

E-learning: progress and prospects

Introduction



The term e-learning was first introduced in 1999. e-Learning and online learning applications are new modes of learning that are completely changing the way we think and approach learning. No longer are we constrained to 'chalk and talk' training sessions. They offer flexibility and accessibility – you can have access to learning when and where you want it and in a way that suits you. Since 1999, the advance of e-learning has taken a number of different forms.

e-Learning has removed the geographical and time barriers to learning. Among many other benefits, it allows organisations to integrate learning with work, recognising the fact that most learning takes place on the job. e-Learning is cost effective - it can help organisations to save money through improved competencies and skills and reduction in learning times. e-Learning and blended learning bring numerous unique benefits to organisations, employees and customers.

e-Learning can also refer to the very practical forms of organisational knowledge in terms of: knowledge banks, on-line communities of practice and networks where the knowledge and experience of your staff can be shared 24/7.

This White Paper gives introductory guidance and:

- considers the scope and types of e-learning
- reports progress to date based on findings of our learning and development surveys
- examines e-learning implementation 'received wisdom'
- provides a link to case studies on implementing effective e-learning.



Definitions

There is no universally accepted definition of e-learning, but the following is used by the CIPD in our surveys: 'Learning that is delivered, enabled or mediated using electronic technology for the explicit purpose of training in organisations'.

This can be described as an inclusive definition: it includes the use of distributed technology products

(mainly CD-ROMs) which do not require the user's computer to be connected to a network. An exclusive definition would exclude these products and include only products delivered through the Internet or an intranet.

The term e-learning first emerged in late 1999. Suppliers of computer-based training were full of optimism and were considering the implications of delivery through the web. The US-based supplier, CBT systems, rebranded themselves as 'Smartforce – the e-learning company' and held a satellite broadcast to announce the change a month later. However, if distributed technology products are included, it could be argued that e-learning stretches back several decades.

Types of e-learning

Since 1999, the advance of e-learning has taken a number of different forms. Much of current experience is based on the use of web-based modules which are accessed at an individual's personal computer. In fact, as a learning tool, e-learning is much broader. In their CIPD publication *How do people learn?*¹, Cambridge Programme for Industry identified three examples of current e-learning practice. Doubtless these will increase as new applications for learning through connectivity emerge.



- **Web-based training:** In corporate training, technology is used primarily to deliver content to the end user without significant interaction with (or support from) training professionals, peers or managers. A significant industry has grown up around this form of e-learning, spanning content authoring, content asset management, instructional design and learning management.
- **Supported online learning:** In higher education, the majority of the content of the course may be delivered through lectures or through distance-education textual material, but the course is categorised as e-learning because the interaction with the instructor, the dialogue with other students, the searching for resource materials, the conduct of collaborative activities, the access to course outlines and supporting material are all conducted online. This approach is being extended to professional communities (see, for example, the CIPD communities available to CIPD members).
- **Informal e-learning:** Beyond these 'course-based' approaches to e-learning are the growing opportunities for technology to support informal learning in the workplace. In many knowledge intensive organisations it is linked with knowledge management.
- Another classification has been articulated in a somewhat different form by the leading US commentator, Allison Rossett of San Diego University². She used the terms 'stuff' and 'stir'.

The 'stuff' is the reusable web objects which are deployed on a corporate Internet. The 'stir' refers to the collaborative tools of e-learning: the online discussions and virtual classroom.

Progress to date



To mark the fifth anniversary of e-learning the CIPD held an online poll³ to monitor progress, identify problems and offer some thoughts for the future. The overall view was that, while there was still much practical work to be done on implementation, e-learning was now accepted as an essential feature of training delivery.

Our Training and development survey 2005⁴ included a special focus on e-learning to gain a balanced view of how organisations are using e-learning, as well as seeking respondents' views on how it is shaping organisational learning as a whole. For the first time, over half of respondents (54%) reported that they use e-learning, and a further 39% said they had plans to introduce it in the coming year. Over two thirds of the e-learning users expected its use to increase in the next few years. And while e-learning accounted for less than 10% of total training time, in the vast majority of organisations, respondents expected this to rise dramatically to up to 50% in three years time.

While e-learning appears to be becoming a key component in organisations training and learning strategies, the survey results indicated that it is mostly used for particular types of training such as IT or technical training. It is less likely to be used for training in interpersonal skills, diversity and foreign languages. Stand-alone CD-ROMs were still the most common form of delivering e-learning, followed by generic e-learning modules accessed by the Internet/intranet, with collaborative activities such as discussion sites and web seminars/virtual classrooms in use by just a small minority of organisations.

Responses on the significance of e-learning were compared with those in the 2002 survey and showed that most respondents (94%) now believed that e-learning is more effective when combined with other forms of learning, reflecting the popularity of 'blended learning' in recent years. But more than half of the respondents think that current e-learning products do not demonstrate the future of e-learning and a similar proportion believe that e-learning can result in money being wasted. Organisations seem increasingly prepared to commission e-learning modules rather than use generic products as they believe them to be more effective in giving context to the learning. Reassuringly for some training providers, only 18% of respondents believed that e-learning was a threat to more traditional methods, 1% less than in 2002.

Our 2007 *Learning and development* survey⁵ includes a section on trends in workplace learning and provides further evidence of the continued if gradual growth of e-learning. Respondents were given an extended list of learning and development activities and asked how frequently they were used in their

organisation. Only 24% of the survey respondents responded that e-learning was not used (with 28% responding rarely used). 67% of respondents reported that they expected the use of e-learning to increase in the next few years, with 32% saying that it would stay the same. However only 2% of respondents identified e-learning as the most effective way that people learn in their organisation.

Benefits of e-learning

The benefits of e-learning include:

- Available 'just in time' ad can be used continuously for learning and reference.
- Flexibility of access from anywhere at anytime.
- Ability to simultaneously reach an unlimited number of employees.
- Uniformity of delivery of training.
- Can achieve cost reductions.
- Reduction in the time it takes to deliver training.
- Ability to log or track learning activities.
- Possibilities of global connectivity and collaboration opportunities.
- Ability to personalise the training for each learner.

However, it has become clear that making e-learning available to unprepared and unsupported learners will not work. E-learning must be appropriately presented and adequately resourced.

Perceived barriers to the effectiveness of e-learning in organisations include:

- Limits of current technology infrastructure.
- Ensuring learners have time and space to participate.
- Providing appropriate support for learners.
- Finding attractive, relevant and high-quality content.
- Gaining line manager support and commitment.
- Employee hostility towards e-learning.
- Motivating learners to complete courses.
- Lack of basic IT skills in the workforce.

Implementing e-learning

In 2002, a number of UK organisations were invited by the CIPD to participate in a short study sharing their experiences and views about what makes for effective e-learning. In autumn of that year we published a report on its implementation⁶.

In the course of study a set of statements were produced. Together they represent what could be described as received wisdom on implementing e-learning. They are:

- E-learning should be regarded as a change initiative; it should not be seen as a way of saving short-term costs.
- E-learning has to be driven by training, not the technology. You need to have faith in your own knowledge as a training expert.
- There is a choice to be made between, on the one hand, introducing e-learning as part of a significant shift in approach to learning and, on the other, proceeding through a controlled pilot project.
- The proportion of staff who regularly use a PC at work is a critical factor to be considered in the design of any e-learning initiative.
- Appropriate strategies must be developed for employees who do not have access or the necessary skills. The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) is receiving considerable attention in this context.
- There may be merit in making an open facility for staff (and their families) to access e-learning, but this should be undertaken to demonstrate a commitment to learning rather than a way of gaining immediate business benefits.
- Blended learning is seen by many as a process in which appropriate e-learning modules are a precursor to a training session in the classroom.
- The purchase of generic off-the-shelf material is most likely to be of value for IT end user or IT specialist applications.
- There is considerable interest in the generation of bespoke or customised material – either in-house through the use of an authoring system or commissioning from a specialist software supplier.
- Bespoke materials are often first created to meet essential business needs (compulsory training); other popular choices for the early use of bespoke material are performance appraisal, standard procedures or induction.
- Learning resource centres are seen as a useful facility – especially where a significant number of employees do not regularly use a personal computer at work.
- If a learning resource centre is intended to serve a population who are not regular users of personal computers on-site facilitation is essential.

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