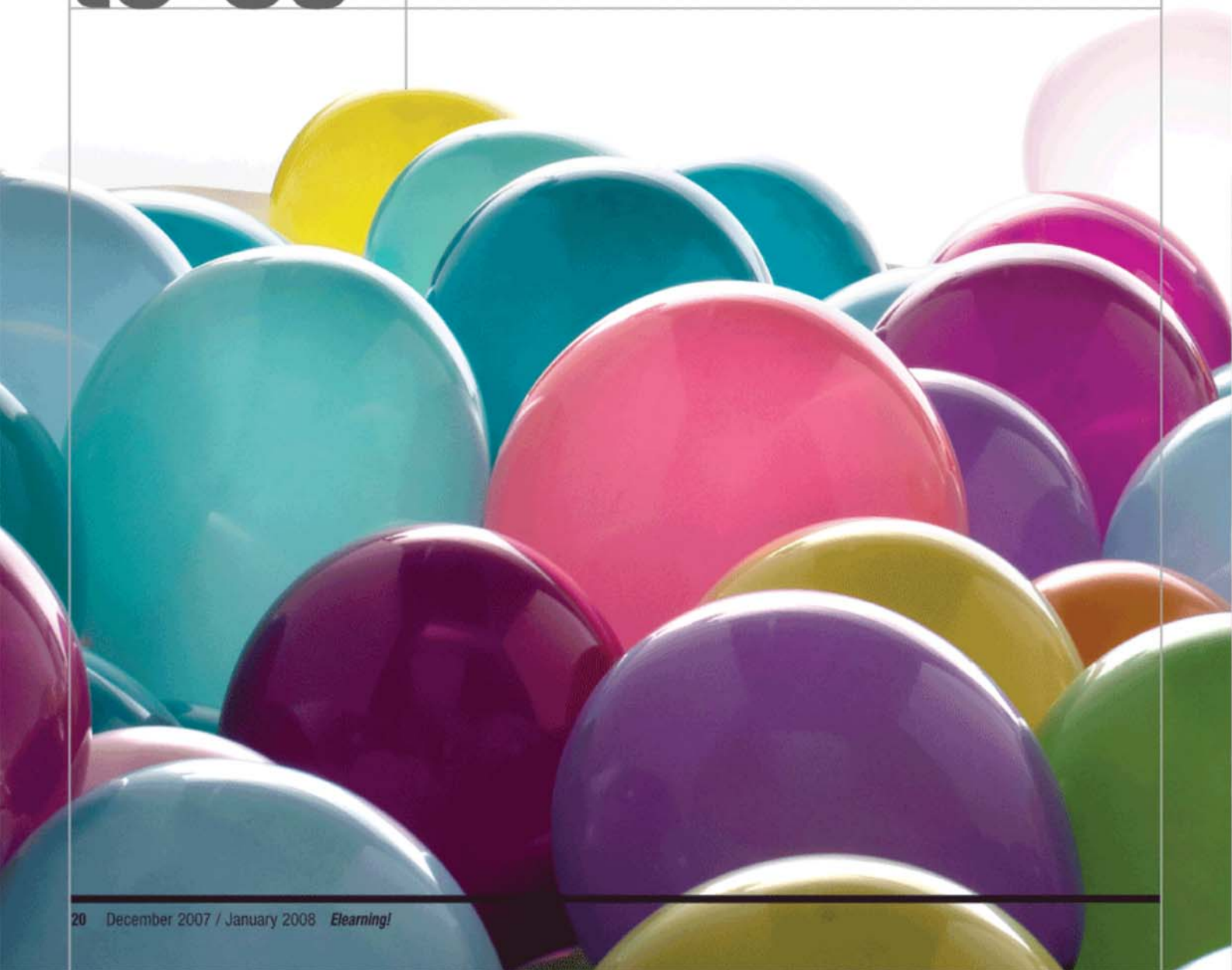


Happy

Birthday

to Us



MY, HOW THE E-LEARNING INDUSTRY HAS GROWN SINCE 1997

BY ELLIOTT MASIE

In 1997, as the e-business/e-commerce/dot-com era was building, the term “e-learning” was born. Several of us started to use it to describe the use of the Internet to deliver what we were calling CBT, or computer-based training.

The core idea was to allow an employee to access the programmed instructional courses that were then being delivered from individual workstations or over corporate internal networks. The focus was to change the delivery mode and to extend the reach of CBT to workers in any location, and even from their homes.

Over the next few years, the effort evolved to work out the kinks of Internet delivery. Bandwidth was an issue for many offices, as it was common for remote locations to be connected to the Internet by low-speed dial-up. This made for frustrating or funny challenges as pages loaded very slowly.

This was also the start of the learning systems field. If we were going to deliver e-learning to workers throughout the organization, we would need systems to authorize and track the content. The first wave of learning management systems (LMS's) was focused on administering the delivery of courses from external collections of e-learning content (from organizations with older names, like CBT systems).

The next wave of innovation in e-learning was the expansion of the media formats that were used to present content and to engage the learners. Early e-learning was limited to text and a few still images. Next, we were able to add a small amount of animation. Then came the use of audio (voice and sound). The next wave was the deployment of video: Starting with very shaky and small video images, it has improved every year to where we are now approaching the use of high-definition video in the next 24 months.

LEARNER INTERACTIONS

Learner interactions also started to evolve:

- >>> Early e-learning was designed around a behaviorist-focused CBT model. Learners were presented a page of content and were often given a comprehension question to test if they understood it. This branched to a moment of praise (Good job, Elliott!) and on to the next set of content. Or to remedial phrasing and re-teaching of the content.
- >>> Soon, learners asked for more control of the sequence of content. Some e-learning design started to include a Microsoft Explorer framework, which displayed all of the modules and content, allowing users to navigate based on their own learning needs.
- >>> Gaming, simulation and other immersive learning modes also made their way into the world of e-learning. Designers and learners reached for more creative ways of dealing with content.
- >>> Reference-based content also grew as a component of e-learning. Designers could easily add a wide range of links to additional, advanced or remedial content to the core instructional modules.

Over the past 10 years, the term e-learning has expanded to include a wider range of learning activities and models. These include synchronous training through the rise of Webinars and other Internet-based, real time classroom/seminars. In fact, in many organizations, the fastest growing segment of e-learning was Webinars. This marked a key expansion from “any time and any place” to “any place and all together at once.” One hybrid that emerged was the use of a live Webinar to create asynchronous content. In other words, use a scheduled live session to capture and then edit content to be made available as a streamed, anytime module.

NEWEST DEVELOPMENTS

In the last five years, e-learning has evolved quite a bit. It is almost difficult to really use that term to accurately describe a set of content. We are seeing innovations that include these hybrids of e-learning:

- >>Podcasting: The use of an audio segment to tell a story, deliver a perspective, distribute an update or even a component of a course. Podcasting clearly can be leveraged as an instructional resource, but it also can be used for corporate communication, customer support, and as part of a blended learning experience.
- >>Performance support: While this term was coined and developed by Gloria Geary more than 20 years ago, we are now seeing a rise in performance support technology that provides learning "at the moment of need" rather than in anticipation of need. Organizations are shifting a percentage of their e-learning assets to performance support assets.
- >>Gaming and simulation: The ability to leverage 3-D capabilities, gaming models and immersive simulations is rapidly


evolving some e-learning offerings. We are experimenting with virtual worlds like Second Life, alternate-reality games where content is created by "players," and on-going immersive simulations.

- >>Search and Google: A large percentage of the workforce turns to Google-like search engines as its first step in learning. Many employees do a search on internal or external resources to launch their e-learning efforts on a given topic.



- >>Social networking systems: Sometimes, our e-learning is focused on finding the right person rather than the right content. If I can locate a colleague with applicable experience, that may be all I need to gain mastery of a topic. Just yesterday, a colleague found me on "Linked

In," asked a very specific question, and I responded with an e-mail followed by a phone call. It was all that this person needed, yet he found me through a social networking system in which I was a friend of one of his friends.

In a nutshell, the "e" in e-learning has expanded and exploded. Some would say that we have shifted from "e" standing for electronic learning to the "e" meaning empowered or effective learning. We have gone way beyond behavioral CBT and are entering an era of collaboration, knowledge and connected learning. Three years ago, our e-Learning Consortium voted to change its name to the Learning Consortium. Are we still doing e-learning? Yes. But, do we care if that term is used? Not really. Learners and learning professionals will continue to leverage new technologies and methodologies that afford us the ability to learn better, faster and more effectively. 

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