



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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A System for Systems!

Improving e-learning initiatives with an ecosystem

A desperate need to improve profits and reduce operational costs saw one US-based airline invest in an e-learning initiative. Once a three aircraft and two-hundred and eighty-employee company, the airline now boasts of being voted as the Best Major Airline two years in a row. High customer service standards and friendly airfares aside, its 13,000 strong well-trained employees form the nucleus of the company.

Fly high

The training needs of an airline are more demanding than that of any other industry. Faced with constant scrutiny from regulatory bodies, their compliance and regulatory requirements are plenty. Additionally, keeping up with maintenance and operations directives requires employees to constantly go through training.

This particular airline had always conducted training for its employees at its centers. A three-week training program for one passenger service employee cost the company nearly \$5000. It even resorted to the workbook mode for additional training. The airline's annual training costs thus ran into millions. This persuaded it to invest in e-learning.

Bon voyage

The company began the e-learning program with Oracle iLearning as its LMS platform and Macro-media Flash to develop course content. Their first e-learning initiative focused on its reservation agents.

In stage one, training targeted those basic tasks (such as learning basic keyboard skills, city codes and function keys) that could be simplified or enhanced through computer-based training. To encourage participation, task-based learning programs with interesting games were used. For example, remembering city codes that identify different airports is a difficult task. The e-learning team developed a computer-based game that required employees to mark the correct city codes on a map within two minutes. Participants with the maximum number of correct city codes were the highest scorers. Participants went through an intensive learning process as they played the game.

Play along

Another game focused on teaching function keys to their reservation agents. By simulating a real world situation of queued up callers, a trainee's score depended on how soon he or she correctly completed common reservation tasks. The longer the mock agent took, the angrier his/her virtual caller got and the less he/she scored!

Today, both these games are very popular, even among more experienced agents. Thanks to e-learning, the duration of the classes has also reduced significantly. Consequently, the workers stay longer at their desks than in classrooms, improving the company's



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productivity. The learning imparted is now more suited to their interests and schedule. The airline has been successfully able to:

- Reduce the costs of compliance training
- Facilitate access to accurate records and reports as e-learning systems automate record keeping
- Reduce instructor-led classes and training-related travel costs
- Establish consistent and complete reusable training resources
- Increase information retention among learners

Happy landing?

Not all organizations adopting e-learning have experienced these benefits. The complexity and expenses involved in integrating content authoring tools and other business systems into an e-learning platform forces many e-learning adopters to question their decisions.

For e-learning to provide better and easier access to education, support learning initiatives, and promote strategic business goals, organizations must consider certain details. The first is to know that you will need any e-learning option to suit your needs. The next is to emphasize the importance of seamless integration.

The current scene

Only one-quarter of organizations have used e-learning techniques for more than three years. Moreover, contrary to expectations, market penetration stands at a thirty percent low. Many believe that such e-learning problems are only a result of the relative youth of the industry. However, organizations have failed to achieve the glorified 'vision of online learning' due to several reasons.

Initially, even organizations without structured or well-defined implementation plans invested huge amounts in application systems and computer based learning programs. When a vendor who was forced to customize e-learning to suit organization-specific business practices went out of business, the organization was left with applications and tools it could not integrate, support or even maintain. This resulted in disintegrated and inaccessible data and course content, frustrating both trainers and learners. In short, the initial e-learning programs ignored the all-important aspects of functionality and user experiences.

Disillusions galore!

Organizations must focus on integrating learning with their business processes and systems and the contexts where actual learning takes place.

The right direction...

Identifying and establishing the steps for e-learning implementation and appreciating the need for deploying e-learning technology are critical for the success of e-learning.



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Equally important is running through a “to-do” list to ensure that organizational goals and business challenges are necessarily met through their e-learning initiatives. This includes commissioning an e-learning eco-system. While an eco-system is defined as “an ecological community that together with its environment functions as a unit”, an e-learning ecosystem is a “learning community, together with the enterprise united by a learning management system.”

What is new?

Isn't an e-learning ecosystem the same as blended or collaborative learning? A bird's eye view of an e-learning ecosystem at work leads many to conclude that an ecosystem is all about the ability to combine and conduct online and instructor-led learning programs from the same platform. However, an ecosystem is much more than just that. With an emphasis on the seamless integration of content authoring tools and e-learning platforms, highly developed ecosystems include:

- A Web-based, integrated human resources portal. Ecosystems integrate learning programs to focus on teaching those competencies that tie personal career paths and organizational objectives together
- An employee has easy access to remuneration data, the freedom to make online changes in his or her insurance premiums, medical plans, and provident fund contributions
- Trainers, on the other hand, can access information that would allow them to integrate learning programs with organizational goals
- Keep track of both employee and learning program progress
- Manage learning resources and assets better

Such ecosystems ensure better returns on investments and improve employee performance and morale.

The LMS scene

There is good news for leading Learning Management Systems (LMS) vendors. According to Cambridge-based research company Giga Information Group, the industry is slated to make a giant leap from its existing \$500 million business base to nearly a billion - all within a span of four, short years. With small- and medium-sized organizations recognizing the need for both e-learning and learning management systems, most organizations will find themselves making the shift from their “home-grown” LMS’ to more high-tech, sophisticated and off-the shelf systems.

What about homegrown systems?

In a knee jerk reaction to a desperate need to improve ROIs, a few organization engaged ‘in-house’ experts to develop LMS applications. While these ‘in-house’ applications are highly customized to suit the learning requirements of the organization, the problem arises when the training team has to compete for IT resources and support. A lack of standardization in such situations prevents seamless integration.



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One learning program manager in a research company predicts that by 2007, the number of LMS vendors will shrink to 12 to 25 leading players. These vendors should then focus on standardizing applications by either adding what is amiss to improve functionality or by collaborating with other vendors to provide 'standardized' solutions. Selecting the right LMS solves half the problem. Creating content interoperability will solve the rest of the problem.

The merits of a standard

- With standardization as the key driver, organizations can mix and match or interchange content from different vendors, and reuse, assemble and disassemble content with ease and speed. Such interoperability ensures longer life for learning content. While standardization is important, it alone does not ensure integration of widely distributed learning environments and content from multiple vendors.