

Implementing elearning from the corporate perspective

Rita Benninck

Abstract

What are the success factors for enterprises wanting to engage with elearning? What are some of the barriers? This article explores issues around the adoption of elearning within the corporate world, including models, key drivers, barriers and recommendations for success. Based on research and interviews with staff engaging in corporate elearning it is clear that there is no one right answer for how to develop and deliver elearning effectively. Tapping into actual needs of the organisation and the learners is the key to success. A key message is to learn from others' experiences, to utilise their skills and expertise, and where possible form partnerships with organisations with similar or complementary needs. The article includes a list of useful web sites to provide further information and guidance.

Introduction

'We don't use elearning here. I don't even like elearning!' So the conversation closed on my attempt to speak to a Human Resources Manager from a large Australian national enterprise about their possible approach to this new way of offering learning.

I was embarking on personal research as part of my Flexible Learning Leaders Scholarship funded through the Australian National Training Authority (Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2003). Fortunately all of the other enterprises or government agencies that I contacted were much more positive and either considering how they might use elearning or were already engaged in using technology to improve access to learning in their organisation.

This article explores some of the models, key drivers, barriers and recommendations for success that I derived from my research.

Definition of elearning

There appears to be a misunderstanding that elearning equates only with learning at a computer, doing boring, text based, online courses with no interaction with a trainer or other learners. This model does still exist, however it is very quickly being replaced with an understanding that elearning encompasses a wide range of learning models, with technology an enabler of increased access to flexible, quality and just in time training (Nichani and Stuart 2003; Mitchell 2003).

Elearning

Elearning involves the use of technology to enhance learning including digital collaboration, satellite broadcasting, CDROMS, video and audio conferencing, mobile technology, interactive TV and web based technologies. Many successes use a

combination of elearning with face to face delivery. This is currently referred to as 'blended' learning.

Online learning

Online learning is a subset of elearning that involves learning that is experienced through the use of computer networks (intranets, the Internet and Local Area Networks).

It is important though to emphasise that although technology has been used for over thirty years for training, through the use of 'Computer Based Training' programs, the major transformational change has been the introduction of the Internet and the ability to network people and information, regardless of time and place (Rosenberg 2003).

Without exception, in the organisations that I visited, the ability to use the Internet for training was either the key to their success or their future aim, in conjunction with the other forms of elearning they currently provided.

Issues for enterprises

In discussing elearning with South Australian private and government organisations over the last two years it became clear to me that one of the issues for enterprises wanting to engage in elearning was a lack of understanding of what elearning is, what it could do for their organisations and who they could turn to for independent advice.

With elearning becoming an emerging industry, organisations are vulnerable to the plethora of sellers of elearning products and services in the emerging market place, promising a quick fix to their training issues (Horton 2003). How can organisations move forward and be able to identify quality service providers and elearning products that will meet their own unique needs?

Methodology

On this basis I set out to visit various organisations that were already implementing elearning to discover

- What were the key drivers for them to engage in elearning?
- What models were they were using?
- What were common success factors, barriers and advice they would give other organisations contemplating the introduction of elearning?

The organisations I visited were a mixture of private enterprises and government departments (A full list is included in Appendix A).

Prior to this I attended the American Society of Training and Development Conference 2003 in San Diego. This enabled me to gain a perspective of elearning implementation and trends overseas.

A literature search of Australian resources indicated a lack of in depth research of the implementation of elearning within Australian industries and enterprises and is backed up by the findings of Schofield (2002).

Attendance at conferences such as the *Australian Institute of Training and Development* Conference for Queensland and Northern Territory 2003 and the *Australian Human Resources Institute* Learning and Technology Conference 2003 confirmed that the use of elearning is gaining momentum and there is now a high level of interest in the 'how' of effective implementation. This was confirmed by a recent discussion paper on elearning trends within Australia (Eklund et al. 2003).

Trends from overseas

Major corporations have implemented elearning widely, but there is now recognition that success requires more than just installing elearning software and programs. It requires focusing away from the technology and onto the learner (Beamish et al. 2002). In the early stages of the introduction of elearning the technology was seen as the solution, rather than a tool that needed to be selectively chosen to meet a particular need. There was little understanding of the human element that is needed to design effective learning activities to be used in conjunction with relevant technology. Technology alone is meaningless and useless. Focussing on the learner has improved the quality of elearning provision but unfortunately much damage has been done in terms of the perception of elearning as a result of initial forays. Many organisations are therefore hesitant about the use of elearning due to failures (real and/or perceived) within other organisations and also due to their own lack of knowledge and understanding. However, the use of elearning is still in a growth stage and expectations continue of increased usage (Schott Karr 2002).

A key success strategy is the need to develop an elearning strategy that ties in with the overall business strategy (Werner 2003). Elearning needs to be considered as a solution to a business issue not for its own sake and will be unique for each organisation (Sloman & Van Buren 2003). Elearning needs to be seen as one option as part of an integrated learning strategy- closer analysis may indicate alternative, non-training solutions. Developing an elearning strategy does not have to be a time consuming process. It also needs to include effective strategies for promotion of elearning opportunities to staff (Walker 2003).

Knowledge management and elearning are converging and organisations are looking for ways to integrate the two, particularly as a customised, individual solution (Norris 2003; Rosenberg 2003). An example is in the use of mobile technologies, currently being explored and utilised in industries that either have a mobilised workforce or where the workforce is unlikely to have access to a personal computer at work (Del Grosso 2003).

Partnerships are being seen as a way for smaller organisations to be able to provide effective elearning opportunities at a reasonable cost (Kapp & Felice 2003; Learndirect Scotland 2002; Queensland e-Learning Cluster 2002). These include models around partnering with educational organisations as well as partnering with organisations within the same industry. Effective partnerships have benefited from independent third party facilitation (Sloan Consortium 2003).

Australian Enterprises

On the Australian scene there appear to be consistent external and internal drivers for the implementation of elearning, regardless of the size of the organisation.

Drivers

External

The need to comply with an increasing array of government policies and procedures requires the ability to ensure and prove that staff have been trained to the level required to meet compliance and remain in business (Hartel & Tilton 2002).

There are increasing market demands and expectations from consumers for a quality, responsive service.

Finally, the economic environment over the last few years has impacted negatively on an organisation's ability to increase expenditure on non core business activity, such as training, at a time when this increase is required (Boulton 2001).

Internal

In conjunction with the external drivers organisations may have key internal factors that drive the need to be able to use elearning.

These may include:

- a business problem that can only be solved by flexible, just in time training
- difficulties in providing effective, low cost, immediate and consistent training to a high volume and/or dispersed workforce, including rural and remote workers
- difficulties for shift workers in accessing face to face training
- a need to train contract workers and be satisfied that they are competent
- a lack of staff to provide the required training across the organisation
- a need to keep staff on the job as much as possible
- current face to face models that do not provide effective, relevant learning experiences
- a need for a highly skilled workforce to;
 - give a competitive edge
 - avoid the potential financial risks from worker error.

Models

There is no one model that is right for an organisation. Each of the organisations I visited used a different model to suit their own circumstances. Each organisation must assess its own needs to develop a unique model that may be based on what has been shown to work effectively for others.

Models used often depended on the resources of the organization, such as staff skills/time and information technology (IT) infrastructure, rather than an overall organisational strategy of what would work best.

Contrary to the message touted by some elearning software and product vendors, many of the models demonstrated that 'a lot can be done with a little' and that successful elearning did not necessarily require spending large amounts of money.

Blended learning

A clear favourite of many organisations was to use online learning as a precursor to face to face workshops. Staff access the online environment to learn theoretical knowledge and practice skill development in a safe, self paced, learning environment. The key in its success, as with all of the online learning, was to simulate as much as possible the real workplace environment in which they would finally have to demonstrate competence.

In one example an eighty hour face to face program was reduced to forty hours of face to face workshops combined with seven hours average online learning prior to the workshops, with no reduction in quality of learning outcomes. Obvious benefits to the organisation include a significant cost reduction in training and staff replacement. For the individual staff member the reported benefits included:

- less stressful learning overall
- ability to learn at own pace
- flexibility in being able to choose own learning time and place
- time off in lieu of time spent on the online component.

A similar model is working well during a trial with another organisation that also requires high levels of competence of staff in what can be complex situations. Early indications, using a control group, indicate that those staff with access to a computer simulation program to practice on, prior to attending face to face training, are achieving better learning outcomes.

Online as an alternative

Another organisation is using online learning to cut the cost of delivering a one hour annual update training course that normally requires three training staff at a time to deliver. Using the online method is not mandatory but provides an attractive alternative for shift workers and staff who don't need to sit through a full hour of training to achieve confirmation of competency. The real long term benefits, though, are in providing consistency of training on a large scale.

Web pages on the Intranet

Some organisations are using online content created in web pages and placed on company intranet. Assessment is provided by a quiz program developed 'in-house' by IT staff and linked to the 'online courses'.

Externally hosted ‘off the shelf’ online courses

Many organisations choose this solution for IT training as there is general agreement that this does not need to be customised for an organisation and can be provided most cost effectively through a hosted option in which you pay for actual usage.

For example in one organisation ‘off the shelf’ generic courses are available to all staff in a 24x7 drop in centre at the workplace, as well as through the Internet at home. The benefits are felt particularly by shift workers and also provide an opportunity to use the time that staff are not fully engaged at work for purposeful training. While mostly used for IT training, online leadership courses are also available in conjunction with face to face workshops.

Completely Online

Another successful model is to offer a completely online course that is available over the Internet. This solution seems to work well with large numbers of workers needing training spread over a dispersed geographic region, including those who are rural and remote. Several organisations have found this model useful in providing consistent, effective training that would otherwise not be available. One organisation received feedback from a participant who reported increased self esteem, due to freedom from the pressures of face to face learning and examinations, who had ‘learnt more in the past four weeks than the past four years’ and had since gone on to further study as a result.

In another organisation a full day of training had been replaced by a one hour online course. This was achieved through the use of multimedia, including sound and simulated animations based on real situations likely to be experienced by the learner in the workplace. Constant exploration of right and wrong answers in various case studies facilitated a good grasp of the concepts to be learnt.

Interactive Satellite Broadcasting

Dealing with access to the Internet and broadband issues has meant that some organisations have turned to the use of interactive satellite broadcasting to meet the needs of their organisations. One such model includes the installation of a satellite receiver at each remote location, together with a training room containing a television to receive broadcasts and interactive touch pads to communicate with the trainer. Training sessions are broadcast at scheduled times from a central location and have proved to be an effective way of providing consistent, just in time training to multiple worksites across Australia.

Using CDROM through a Local Area Network (LAN)

Due to the inability to deliver large volumes of multimedia data through the internet, where the learning content is multimedia rich, the use of CDROM enables effective access. One organisation has been using this strategy effectively to deliver simulation learning that is engaging and meets the needs of the learners and the organisation. However they will soon also be delivering online learning across the organisation to meet other needs.

Enterprise-wide integrated online learning

Some of the larger organisations have implemented extensive online elearning programs that are integrated with the overall human resource and performance management systems of the organizations, to provide an integrated system for tracking and managing all training across the organisation

Barriers

There are many barriers and these will depend on the size of the organisation but will often include:

- the cost of purchasing and maintaining a learning management system was prohibitive for many of the smaller organisations.
- difficulty in knowing what is the best way to approach elearning. (Organisations are literally bombarded by vendors trying to sell expensive products and services. How do they identify who can give correct advice?)
- lack of understanding of elearning and how it can be used leading to;
 - inertia
 - ineffective models of elearning
 - training personnel resistance
 - staff resistance
- lack of time and/or skilled training personnel
- lack of support from all levels and stakeholders within the organisation
- bandwidth issues can be a problem-sometimes more in metropolitan sites than regional areas.
- lack of basic computer and Internet skills of learners
- copyright issues.

Advice

Organisations who had engaged in elearning were asked a question. What was the most important advice they would give to another organisation new to elearning? The following are the main recurring themes to emerge from their responses.

Align with Business

- Focus on the ‘must haves’ of the organisation and put effort into that. You must solve a problem.

Plan

- It is imperative to align with strategic organisational planning.
 - Need to first identify strategic issues- who and what.
 - Identify training required –what is the level of risk if it doesn’t get done? It is best if there is a high level of risk, as that means you are more likely to get resources to do it.
 - Look at timelines, and examine what methodology will work - may be face to face, online, blended and then once decided- go to the suppliers to compare and decide on the products to suit you.
- Have a clear understanding of what you want to achieve over a long term timeframe.

- What are the business case objectives?
 - Have you an understanding of the end outcome?
 - Have you an understanding of the user needs?
 - Have you an understanding of how elearning fits into the organisation?
 - Have a set of processes and guidelines.
 - Plan phases.
- It is critical to put a change management strategy around the implementation.

Involve stakeholders

- Get 'buy in' from all stakeholders- bring them together
 - workers
 - all levels of management
 - Human Resources staff
 - Information Technology staff
- Have a reference group. Make decisions together.
- Empower people to take it where you want to go.
- Have passion and commitment to lead and follow it through.

Learn from others

- It is very important for you to get 'out there and learn from what others have done'.
- Talk to vendors, as this increases your own knowledge, but also talk to other organisations that have used the solution/product and see what they say. (Although remember that may not work for you.)
- In selecting a vendor, find someone you feel comfortable with and be aware that Australian products are just as good when it comes to Learning Management Systems.

Start small

- Start off with things that are already working in your organization and build on them.
- Be creative. The technology and the applications are all new. Think about what will work for you.
- Try to make first experiences as good as possible, as bad experiences will impact negatively. Go for less but better.
- You need a scalable Learning Management System. You can then start small and build on your successes.

Promote and support

- Marketing and communication is essential. They (learners) won't just come because you build it. You have to be committed to promote the elearning.
- Encourage a high level of personal motivation in staff through clearly articulating the benefits of the training.
- Provide a help desk for technical and content issues and access to online learning at home or work.
- Utilise and support 'champions' at a local level.

Focus on quality customised content

- Focus on instructional design. Anyone can do the multimedia stuff, but it is good instructional design that will give success.
- It is very important for online content to be customised for the organisation although IT training can be generic.
- Use an effective, engaging model of simulated work based learning that can translate to different contexts.
- Identify staff needs and behaviour. Adapt the learning these needs, rather than the other way around.
- Trial or test things like online enrolment with real people. This will save time later on.
- Keep content simple. Focus only on what is relevant. Don't include 'bells and whistles', it doesn't work.
- Development work doesn't have to be expensive. Don't be misled by vendors.
- Develop guidelines and criteria for selection of externally purchased content.
- Ensure your project is not just about putting product online.
- Comply with relevant elearning standards such as SCORM, to facilitate long term viability of your content and integration with other management systems.

Develop your own expertise

Organisations varied to the extent to which they outsourced various aspects of online development, however all agreed that developing the organisation's expertise should be an important part of the process, even if they don't actually do the development themselves.

- If you have the skills and talent in-house then use it, if not, then develop it.
- In the long term, for a smaller organization, using internal developers can be more cost effective and assists with control of the product.
- Develop expertise by partnering with others.
- If completely outsourcing, work with a few preferred contractors and develop a good relationship.

Conclusion

There is no one right answer for how to develop and deliver elearning effectively. Tapping into the actual needs of the organisation and the learners is the key to success. What works for one may not work for another.

A key message is to learn from others' experiences, to utilise their skills and expertise, and where possible form partnerships with organisations with similar or complementary needs. (Newton et al. 2002; ANTA 2003).

One of the aspects to emerge is the benefits that can be gained in Australia through partnerships with Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisations that are developing a high level of expertise in designing and developing elearning materials and products. Exploring partnerships with a local Registered Training Organisation, a TAFE or Adult Community Education (ACE) organization or a private provider, for example, is likely to provide mutual benefits in delivering elearning. Existing

elearning partnerships between VET and private and government enterprises have resulted in a growth in the expertise of both organisations involved (Bennink 2003).

Clearly, there needs to be more research in the Australian context to further explore issues around successful models of implementation and partnerships that facilitate this.

There is no doubt that elearning will grow and will change as technology moves ahead. It will become an integrated part of the way everyone learns in the future and issues of 'liking or disliking' elearning will be irrelevant. Rather the questions of effectiveness and efficiency will continue to dominate and be a challenge in the world of corporate training.

Related links

There is an enormous range of information on this topic but it is not always easy to identify the gems. The following are recommended websites for locating information.

Australia

<http://www.aitd.com.au>

Australian site with local information and links

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/>

Everything you want to know about elearning in the Vocational Educational and Training (VET) sector in Australia is here including access to, and interaction with, a community of other interested people and experts.

UK

<http://www.e-learningcentre.co.uk>

UK based- excellent free resources on everything you want to know about elearning, guides, information on different software (including free), with reviews.

North America

<http://www.astd.org>

Comprehensive US based-mostly free information with some restricted to members only.

<http://www.learningcircuits.org>

Try: *Getting Bigger Slices of the E-Learning Pie* by Brooke Broadbent

<http://e-learningguru.com>

Check out white paper and articles

<http://www.darwinmag.com>

Try: *E-Learning Needs Analysis* by John Sloan

<http://www.brandon-hall.com>

Try: *Low cost learning management systems: 21 products for limited budgets*
E-learning guidebook: Six steps to implementing elearning

Useful Survey to check elearning readiness

Rosenberg, M. J. 2000, 'The E-Learning Readiness Survey'

http://www.ucalgary.ca/~srmccaus/eLearning_Survey.pdf

References

- ANTA, 2003, *Partners in training*. Retrieved 5 August, 2003 from <http://www.anta.gov.au/rtoPartners.asp>
- Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2003, *Flexible Learning Leaders*. Retrieved 6 September, 2003 from <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/leaders/>
- Beamish, N. et al. 2002, 'The deployment of e-learning in UK/European corporate organisations' in *European Business Journal*, pp 105-115.
- Bennink, R. 2003, *Flexible Learning Leaders Progress Report*. Retrieved 4 December, 2003 from http://flexiblelearning.net.au/leaders/fl_leaders/fl103/interim/bennink_rita_progreport.pdf
- Boulton, P. 2001, 'Summary of Data'. Retrieved 5 July, 2003 from http://www.canopi.com.au/27opine/monash_survey.pdf
- Churchill, B. 2003, 'Using branded blended learning solutions for today's competitive marketplace survival'. Unpublished presentation at American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) Conference 2003, San Diego.
- Del Grosso, C. 2003, *Flexible Learning Leaders Progress Report*. Retrieved 5 December, 2003 from http://flexiblelearning.net.au/leaders/fl_leaders/fl103/interim/del_grosso_cinthia_progreport.pdf
- Eklund, J. et al. 2003, *e-learning: emerging issues and key trends A discussion paper* Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Retrieved 11 November, 2003 from <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/research/2003/elearning250903final.pdf>
- Nichani, M. and Stuart, 2003, '10 Damaging E-learning myths' in *Elearningpost*, Retrieved 7 July, 2003 from <http://www.elearningpost.com/features/archives/001749.asp>
- Hartel, C. & Tilton P, 2002, *Australia and online learning – lessons on strategic implementation and effective learning*, Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Retrieved 11 July, 2003 from <http://nw2002.flexiblelearning.net.au>
- Horton, W. 2003, 'Hardware/Software Panorama: Enter the hype-free zone'. Workshop at ASTD International Conference 2003, San Diego.
- Kapp, K. & Felice, H. 2003, 'Forging University and Government elearning partnerships for success presentation'. Unpublished presentation at ASTD International Conference 2003, San Diego.
- Learndirect Scotland, 2002, *National gateway to learning: annual report 2001-02* Learndirect Scotland, Glasgow.

Newton, D., Hase S. & Ellis, A. 2002, 'Effective Implementation of online learning: a case study of the Queensland mining industry' in *Journal of Workplace Learning* vol. 14. no 4. pp. 156 –165.

Mitchell, J. 2003, *E-business and online learning: Connections and opportunities for vocational education and training*, NCVET, Leabrook, SA

Norris, D. 2003, 'Transforming E-Knowledge and knowledge reuse: Case studies on the convergence of E-Learning and knowledge management presentation.' Unpublished presentation at ASTD International Conference 2003, San Diego.

Queensland e-Learning Cluster, 2002, 'Born Smart: Queensland's e-learning Industry', International Webcasting Association Australia, Fortitude Valley QLD

Rosenberg, M. J. 2003, 'Building a successful elearning strategy.' Unpublished presentation at ASTD International Conference 2003, San Diego.

Schofield, K. 2002, *On-line learning: Case studies of the corporate experience*, Organisational, Vocational and Adult Learning (OVAL) Research Working Paper Retrieved 17 November, 2003 from http://138.25.185.150/lasso/lassosites/oval/project_detail.lasso?-token.id=33301

Schott Karr S. 2002, 'Anytime Anyplace Learning' in *Financial Executive*, November 2002, Australia, pp. 38-42.

Sloan Consortium (2003) 'Corporate and higher education alliances for elearning' Presentation at ASTD International Conference 2003, San Diego.

Sloman, M. and Van Buren, M. 2003, 'Elearning's learning curve: will they come, will they learn?' Unpublished presentation at ASTD International Conference 2003, San Diego.

Werner, T. 2003 'Change Management and E-Learning.' Retrieved 6 July, 2003 from <http://store.yahoo.com/brandon-hall/whitpaponcha.html>

Walker, C. 2003, 'The cutting edge of E-Learning – lessons learned.' Unpublished presentation at Information Online Conference, Sydney.

APPENDIX A
Organisations Visited/Interviewed

Organisation	Visited/interviewed
Ambulance Service of NSW	Steve Matheson Clinical Educator
ANZ	Scott Mahoney Manager Learning Technologies
Australian & New Zealand Institute of Insurance and Finance	Steve Granland Executive Manager-Business Development
Australian Regional Health Group	Dr Geoff Dreher CEO
Brisbane City Council	Ziggy Nowak Senior Officer Economic Development
Australian Regional Health Group	Dr Geoff Dreher CEO
Centrelink Virtual College	Margaret Hamilton Dean
Conrad Treasury QLD	Vicki Barlow Workplace Development Manager
Crown Casino VIC	Peter Coyne General Manager People Development and Planning
Dept of Defence-Army NSW	Harley Doughty Manger Training Technology
EDS	James Burgess Principal Consultant EDS Solutions Consulting
Local Government Association of Queensland	Kathy Kelly Manger-Training Services
Queensland Rail	Dallas Woolley Learning Centre Manager
Queensland Services Group –Dept of Public Works	Joanne Shambler Group Human Resources Account Manager
RACQ QLD	Andrew Palmer e-Learning Co-ordinator
Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital	Randall Scott Nurse Educator
Aspin Consulting	Margaret Aspin Consultant
elearn 153 Queensland elearning cluster	Ziggy Nowak Senior Officer Economic Development
Elearn.WA	Frank Bate Director Development
Health e-learning	Steve Fisher Consultant