LEARNING SOLUTIONS MAGAZINE℠

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Getting Business Results From E-Learning

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E-Learning has become a mainstream tool for employee learning and development. Approximately a third of training is delivered electronically (ASTD 2008 State of the Industry Report). According to a study by the U.S. Office of Education, the evidence is that e-Learning (primarily Web-based education) can have a strong impact on learning outcomes (i.e., academic knowledge) in certain situations, even more so than traditional instructor-student face-to-face instruction.

Tony Payne, Senior Vice President of Information Technology for Focus Engineering, has pointed out that in addition to achieving these learning outcomes, the speed of delivery and relatively low cost of online programs make them very attractive. It seems like the e-Learning technology gets better every day, with excitement building around a wide variety of mobile tools that are becoming readily available.

It's understandable that many training professionals are enthralled with the glitz and glamour of e-Learning. Initially, achieving learning outcomes and business goals aren't as important as experimenting with a promising new delivery method for learning. That's the normal course of adoption of instructional methods: early adopters use the technology because it is new, and then others get on the bandwagon when the technology is clearly a solution to a specific need that they have.

However, companies should invest in e-Learning with their eyes wide open, and we don't mean like kids in a candy store. We mean proceeding with a clear understanding of what it takes, beyond the technology and content, to turn e-Learning programs into business results. Otherwise, it's a poor investment.

Commenting on the field, Clark Quinn, the author of *Engaging Learning: Designing e-Learning Simulation Games* writes in his blog, "The waste of organizational resources and learner time is tragic. Seldom has so much been done, for so many, for so little gain." But before writing-off your investment in e-Learning, you may want to consider what is preventing employees from using and applying e-Learning to achieve business results in your organization.

We have interviewed hundreds of participants in learning programs, both online and event-based. Essentially, the question we asked was, "Were you able to apply what you learned in a way that helped you achieve a business outcome or goal?" Perhaps not surprisingly, a large percentage of these employees answered "No."

However, when we delved deeper to understand what was preventing these learners from attaining and applying this new knowledge to achieve goals, we were surprised to discover that it was not a failure of the technology or the learning program itself. In most cases, learners point to factors outside of the learning program or event as being the most critical barriers to success.

The organizational factors that prevent employees from converting e-Learning into business achievement can be boiled down to five key principles. We call these principles the 5As, and together they make up the 5As Framework:

1) *Aligning* e-Learning initiatives (the content and purpose of the program, etc.) with individual and organizational goals;

2) *Anticipating* learning and success from participation in the e-Learning;

3) Forming a learning *Alliance* of learner with supervisor/boss;

4) *Applying* learning to achieving business goals; and

5) Being *Accountable* for business results.

Alignment

Employees feel motivation to participate in training programs when they understand how their participation in the program will help them be more effective in the organization. In other words, training and development activities must have a visible link in the chain of value that connects employee learning to significant bottom-line performance outcomes. Employees might find it fun to use the new technology, and might even appreciate the distraction from their normal work, but unless the e-Learning has an obvious relationship to business improvement, employees will not value the learning and the initiative will fail. It must be clear to learners that the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs they are being asked to internalize will contribute to their effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes on which they are measured. With alignment comes a higher level of motivation, greater commitment to results, and a better understanding of what must be done to achieve success.

Anticipation

We know that expectations are a major factor in learning. The research on expectations is clear about this: people who expect to increase their knowledge and skills learn more than people who do not have this expectation. Therefore, if you want to maximize learning and business results, you should make sure that learners are anticipating what they will learn from the program, why they will learn it, and what they will do with that learning. They should have high, but reasonable, expectations for how they will apply the learning to achieving business results. People who have a clear sense of the benefits, and who look forward to the experience, are more likely to increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities and take full advantage from the outset of what the program offers.

Alliance

We also know that an employee's supervisor or manager and top organizational leaders are essential partners in the learning process. Chris King, in writing in this magazine about the Challenges of Integrating Learning 2.0 (http://www.learningsolutionsmag.com/articles/26/the-challenges-of-integrating-learning-20) said, "As much as we need to communicate the new expectations of Learning 2.0 to our learners, we must spend equal time educating managers on the expectations and benefits of this new learning style." We would add that we must also educate managers about their role in supporting learning and its application.

 Employees are much more likely to assimilate new knowledge, skills, and attitudes if they believe that the people to whom they are accountable care about and support that learning. Immediate supervisors play an essential role in working with learners to set goals, to clarify expectations, to provide opportunities for utilization of that learning on the job, and to determine impact. And executives play an essential role in motivating employees to learn by communicating that the particular learning is valued by the organization.

We have observed in our work that managers who learn the most from leadership development programs, and who do the most with what they have learned (i.e., produce business results), are the same managers who report that they met with their supervisors before and after the learning event to discuss goals and results. These are the managers who feel supported, who believe that their participation in the learning event is important to the organization, and who know that what they do afterwards to improve performance will be recognized and rewarded.

Application

We know that for people to retain newly learned knowledge and skills they must apply that knowledge and those skills soon after learning. Whether building a team or solving a process problem, application of new knowledge and skills should occur within hours and days of the learning, not within weeks and months, or never, as so often happens. This means that learners must have meaningful opportunities to apply that learning. Supervisors and

learners must plan together to ensure these opportunities. You cannot leave the opportunity to use these skills to chance.

Accountability

Finally, we know that employees apply learning to achieving business results when they are held accountable. Accountability means answering important questions. What happened as a result of the learning process? Did the learning contribute to important business results? Was it worth the time, effort, and cost? Would the business goals have been achieved anyway, even without the training program? What needs to happen so that the learning can contribute to important business results? These are the questions that cause supervisors and learners to reflect on the learning process. The answers tell them where they are and what they still need to do to improve performance.

The process of being accountable can add tremendously to learning. Simply asking people questions about what they learned and how they are applying what they learned causes learners think about their experience, and reflect on what they learned and what they are doing with what they learned. This can renew the individual commitment to improve performance he or she made at the time of the learning event, but which waned in the face of work responsibilities and pressures. We have found that asking managers about the impact of a leadership development program they attended is like a jump-start for action. They frequently remember the changes they had intended to make after the program, and then they will again re-commit to making those changes.

Case Study: The 5As Framework at a Global Healthcare Company

A global health care products company used the 5As Framework to develop a Web 2.0 intervention. The Information Technology (IT) organization within the healthcare company wanted to improve the leadership competencies of its managers. They needed an information-on-demand tool that would support their training efforts and that would grow and change with the organization. To accomplish this, they created an internal wiki and made it available to all IT managers.

The wiki is a Web-based, on-demand resource, allowing for both company- and user-generated content. It is intended to provide just-in-time information that will help IT leaders develop the competencies they need to be successful. The wiki resource includes tips (suggested activities) and Web links to materials and company-specific courses. Materials consist of books, articles, Web sites, blogs, and videos.

The wiki is organized around leadership competencies. A study of the roles of IT managers identified 10 "functional competencies" that they need to be successful. For example, IT managers need to know how to "influence others" both within IT and across the company. Interviews with senior managers fleshed out the meaning and application of each of the 10 competencies, and then they identified, defined, and validated the competencies for IT managers. They broke the competencies down into what they mean at four progressively more competent levels: 1) people who are just beginning to develop this competency (learning); 2) people who have some learning and are now beginning to apply this competency in their work (applying); 3) managers who can lead others in applying the competency (leading); and 4) senior managers who are experts in this competency (expert). Then they selected resources that could help managers develop each of the 10 competencies at each of the four levels and posted them on the wiki.

Managers use the Resource Guide to increase their knowledge related to competencies. If a manager wants to become more effective in convincing others to support a particular solution, he or she can access the wiki and find tips and links to books, articles, other Web sites, blogs, and videos that might be helpful. For example, if a manager wants to become more effective in contributing to planning, he or she can go to this site and find resources about business planning and business assessment. The Resource Guide is rich in materials for self-directed learning.

However, as we said at the beginning of this article, excellent technology and content are not sufficient to convert e-Learning into business results. This is true for the Wiki Resource Guide, as well. The Web-based list of vetted materials by itself is not likely to have much impact on achieving goals of the IT organization, or on the company as a whole. Additional organizational elements are necessary to ensure that learning from the Resource Guide will make a difference.

This is where the 5As Framework comes in. Each element of the Framework must be in place to support the Resource Guide. First, learners must have clear learning goals that align with business outcomes, and they must understand how the wiki information will help them achieve business goals. Second, learners and their managers must anticipate success; they must believe that they can develop the needed competencies and, if they develop these competencies, that they will be successful and help IT be successful. Third, learners and their managers (or another sponsor in the organization) must agree on what the learner must learn, how and when this learning will be applied, and how they will know that application of the learning has had significant business results. Fourth, learners must apply their learning; whatever is learned from the Resource Guide must be applied very soon after reading, listening, and seeing. And, fifth, learners, their managers, and other relevant co-workers must hold themselves accountable by observing and measuring the impact of learning from the Resource Guide, and providing feedback to learners.

The IT organization asked themselves these 5A questions:

Alignment

Do the resource guide modules align with competencies that IT leaders need in order to achieve the strategic goals of IT? For example, IT needs to take a more direct role in helping business units achieve their business goals. Do the modules provide resources that can help IT employees learn how to be more effective in helping business units be successful?

Anticipation

Do users of the Resource Guide have the expectation that this tool can help them develop needed competencies and be more successful? Have they heard, or will they hear, this message from senior management?

Alliance

Are IT supervisors having conversations with employees about the competencies and the Resource Guide, and how it can help them achieve their learning goals? Are they using the Resource Guide together to learn together?

Application

How is the content from the Resource Guide being applied? How do we know it is being applied? Are supervisors giving employees opportunities to apply the content to their work?

Accountability

How is use of the Resource Guide making a difference in the work of IT employees? How is the Guide contributing to users achieving the business goals of IT and the company? What are the success stories that link the Resource Guide to improved competencies, and to achieving the organization's strategic goals?

Table 1 explains how the answers to these questions have been built into implementation of the wiki IT Resource Guide.

Table 1: *Building the 5As into a Wiki Resource Guide*

5A Framework	Applied to a Global IT Learning Initiative
Alignment	A competency study linked specific behaviors to the business outcomes IT wants to achieve. Managers complete a self-assessment that rates their level of functioning within each of the competencies so that they can see what they need to work on to be successful within IT. They can see the gap between where they are now and where they need to be to achieve IT's business goals. For example, they need to be able to deliver business solutions to internal clients.

Anticipation	Senior IT leaders have communicated to the organization that these competencies are important, that evaluation will occur, and that managers will be recognized for how well they develop and apply these competencies. The expectation is established that using the Resource Guide for learning is a priority of the organization.
Alliance	Learners and their managers are encouraged to meet together regularly to discuss learning goals and review progress toward achieving those goals. They are to form a learning partnership in which they create, and periodically assess, an individualized learning plan.
Application	Managers of learners are asked to provide opportunities for learners to apply their new knowledge and demonstrate competencies on meaningful tasks within IT. Managers give learners feedback, and direct them to additional materials in the Resource Guide that might be helpful.
Accountability	Observe and measure the application of learning from the Resource Guide to achieving business goals. Provide feedback to learners and their managers. Finally, encourage further learning and performance improvement based on these measures, and learners and managers discuss additional ways to contribute to business results.

We encourage you to fill out Table 1 for e-Learning programs in your organization. What is your organization doing to ensure alignment, anticipation, alliance, application, and accountability?

Summary

E-Learning clearly has great potential. Use of the medium is rapidly growing for employee training and development. However, as with other types of training delivery, technology and content are not enough to ensure application of the learning in ways to achieve important business results. The organization needs to manage and support the learning and application process. One way to do this is to manage learning interventions in terms of the 5As Framework. Ask yourself the following questions about e-Learning at your organization. Is there *alignment* of the e-Learning program with intended business results? Do learners *anticipate* that they will be able to use the learning to make a difference? Do learners and their managers have a learning *alliance* that supports learning, performance improvement, and results? Do learners have an opportunity for *application* of what they learn toward achieving business results? And are learners and their managers held *accountable* for learning and business results? Answering these questions will not guarantee that employees will learn or that they will apply that learning to achieving business goals. However, without a process that helps managers tackle the barriers preventing employees from applying knowledge from training programs, it is unlikely e-Learning programs will have a significant impact on business results.

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