ENTELISYS
TECHNOLOGIES

Successful eLearning Strategies

Interactive eLearning for an Interactive Age

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Introduction

eLearning…what is it? What does it do? Most people have heard of eLearning but do not necessarily know too much about it. This guide is designed to provide you with various tips, suggestions, and bits of information regarding eLearning. This is not a step-by-step guide to implementing eLearning in your organization; however, it provides you with basic information to help you learn more about eLearning and take the first steps to implementation.

About the Authors

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Information Age Training Techniques

Most companies in today's business world waste time and money on Industrial Age training techniques that are no longer efficient in our new Information Age economy. In so many areas of business new and more efficient methods using the Internet have been accepted and embraced. However, some companies continue to use the concept of old training strategies for their employees despite the fact these methods are no longer the most efficient.

Classroom Training is No Longer the Most Efficient Training Method

In business, what worked yesterday can become obsolete quickly. Now that companies are expanding globally, they must keep up with the demand in a competitive environment. The ability to keep your geographically dispersed employees and sales channels up to speed and informed is becoming more of a challenge. The need to distribute knowledge and information quickly to the workforce is ever changing the economy. Old ideas are quickly replaced by new ideas. The Internet is changing the way people think and do business. It is a powerful tool to communicate and transfer knowledge and information. To be successful, companies must get their information out quickly and efficiently. Time is crucial to compete in today's environment.

Classroom training was the preferred method of training employees, channel partners, and your field sales force for many years. Although classroom training has been the preferred way training method, it does not leverage the power of the Internet. The effectiveness of classroom training and the task of bringing people from multiple locations to train have been costly, inefficient, and ineffective at times. What does this mean to you? Increased costs. Travel costs, hotel costs, printed manuals and documents, printed assessments and tests, and more importantly, your employees' time and attention. Classroom training requires employees to be out of the office to attend training classes. Sometimes the training can last as much as eight hours a day, five days a week. The fact is classroom training is still fine to use for practical application, but it is not the most efficient or cost-effective method anymore.

The effectiveness of classroom training went by the wayside as our society moved out of the Industrial Age and into the Information Age. In today's business world of doing more with less, reduced spending, and downsizing, classroom training is the least efficient way to reach your global workforce.

Information Age Training Methods

Information Age training methods are no secret. Online training, or eLearning, has been used for several years and continues to evolve. Some companies embrace eLearning and have been doing it for many years, while others are in the preliminary stages trying to incorporate it into their organizations. Those companies not using the Internet for business or training will quickly be left behind their competition.

Information Age training facts include:
- eLearning efficiently reaches your national or global workforce
  - eLearning can quickly distribute critical company information and training out to your dispersed workforce more efficiently than having employees travel all over the country for a seminar or classroom training
- eLearning reduces training costs
  - Organizations can reduce costs they incur with travel and lodging expenses, printing costs, instructor salary and benefits, and time away from critical work
- eLearning can increase sales for your organization
  - A trained and informed sales channel will help increase sales. Most salespeople do not perform well in sales due to lack of product knowledge and company sales methods.
- Information Age training methods reduce time
  - The time your employees spend out of the office traveling to and attending classroom training events and seminars should be spent productively in the work environment.

Start using Information Age training methods to improve efficiency in your training organization and impact your company's bottom line.

Could Your Company Benefit From eLearning?

We are becoming more and more dependent on technology as part of our day-to-day work lives. Instead of feeling restricted by technology, you should use technology to your advantage. An effective way to use technology to help you increase sales, increase customer satisfaction, and reduce training costs is eLearning.

Is your company a candidate for eLearning?
Ask yourself the following questions:
- Could your company increase sales?
- Could your company increase your customer's satisfaction?
- Do you have processes or procedures specific to your company?
- Must your employees complete HIPPA, Sarbanes-Oxley, OSHA, sexual harassment, or other compliance training?
- Do you have new or legacy software applications on which you must train your employees?
- Do all your employees, distributors, or channel partners know how your products benefit your customers?
- Could your company reduce training costs?

If you answered "yes" to any of the questions, your company is a candidate for eLearning. eLearning provides you with a cost-effective means for training your employees quickly and easily regardless of your requirements and their geographic location.

What are some characteristics of eLearning?
Your company can benefit from eLearning in many ways. Some eLearning characteristics include:
- Easy accessibility
- Reduced training costs
- Consistent and accurate message

Easy Accessibility
eLearning provides the ability to conduct training anywhere an employee has access to the Internet. They could be at their desk, at home, on the retail floor, in a breakroom, or at Starbucks. Employees have training available to them at their fingertips 24-hours per day. Employees no longer are required to spend hours or days of unproductive time traveling to and attending training classes or events. eLearning provides your employees quick and effective training that reduces your travel and training costs.

Reduced Training Costs
Think about the costs of conducting classroom training courses to reach all of your employees. How much does it cost to provide travel, food, and lodging to those employees attending the training? How much productivity time is lost with

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employees in a classroom and not performing their regular duties? Classroom training should not be eliminated, but augmented with eLearning. Some courses could be conducted solely via the Internet, but others must be conducted in a blended learning format.

Blended learning means there is both an eLearning and classroom requirement. Typically, the eLearning requirement is a prerequisite to the classroom. The eLearning is used to provide basic knowledge and ensure all attendees have cursory knowledge and are largely on the same level when the classroom training begins. Online pre- and post- tests are common to provide the instructor with data identifying weaknesses or areas to focus their efforts. How much more productive would your training be if your instructors knew beforehand the strengths and weaknesses of the attendees. A five-day training course could be reduced to 2-3 days. How much do you save when you calculate food and lodging costs as well as less productivity lost?

<u>Consistent and Accurate Message</u>
eLearning provides a consistent and accurate message to all employees in your company. eLearning also provides you with the ability to control training materials and content from a central location. Modifications can be made to a course and it is immediately available to all employees. All employees receive the same training no matter where they are or what time of the day they complete the training. Let's say you currently use training manuals such as instructor guides and student workbooks. What happens if you print 10,000 manuals and the content changes? What associated cost is there to re-print those manuals? You could provide an addendum or insert for the manuals. But, how do you ensure all manuals get the insert? Will the employees know which part of the training is not valid? eLearning helps you control the accuracy of the training materials as well as printing and distribution costs.

eLearning can be a solution for every company. Remember, ask yourself the following questions:

- Could your company increase sales?
- Could your company increase your customer's satisfaction?
- Do you have processes or procedures specific to your company?
- Must your employees complete HIPPA, Sarbanes-Oxley, OSHA, sexual harassment, or other compliance training?
- Do you have new or legacy software applications on which you must train your employees?
- Do all your employees, distributors, or channel partners know how your products benefit your customers?
- Could your company reduce training costs?

If you answer "yes" to any of them, you are a candidate for eLearning.

Is eLearning the Right Solution for Your Company?

eLearning is often not a high priority for companies. Many executives and business leaders shy away from eLearning projects. Budgets for eLearning and training are limited and leaders are reluctant to allocate money for something that is not a priority. The issue is many eLearning programs developed in the past were not effective. Also, companies had a difficult time calculating the ROI for their eLearning programs. You must take the necessary steps and due diligence to determine if eLearning is right for your organization. If you do not, no solution will have a quantifiable ROI.

Think about the following questions when determining a quantifiable ROI:
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What are the key business problems being addressed?
- What are the alternative solutions to address these problems?
- Are these solutions aligned with your overall corporate strategy and objectives?
- What does your leadership think could solve these issues?

Determine your current training costs. Specific numbers are needed. Calculate travel costs, hotel costs, instructor salaries and benefits, printed materials, conference room rental, and other costs such as time away from work and employee satisfaction. Unless you know what you are currently spending, you cannot determine if eLearning or any other training program will help.

You might be thinking *how in the world can eLearning help us with our issues?* For certain issues eLearning is beneficial.

eLearning should be a priority for all organizations. It should also have executive and leadership support. As the Internet develops, the need to distribute information has never been more important. Many companies refuse to embrace and leverage the power of the Internet. It can make your company not only more efficient and effective, but also reduce costs and increase sales.

As companies grow, workforces increase and are spread out geographically both nationally and globally. Using eLearning technologies is an efficient way to get information and knowledge out to your audience.

Scenario-based eLearning Increases Employee Retention

Scenario-based branching logic eLearning is an effective means for training employees on specific processes and procedures they encounter in their day-to-day activities. Employees are presented with common scenarios and must react to their decisions in order to successfully complete the training. An innovation in scenario-based training is branching logic. Branching logic creates a real-life and interactive experience for the employee.

What is branching logic?
Branching logic takes a scenario-based "choose your own adventure" approach to training employees. Branching logic places your employees in real-world scenarios specifically tailored to your company's unique processes and procedures. This experiential training allows your employees to experience common situations that may occur on a sales call, customer interaction, or interactions with other employees. At regular intervals during the training, the employee must make a decision. Based on their decision, correct or incorrect, the next scenario is dependent on their specific decision. If the employee chooses incorrectly, they realize jeopardy or a less-than-perfect situation they must remedy in order to get back on the correct path. No two employees experience the same training path and still successfully meet the objectives.

Most training provides correct or incorrect feedback then advances to the next scenario regardless of the employee's decision. However, employees learn from making mistakes and correcting their behavior based on that experience. The next time a similar situation occurs, the employee will know what they need to do because they have adjusted their behavior.

What does this mean to you?
Scenario-based branching logic eLearning provides you with many benefits that impact your company's bottom line including:
- Increased sales
- Reduced training and operating costs
- Increased customer satisfaction

Scenario-based branching logic eLearning:
- Increases employee productivity by preparing them for common scenarios and situations they experience in their day-to-day activities
- Reduces future mistakes because employees learn from their mistakes in a controlled training environment
- Increases employee retention resulting in:
  - Increased sales
  - Increased customer satisfaction
  - Decreased operating costs
- Reduces training costs because the employee can complete the training from a POS terminal, their workstation, at home, etc.

Common eLearning Myths

Many myths exist regarding eLearning. What is fact and what is fiction? Here are the most common eLearning myths.

Myth: If you build it they will come.
Most employees do not actively seek training opportunities unless they are tied to a promotion or increased earning potential. Even then, there is no guarantee. You could spend thousands of dollars on off-the-shelf or custom eLearning courses, but merely placing them on a learning management system (LMS) or making them available will not entice employees to complete the training. You must provide an incentive or create excitement with the initial rollout of eLearning. If the training is done properly, the employees will be interested, learn, and come back for more.

Myth: PowerPoint is effective for eLearning.
It is amazing how many companies create a PowerPoint presentation and call it eLearning. A PowerPoint presentation available on the Internet can be considered eLearning, but is it effective? Is the employee learning? Interactive, performance-driven training can change work behaviors and increase employee knowledge. A PowerPoint should be used for presentations, not learning. PowerPoints and authoring tools create basic page-turner courses, also known as glorified PowerPoint presentations. Although these methods are inexpensive and easy for getting get quick information out, they do not capture your employees' interest long enough for them to absorb knowledge and change behavior. This renders the training useless.

Myth: CD-Rom training is all we need.
CD-Rom training is a good method to train geographically dispersed employees…if you determine the content will never change, you do not want to track user performance, and the course is good for a one-time training event. But today's technology has changed how to deliver training to employees across the world. The Internet has created a more efficient method of distributing training. CD-Roms are not the most efficient method to maximize your training dollars.

Myth: Off-the-shelf training is just as effective as custom training.
Off-the-shelf programs can be useful and effective training at times…if you are looking for Management 101, Leadership 101, or Sales 101 basic training techniques. But, if you are looking for specific training based on your company and your unique processes, products, and specific job-related tasks, off-the-shelf training is not effective. Custom training takes an ordinary topic and turns it into an effective learning experience tailored specifically to your company. Plus, it can be easily modified as your company grows and changes.

Myth: Internally developing eLearning is easy.
The cost of developing eLearning can vary depending on the level of interactivity, course length, audio or video requirements, and development time. Developing eLearning internally using your own resources can be inexpensive from an actual dollar figure perspective. However, what indirect costs are associated with using your own internal teams? What dollar figure do you put on your employees' time and other resources?   Do you have enough resources to cover every project? What expertise do you currently have internally? What if a project's deadline moves up and you do not have coverage? How much time is allocated for developing an eLearning course? How could your internal resources be used more effectively? What is the risk of missing your deadline? These are questions you need to answer. Whether you develop eLearning internally or with an outside vendor, it can be done inexpensively if planned properly.

Myth: We do not need to tie our training to a return on investment (ROI).
This is a difficult myth to disprove because it is hard to measure. Getting hard numbers on ROI is difficult regarding eLearning. Many executives in today's competitive business environment realize and understand that measuring ROI in anything is difficult. They tend to see more value in training and developing their workforce to improve sales or customer satisfaction because increased revenue and customer satisfaction indexes are quantifiable. The ability to tie eLearning to a quantifiable ROI results in executive buy-in since there are hard numbers to justify the effectiveness and the expense.

Myth: We must buy a LMS and then determine our eLearning strategy.
Many companies make this common mistake. Many companies focus on the LMS first because it is typically the most expensive aspect of eLearning. It is important to track and monitor training. However, having a training strategy in place first for what you want to accomplish is integral before purchasing an LMS. What do you want to achieve with training? What objectives do you want to achieve? Are the objectives aligned with your overall business strategy? How much of the training is classroom-based, web-based, or blended? What are you trying to fix with training? These are questions requiring answers prior to purchasing an LMS.

Myth: Leadership involvement in eLearning is not important.
Executive and leadership buy-in for eLearning is extremely important for your initiatives to be successful. If your leadership is not involved or does not believe in eLearning, how are you going to successfully roll out your initiatives? What if you need additional funding? Are your training strategies aligned with your business objectives? Can they provide feedback on what your employees need to be trained? What areas of your business could improve from training? It is important to make sure that any training you do, whether classroom-based, web-based, or blended, is aligned with your organization's overall strategy. Trying to roll out eLearning will not be successful without executive level support and involvement.

Myth: eLearning is boring.

eLearning can be as boring or as exciting as you want to make it. Many companies use authoring tools, PowerPoints, PDFs, and other methods for creating eLearning. No interactivity. "Page-turners." A sound instructional design can take the most boring topic and place the employee in a training experience where they will remain interested and learn. New and innovative instructional design methods are eliminating the "page-turner". What was once considered eLearning is being eliminated. eLearning is evolving.

Defining the eLearning Levels of Interactivity

The eLearning industry is rapidly changing in today's increasing competitive business market. It is important to have highly interactive training for your employees. Companies in the past have spent thousands of dollars on developing and purchasing eLearning without thinking their employees may not enjoy it or find it relevant to their job responsibilities. This waste of money has many executives cringing and hesitant to invest additional budget dollars towards these initiatives.

eLearning does not have to be a boring, non-relevant part of an employee's training program. If done correctly, eLearning can help solve critical business problems and alleviate the headaches in providing critical training to your employees.

First you must ensure your current or future eLearning initiatives meet the following criteria:

- Is the eLearning relevant to what your employees are facing on the job or specific business related issue?
    - In order to change behavior the eLearning programs must address specific business challenges and job related issues that the employee faces. For example, a Customer Service Agent may have difficulty handling certain levels of complaints, so scenario-based eLearning may help by putting that person in specific job related scenarios and determining how they deal with those particular problems.
- Is the eLearning interactive?
    - Does it provide a truly enjoyable experience for the employee? Does it make them accountable for their decisions and offer jeopardy and other consequences for making the wrong decision? Studies have shown that people learn more by doing than by passively reading text on a page-turner course. They learn more by making mistakes and learning from them. After all, would you rather have your employee make a mistake while going through a training program or while on the actual job where it could cost your organization thousands of dollars?

There are various levels of interactivity you can use as a standard in determining how interactive you want your eLearning. If you are looking to distribute basic information, a simple page-turner course could meet your requirements. If you are looking for an actual change in behavior, a more interactive eLearning course is necessary.

The Levels of Interactivity as defined by the Department of Defense (DoD) provide a basis for developing effective and interactive eLearning in accordance with your corporate and training objectives. Your appropriate interactivity level is

based on the nature of the content, your technological infrastructure, budget constraints, and other factors.

Level I: Passive
The learner acts solely as a receiver of information. The learner is required to read the text on the screen, view graphics, illustrations, charts, and use the navigational buttons to progress forward through the program or move back. Engagement techniques include:

- Multiple choice exercises
- Pop-ups
- Rollovers
- Simple animations
- True/false exercises

Level II: Limited Interaction
The learner makes simple responses to instructional cues. The eLearning includes learning activities listed in Level I as well as scenario-based multiple choice and column matching related to the text and graphic presentation. Engagement techniques include:

- Scenario-based multiple choice, drag-and-drop, matching exercises
- Application simulations not requiring the learner to enter field data but merely follow a process or procedure
- Interactive animations where the learner has the ability to investigate

Level III: Complex Interaction
The learner makes a variety of responses using varied techniques in response to instructional cues. The responses include those listed for a Level II as well as text entry boxes and manipulation of graphic objects to test assessment of the information presented. Engagement techniques include:

- Complex application simulations requiring the leaner to enter data into fields
- Scenario-based branching logic where the learner experiences jeopardy for incorrect responses and their journey is predicated on their decisions

Level IV: Real-time Interaction
The learner is directly involved in a life-like set of complex cues and responses. This involves engaging the learner in a simulation that mirrors the work situation with stimuli-and-response coordinated to the actual environment. Engagement techniques include:

- Real-time learning and assessment
- Collaborative environment with other learners and a facilitator or moderator

It is important to remember the level of interactivity is dependent on:
- The nature of the content

- Technological limitations
- Budget limitations
- The target audience

As the level of interactivity increases, the development time and level of complexity increases. It is challenging to develop highly interactive training with a short timeline and limited budget. Knowing the levels of interactivity helps in determining how you should address your employees' training needs regarding eLearning. By knowing your audience, budget, and overall training and business objectives you will be able to determine what level is appropriate for your eLearning initiative.

How Much Does eLearning Cost?

This question is asked time and time again. It is the most common question but also one of the most difficult to answer. At least, for customized training. Off-the-shelf products have a fixed price and typically are less expensive, but you also lose the ability to tailor the training to your unique company.

To answer this question for customized eLearning you must first understand what factors determine eLearning development costs. Factors used in determining an accurate price are:

- Course size
- Interactivity level
- Tracking requirements
- Multimedia

Course Size
Course size is a fairly straight-forward concept. The larger the course, the higher the cost. How you determine the course size can vary. You can either identify the length in minutes or by the number of screens. A 60-minute course typically costs more than a 15-minute course with all other factors being equal. A 45-screen course typically costs more than a 25-screen course.

Interactivity Level
The associated development costs typically increase as the levels of interactivity increase. A Level III interactivity course typically costs more than a Level I interactivity course. Answering straightforward multiple-choice questions is much simpler to develop than a sophisticated scenario-based application simulation.

Tracking Requirements
The more data you want tracked in the LMS, the higher the developments costs. The most common data tracked are pre-test and post-test scores, status/progress (Not Started, In Progress, Completed), and completion date. However, tracking the specific answers to questions, how long the learner was in the course, etc. will increase costs due to the programming logic and extensive testing required.

Multimedia
Development costs typically increase when incorporating multimedia elements such as audio and video. If no current audio and video assets exist, these must be produced. Renting a studio, hiring voice talent, and mixing the tracks can be an expensive endeavor. Especially if you do not have these resources available internally.

You may be thinking *cost is not that hard to determine* based on the descriptions listed above. But, this is where it gets more complicated. As you might have noticed, the word "typically" is used throughout the descriptions. This was done

by design. When using one factor to determine cost, it is straightforward. A 30-minute course costs more to develop than a 15-minute course. However, when you incorporate more than one variable, identifying the applicable costs is more difficult. For example, is a 15-minute course at Level III interactivity more expensive than a 30-minute course at a Level I interactivity? Or, does a 15-minute course at Level III interactivity with an audio production requirement cost more or less than a 30-minute course at Level I interactivity having existing audio clips? It is difficult to say one way or the other.

The costs associated with the different levels of interactivity are variable. However, general guidelines exist. According to the *Office of Domestic Preparedness* and the *American Society of Training and Development*, applicable costs for one hour of seat time per interactivity level are:

Level I	$10,000-$25,000
Level II	$25,000-$40,000
Level III	$40,000-$55,000
Level IV	$55,000-$70,000

The most important aspect in determining accurate development costs is having well-defined requirements. Customized eLearning is essentially a software development process, so it does not have a specific pricing matrix. Anyone who tells you that it does may not have all the facts and could be undercutting the actual price or overcharging you. You do not have to be an expert in eLearning, but you should have a clear understanding of what you want. Identifying and understanding the course requirements result in you getting the most for your budget and standards.

The Number One Reason Why eLearning Projects Fail

You have the best subject matter experts, project managers, instructional designers, graphic designers, and web developers. You have an identified budget and a reasonable development timeline. There is no way the project can fail, is there? You have everything you need. People, money, time. How do you even know you have the right people, the applicable budget, and a reasonable timeline? What is missing?

The number one reason why eLearning initiatives fail is poorly identified requirements. Requirements should be identified early in the process. Requirements are the basis for creating an RFP, evaluating proposals, determining whether to develop the eLearning in-house or with an outside vendor, if off-the-shelf or customized training is applicable, what resources are required, the associated costs, and how long it takes to develop.

Questions to help you identify requirements include:
- What objectives must the training satisfy?
- Does the content already exist or must it be created?
- What technical limitations exist, if any?
    - What are minimum Internet browser requirements?
    - What are the allowed development languages?
- What data must be tracked to the LMS?
- What interactivity level is applicable?
- Who is the audience for which the training is intended?
- What type of training is required?
    - Application simulation?
    - Compliance?
    - Product?
    - Sales or operations?
- Is the eLearning part of a blended solution?
- How long is the training?

Requirements determine the scope of the initiative. There are many more questions that could be answered to help you identify solid requirements. The more answers you provide to these questions, the more accurate the people, money, and timeline.

Well-defined requirements provide the development team with a good understanding what they need to do. This saves you time and money in the long run because there is less re-work and modifications. Without well-defined requirements, designers and developers will assume what you have in mind. More often than not, their interpretation will not be the same as yours. Well-defined requirements provide the development team as well as the project owner with a guide for the overall initiative.

The likelihood of completing the project on-time and under budget is greater if you know what you need to do and understand the potential risks. Requirements are the building blocks to a successful eLearning initiative.

10 Questions for Finding the Right eLearning Vendor

Looking for an eLearning guru? Have a tight budget and tight deadline? The process of finding the right vendor to provide outside eLearning consulting is a challenging task.

When we turn to outside experts, we are cautious and feel we lose autonomy. With the fast-paced world we live and work in, we feel increasing pressure to perform above our means within a limited time frame. But we also face the fact that deep down inside we simply cannot do it all on our own. There is so much to do, so much to know, so much information out there to learn, and not enough time.

If you determine you do not have the internal resources to develop interactive eLearning, an outside vendor will save your time and effort to develop your project. The number of companies in the market providing eLearning development, custom development, off-the-shelf courseware, CD-Rom, web conferencing, training outsourcing, LMSs, and learning content management systems (LCMSs) grows every day.

Where do you begin when looking for an eLearning vendor? Who do you trust? How do you find the right one? Will the vendor perform as they say they will or is it a sales pitch? You want to spend your time and money wisely, and put your faith and trust in the right people with the right experience, but how?

Here are 10 questions when looking for the right eLearning vendor:
- What experience do they have in eLearning?
- Is eLearning their core competency or one of many services they offer?
- Are you assigned a specific project manager during the course of the project?
- Are there regular sign-offs, reviews, or updates regarding your project?
- What is their development process?
- Do they have a good track record for being on time and within budget?
- Do they have good references?
- Have they worked on a similar project as yours before?
- How much will you have to be involved during the process?
- Do they use proprietary development languages or authoring tools?

These are just a few tips to look for in finding and determining the right eLearning vendor for your project. With the right assistance, experience, and blueprint for success your project will be a successful one.

Should You Use Off-the-shelf or Custom eLearning?

When looking to implement an eLearning initiative, companies are faced with a decision whether to use off-the-shelf training or have training customized specifically to their company. Either method can be effective depending on your objectives and return on investment (ROI).

Off-the-shelf eLearning
Off-the-shelf eLearning courses are training courses you can buy at retail stores or from other eLearning companies. Although this solution is often a less expensive solution to customization, there are some limitations.

Generic Content
Off-the-shelf training contains generic content. If you want to train your employees about qualifying a lead, an off-the-shelf product may be a good solution. If you want to train your employees about selling products to your different customer segments, customized training is more suited for your needs.

Modification Limitations
Off-the-shelf training content and interactions cannot be modified. What you buy is what you get. If your processes, procedures, or products change, off-the-shelf training becomes obsolete. The shelf-life of the course is shorter. If you must buy additional training to coincide with the modifications, the overall cost of the training can skyrocket.

Data Tracking
Off-the-shelf training may not provide you with the ability to track user data such as test scores. Although there is a movement for learning management systems (LMSs) to become standardized using AICC or SCORM, each LMS has unique capabilities.

Customized eLearning
Customized eLearning provides you with much more flexibility. Although purchasing the course may cost a bit more initially, the benefits can more than offset the initial costs.

Unique Content
Customized eLearning contains content based on your specific requirements. You can target the training to meet specific corporate and learning objectives. Since the content is targeted specifically to your company and the engagement techniques are customized to the content, employee retention is higher. Your employees can immediately apply what they learned to their day-to-day activities.

Unlimited Modifications
Unlike off-the-shelf eLearning, customized eLearning can be continually modified. If processes, procedures, or products change, so can the training.

Since you own the source code, you can make modifications internally or contract with an outside vendor to make modifications quickly and easily. The shelf-life of the training then becomes infinite at a minimal cost.

Data Tracking
Customized training can track whatever data you desire to the LMS. Whether you want test scores, screens accessed, the time it took the learner to complete the training, or what specific answers they provided for each test question or exercise, customized training can provide the information regardless of your LMS.

Off-the-shelf eLearning is an inexpensive way to get training to your employees, but the lack of flexibility with the content, modifications, and data tracking may result in a lower retention rate for your employees and a course that can become obsolete with any change within your company. Customized eLearning may have a higher initial cost, but it also provides you with the flexibility to tailor the training specifically to your company resulting in a higher employee retention rate and instant applicability to your employees' day-to-day activities.

eLearning Technology Infrastructure Requirements Checklist

When beginning an eLearning initiative, you must identify specific technical requirements. Here is a checklist to help you get started.

Do you have a LMS?

_____ Yes

_____ No

If yes, which LMS? _____

What version? _____

What connection bandwidth is in place?

_____ T1

_____ DSL

_____ 512 kbps

_____ 256 kbps

If other, what speed? _____

What database do you have?

_____ Access

_____ Oracle

_____ SQL

_____ Other

If other, which database? _____

Do you have Macromedia Flash player on your computers?

_____ Yes

_____ No

If yes, what version? _____

What is your screen resolution requirement?

_____ 640x480

_____ 800x600

_____ 1024x768

_____ Other

If other, what is the screen resolution? _____

What Internet browsers do you support?

_____ Internet Explorer

_____ Navigator

_____ Firefox

_____ Other

If other, which one? _____
What version (for all responses)? _____

Do you require video?
_____ Yes
_____ No

If yes, do you have the assets or internal resources to produce it?
_____ Yes
_____ No

Do you require audio?
_____ Yes
_____ No

If yes, do you have the assets or internal resources to produce it?
_____ Yes
_____ No

eLearning for Retailers

The retail industry is as competitive as ever. With retail companies competing for market share, it can be challenging to adopt strategies to gain an edge. With many retailers upgrading their network infrastructures and POS systems, their use of Internet technologies to improve performance and efficiency is increasing. One of the challenges also faced by retailers is an expanding work force. As new stores open across the country and globally, more employees are hired in geographically dispersed locations.

A challenge with the expansion of business is training employees. Employers must train them how to effectively interact with customers, manage and perform store operations, understand product benefits, and sell. Many retail companies have adopted and implemented eLearning strategies to reach their employees working at multiple locations and train them on the skills needed for success.

Big Box retailers such as Best Buy, Circuit City, Home Depot, and others already do eLearning in addition to classroom training.

For those who have not adopted eLearning strategies, look at the following areas where eLearning may be beneficial:

- **Store Operations**
    - Store policies, procedures, and processes
    - What are the steps to opening the store, running the POS system, closing the store, security procedures, etc.?
- **Retail Sales**
    - How do your retail sales employees interact with your customers?
    - Are they offering the appropriate customer assistance?
    - Do your customers have a consistent and positive experience when they come into your stores?
    - Do your sales employees understand the sales processes and procedures?
    - Are they up-selling or cross-selling new merchandise or seasonal products relevant to the customer?
- **Management**
    - Are your management employees knowledgeable on running their store, district, or region?
- **Compliance and Occupational Safety**
    - Are your retail stores consistent with compliance and federal regulations?
    - Are they compliant with OSHA and other standards?
    - Do they know proper procedures in the event of an emergency with a customer or an employee?
- **Product Training**

- Are your retail store employees trained on product lines to effectively answer the customer's questions and provide the appropriate assistance?
- Are your store employees aware of new products and seasonal product launches to sell those items effectively and at the appropriate time with other merchandise?

- **Loss Prevention**
  - Do your employees understand employee theft policies?
  - Does your store security understand the proper procedures and what signs and situations to look for when observing employees?
- **Company Policies and Procedures**
  - Do your store employees and management understand company policies and procedures and in a consistent manner?
  - Do you require regular updates and changes to your policies where printing documents may become expensive to update?
- **Customer Service**
  - Are your customers getting the service they deserve? Are they coming in to your store and having a pleasant prompting them to return?
- **POS and Systems**
  - Do you have a new or upgraded POS system or other applications your employees may be unfamiliar with?
- **New Hire Orientation**
  - Do your new employees receive new hire orientation training?
  - How much time is spent in classroom training?
  - Could your employees benefit from self-paced learning?

General questions to determine if eLearning is solution for your company are:
- Do you have geographically dispersed employees?
- Do you have difficulty getting critical product information out to your retail sales employees?
- Could your sales employees improve their sales skills to up-sell or cross-sell additional products?
- Do you have new products or seasonal products your require training in a timely and efficient manner?
- Do you have regulatory compliance requirements?
- Could you improve customer satisfaction in your retail stores?
- Do your training programs need content upgrading or are your programs constantly changing?
- Are you spending a lot of money sending trainers out to multiple locations to train your retail store employees and managers?
- Do you desire consistency of your training programs and the information sent to your store employees?
- Are there store operations requiring improvement (opening, closing, departmental procedures, etc)?

- Could more efficient training methods help increase sales for your retail sales employees?

Having a well-trained workforce helps you improve efficiencies for your retail operations, reduces turnover, and increases sales for your organization.

How to Increase Channel Partner and Distributor Sales

Effectively training your network of channel partners and distributors on new products and existing products can increase your sales significantly. The common problem heard among channel partners and distributors is, "if we knew about a particular product line, had adequate training on a product, or had information about a new product launch, we could sell it." Providing proper training and distributing quick knowledge on your products can increase your sales.

Training Your Distributed Network

The importance of training your channel partners, sales force, resellers, and distributors has increased in today's competitive environment. More companies are expanding nationally or globally and use outside partners and distributors to sell their products. But as companies expand, the ability to reach those individuals out in the field and in other locations is challenging. How do you get information and product training out to all of your geographically dispersed partners?
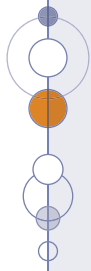
Information Age Strategies

Using Information Age strategies is an effective means to distribute knowledge, information, and training to your distributed network in the field. Keeping the communication lines open on new products, existing products, and company policies and procedures makes a difference between competing in today's market and being left behind.

Five Important Training Tips

Five important tips to remember when providing training to your channel partners, field sales reps, resellers, and distributors to increase sales and product knowledge are:

1. Implement an information portal, such as an intranet or learning management system to track training and provide a central location for your outside sales force to access information on existing products, new products, and other critical company information.

2. Develop effective and interactive eLearning to train your distributed network on sales processes, product knowledge, systems, compliance, and company policies ensuring they are up to speed and have the tools to increase sales for your organization.

3. Develop creative ways to ensure they are completing the training and getting critical and timely information. For example, offer certifications on products or bonuses for increased sales due to practical application of their eLearning knowledge.

4. Create a mini-profit center by developing eLearning for your channel partners and distributors and have them pay you for taking the training.

5. Ensure your training objectives are in line with your overall corporate strategy and objectives in determining what products and what areas you should train your resellers. Tie the training to a specific business problem or need for improvement.

These are just a few of many tips for helping your channel partners, sales force, resellers, and distributors increase sales and product knowledge. By providing powerful training on new and existing products you can help increase sales for your organization.

eLearning Business Case Development Guidelines

General guidelines to use when presenting your eLearning business case include:

Summary
Brief description of the project and its components. It is a good idea to lead with this, even if the primary reader is familiar with the details. You never know who will review the business case. Remember to keep this section short and to the point, so the focus quickly turns to benefits.

Benefits
Include all benefits, especially those held most important for the target group. In this case, there are intangible benefits such as "Information is available faster" and many tangible benefits impacting the bottom line, such as "Saves printing costs."

Costs
Provide bottom line costs. If someone is questioning the breakdown, he or she can ask for further analysis. This tactic prevents individuals with counter-agendas from focusing on the minute details and picking apart each piece of information.

Financial Return
This is a vital piece of the internal sales pitch and is written in clear, direct language that speaks directly to the CEO, CFO, and others responsible for profit.

Development Schedule
Provide specific milestones. If your goal is to obtain project funding, leave inter-project milestone dates vague to reduce objections related to conflicts with other project roll-outs. Focus on major milestones like project kick-off, pilot tests and final launch times.

Team Experience
Identify the team's capabilities. If the development team is internal, reference their prior experience on similar projects, academic credentials, and any other noteworthy items. If the team is an outside vendor, list previous experience, results from reference checks, and any awards or honors they have received.

Writing an Effective Request for Proposal (RFP)

Writing an effective RFP is both time consuming and intimidating. Frustrations can mount for both the client and vendor if the process is not completed thoroughly and accurately.

From the client perspective, it takes time to write an eLearning request for proposal (RFP). You want it done right with accurate information and completed in a timely matter. If so, it is effective in meeting your business objectives and training strategies. A well-constructed RFP will ease the evaluation process and result in fewer questions from vendors.

From the vendor perspective, it takes time to respond to an RFP and to put together the best response possible. Vendors do not want to have their time wasted by spending hours developing a response to an RFP lacking the appropriate requirements and information needed to put together a detailed response with accurate costs and timelines.

Evaluating RFP Responses from Vendors

You may receive one or several RFP responses depending on how many vendors prepare a bid. Typically, three vendors are recommended for a competitive bid. Evaluating RFP responses is a time consuming and tedious process in determining how vendors differentiate themselves.

When evaluating each response, you must compare each response using the same criteria. Otherwise, you may not be comparing apples to apples. Are you comparing the same factors and requirements for each vendor? Have you provided the vendors with detailed information to result in an accurate proposal?

Remember, eLearning development is a software development process. Most projects fail due to lack of solid requirements and objectives. If the requirements have not been thoroughly analyzed and identified, the project will not be completed on time or under budget.

In evaluating vendors, base your decision on criteria including:
- Personnel experience
- Previous work examples
- Deliverable date
- Cost
- Development process
- Overall response quality

Determine what is most important to you and weight the criteria appropriately. Rating each vendor assists with the decision making process.

eLearning Links and Resources

American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)
www.astd.org

Bersin & Associates
www.bersin.com

Brandon Hall
www.brandon-hall.com

Chief Learning Officer Magazine
www.clomedia.com

E-Learning Guild
www.elearningguild.com

e-LearningGuru.com
www.e-learningguru.com

E-Learning! Magazine
www.elearning.b2bmediaco.com

HR.com
www.hr.com

HR Outsourcing Today
www.hrotoday.com

Learning & Training Innovations
www.ltimagazine.com/

Life Long Learning Magazine
www.llmagazine.com

Training Magazine
www.trainingmag.com

Training Media Review
www.tmreview.com

TrainingOutsourcing.com
www.TrainingOutsourcing.com

Workforce Performance Solutions
www.wpsmag.com