deliver IT training through the e-learning mode at many of their 450 franchise locations in India.

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Satyam has created a subsidiary, Satyam Education Services Limited (SESL), to promote online education. SESL is setting up an online learning center, in partnership with ISOPIA, which will provide its Integrated Learning Management System (ILMS™). SESL has also tied with Element K to provide online training to corporations and students throughout India.

Several technology vendors have started offering “learning management solutions”. Indian corporates seeking to leverage on e-learning need to ensure the following –

- ❑ Identify the areas of learning that are amenable to e-learning and relevant for the organisation.
- ❑ Set the e-learning objectives for each e-learning area. This could be certification (which would entail evaluation of the learner) or participation (where participants would need to be kept engaged, independent of the damocle’s sword of evaluation hanging above their head) or behavioural change (where the ongoing efficacy of the program can be tested through observation of behaviour).
- ❑ Map the profile of prospective learners, particularly with respect to existing base of knowledge, capability to self-learn, initiative to learn, comfort with technology etc.
- ❑ Identify the learned and various sources that can offer domain knowledge in the areas identified for e-learning.
- ❑ The above would set the basis for deciding on learning management solutions and technology. For instance,
 - o If the target is workmen who are not computer oriented, then the touch screen technology would be more appropriate.
 - o If the objective is impart training on how metal can be smoothed using a particular machine, high quality image streaming would be required.
 - o If learners are to be trained on how “Satyanarayana Puja” is to be conducted, both audio and visual effects would be required.
 - o If the learners are salesmen on the move, it would be absolutely necessary to offer it on the internet, not just the intranet.

For the technology, even an Application Service Provider (ASP) option can be considered. This would limit upfront investment, while ensuring upgradation. However, if the content has confidentiality implications, then the program would need to be hosted only in the corporate intranet and within firewalls.

- ❑ It would be a good idea to not only make the program available on the corporate intranet, but also integrate it into any existing knowledge management systems within the company.
- ❑ Thereafter, the organisation can implement the technology, enter into contractual arrangements with the sources of domain knowledge, structure each e-learning program and evaluation process etc. If certification is a critical element of the program, then fool proof measures would need to be worked out to ensure that no one beats the system.
- ❑ Finally, the proof of the program is in the learning. High decibel campaigns within the organisation could generate curiosity and interest. Awards for taking the benefit of the program could be a carrot. Promotions could be made subject to people going through specific behavioural programs. Entitlement to vehicle ownership schemes could be made subject to passing through road safety courses.

With aggressive pushing by vendors, who are also often the first to introduce the concept, companies make the mistake of first deciding on the technology. Then they decide what to do with the technology. This becomes a case of putting the cart before the horse.

The structured process detailed above would help organisations enhance their competitiveness and boost employee morale through effective e-learning.