Critical Success Factors for e-Learning Projects

What we have learned from 20 years of experience

By Sally-Ann Moore

This article is designed to help human resource and education professionals embarking on on-line learning projects avoid pitfalls and ensure success in today's environment. The piece is structured into the following key sections:
- Fundamental assumptions about training in companies
- What has not worked and why
- What we have learned from successful e-Learning projects
- Integrating work and learning
- Measuring the benefits of e-Learning in companies

Fundamental Assumptions about Training & Development in the Enterprise:

During my time, as VP for business development in a very large training company, (over 3000 trainers worldwide) I spent many hours discussing training projects with large organisations. They had many reasons for conducting training, but these were not always clear, and sometimes without any value-adding component for the company (e.g.: one company was training people in arbitrarily in IT because they were going to fire them, and wanted to give them new skills to get a new job, as per the law in that country) However, there is only one good reason for training and that is to increase performance of the organisation in an increasingly competitive global economy. Performance then becomes the pillar and key measure of any training programme, but especially vocational training.

What's not working:

During this latest economic downturn in France, more companies than ever have turned to eLearning for the first time, in order to save up to 75% on delivery cost of training. However, not all projects have succeeded, and learner drop-out rates and motivation remains as an issue. For some companies here, significant investments in content and delivery technologies were not paying off despite the obvious economic promise of e-Learning.

Why it's not working:

Analysis of failing projects tended to assume that the problems were related to items such as:
- Speed or reliability of technology delivery
- Quality and depth of content
- Absence of human intervention or teachers

Key Success Factors:

None of the above was actually the main cause of failure. The analysis of successful projects points the way. Training projects using partial or all IT delivery to learners that achieved their objectives and good attendance - all had **four key factors in common**.

These four factors, which will be presented in detail, required more management attention and a more sophisticated use of technology in training needs analysis and measurement, not just delivery of learning and training.

Strategic Approach to e-Learning Projects and Training:

Companies are now aware of the critical success factors, but often find it difficult to identify clear business goals and measures, and priorities for training. In the presentation, we show how measures can be identified and set in line with business objectives by taking a systemic view of the target audience's activity in the organisation and

the use of a balanced scorecard. With reference to David Norton's model: measuring only the shareholder value or financial returns is somewhat like flying a plane while only watching the airspeed. Like pilots, we need a balanced set of measures to keep us on course to the destination, safely. David Norton proposes the following categories of measures that I have found to be ideal for setting the performance measures of training projects:
- Shareholder Value – In the case of training projects, an increased output, by the trainees in the activity they have been trained to perform better, e.g.: Sales.
- Customer Perception - A company may have an extremely healthy balance sheet and customers who hate them….will they be in business next year? A good measure of training is the customer's feedback on the difference it makes. I have even involved clients in delivery of role-plays and training design. Sound's risky? Dirty laundry? Not at all – a wonderful way of being client-centric is to collect their opinions on what the customer-facing organisation needs to learn to do better. The trust of your client will increase tenfold in this process of involvement.
- Key Business Process Drivers – Every organisation with a purpose will have a small but vital set of key business processes that drive their business value. Let's take the example of a Building society that lends money to homeowners; the key process is the client's credit approval process. Over recent years, this has been reduced from 24 days to 24 hours, and now if certain TV adverts are to be believed, 24 minutes. Without information technology, this would not have been possible, but imagine the IT without the people on the phone and behind the counter doing things very differently – and not without some pretty effective training.
- Rate of Innovation and Learning – Several CEO's have been quoted as saying the only competitive edge we have left is the rate at which we learn ….well yes, it's a fast changing world and while small companies can hire and fire as the competencies change, no large organisation can afford to do that – they have to ensure that their workforce is learning at least as fast as their rivals.

So remember, what you measure is what you get – testing knowledge and competence is a mere focus on the inputs to the value adding process – focus on the outputs, the results of the work done better, the categories measures above will keep the balance.

All the successful e-Learning and blended delivery projects uncovered were characterised by a clear sense of business objectives, with clear "output" measures that the employees understood, and were rewarded for. Furthermore, the management were perceived to be measuring the results. For busy executives, this is a more effective weapon than coaching which, while in fashion, is barely practical with today's flattened hierarchies and networked teams. This reminds me of my childhood breakfast (not in fashion!) of bacon and eggs: in such a meal the chicken is contributing but the pig is committed. How very like training projects and executives, all too often you're getting a chicken when what your project needs is a pig….the best way to make this conversion is the use of the balanced scorecard and filling in of that executive picture puzzle – why the training project

is good for the business – in a straight, hard line.

The other factor that stands out in the successful projects is the notion of selection: if you want someone to climb a tree, it's better to hire a squirrel than train a turkey. One of the biggest earliest e-Learning foundations was created by a very large software company whose world market domination was being slowed by lack of certified IT professionals to do systems management and development. 50 million dollars and one very complete on-line learning institute later, there were still only 7 out of 10 system manager vacancies being filled. The learning solution was not at fault – simply the contenders for certification were dropping like flies – only 15% completed the course, mainly because most of them simply didn't have the profile to be a systems manager or developer in the first place, and were merely attracted by the money. Not great selection process. The fourth factor, but no means least, good training and e-Learning projects always feature needs analysis, with a personalised curricula as a result. As

in medicine, half the battle is the diagnosis, so it is sad to note that companies only spend 15% of training budgets on needs analysis.

In conclusion, in favour of e-Learning, it is worth noting that surveys of staff show that they consider that over **85% of the skills required in their workplace**, were acquired informally, and not in training courses. Again, pause to reflect on the balance of the training budget that is still stacked up to 65% in favour of the formal training process, instead of on-the-job coaching and support. TEL

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