

Locked Out: Bridging the Divide Between Training and Information Technology

By [Marc J. Rosenberg](#) & [Steve Foreman](#)

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Alarmed by a growing number of companies whose executives have been charged with accounting fraud and other crimes, the CEO of a company in the United States asked his corporate university to create a course that would provide training on compliance with the country's Sarbanes-Oxley law, and to deliver the training to all 20,000 global executives and managers as soon as possible. To meet the tight deadline and the heavy record-keeping requirements the Training organization turned to e-Learning, and started building a highly interactive, media-rich program that, in pilot testing, appeared to deliver the necessary skills and knowledge in an efficient, engaging, and effective manner. The e-Learning program even included a video address by the CEO stressing the importance of the training.

The Training department approached the Information Technology (IT) group about delivering the course on the company's computer network. The training program, at this point, was well under development when several concerns arose. The IT staff had strong reservations about delivering the course to managers and executives working in corporate headquarters, let alone in the 60-plus locations around the world. IT needed time to prepare, including several weeks to install the course on staging servers, where new or changed software applications are tested before they go live, and to run a series of tests of the video performance over the network. Furthermore, IT didn't know that the leader of the corporate university had sent an e-mail to all managers in the corporation telling them that the course would be available in a few days, and adding that they should take the course as soon as possible. Feeling boxed into a corner and pressured by the CEO, the CIO pulled valuable resources off of other critical projects to run some network tests. Her staff projected that the maximum number of simultaneous users who could access the course without negative impact to other mission-critical applications was just 20 people. Because this was unacceptable, course deployment was delayed.

The next day, the CEO called the CIO and the Chief Learning Officer (CLO) into his office to explain what happened. The CIO stated that the course did not conform to IT standards and would bring the corporate network to a crawl. Training would have to redesign the course, remove the rich media components — including several executive videos — and deliver the course in a format that used simple graphics and text. The CLO was embarrassed, and could only state that he would look into how much time it would take to redesign the course.

Gone are the days when training organizations could go their own way with regard to learning technology; it has become too complex and expensive. Training applications require sophisticated networks, reliable servers, and 24x7 support to deliver learning to everyone who needs it, when and where they need it.

Customers demand more flexibility, less disruption in how training is delivered, and faster and better access. Business demands more frequent updates to training content. Both Training and IT have a vested interest in meeting these demands. Despite their differences, the two groups ultimately have the best interests of the organization in mind and can only succeed when bridges are built between them.

Two different world views

Before we can talk about building bridges, however, we must understand the essential differences in how Training and IT groups approach their work.

IT organizations often see e-Learning in the same way as they see other enterprise applications in terms of technology – servers, applications, networks and data. IT's goals are efficiency, reliability, and security, and they achieve these goals through standardization, resource consolidation, careful planning, and rigorous process management.

The view of technology is quite different among trainers. For them, technology is an enabler for learning; a tool to be used, manipulated, and adjusted as the need arises. For example, while the planning horizon in IT is several months or a year, planning within Training happens in a matter of weeks, or a few months at most. Learning and human performance problems must be addressed rapidly, before they affect organizational performance. Many training groups are often brought in at the last minute to solve a human performance problem, and internal clients expect a quick solution.

In the process of accomplishing Training's goals, however, IT might not have vetted new and innovative e-Learning solutions. The Training group sees the issues of compliance and control with technology standards, so central to IT management, as obstacles that slow or stifle dissemination of learning throughout the organization. This culture clash discourages cooperation and, quite often, promotes conflict.

On one side — the IT staff: who find that learning technology is “all over the place,” unwieldy and unmanaged; too costly and unreliable. The Training organization has too much “unauthorized” technology that does not conform to corporate standards, and Training people are not team players. Their technology involves too many variations, too many vendors, too much customization, and puts undue stress on the network; it needs to be simplified and standardized. In short, IT might say that, “unless Training plays by our rules, they put us in a position to fail.” Their concern is that training technology may not be reliable, may not perform well, may negatively impact the rest of the infrastructure, and may be a maintenance nightmare.

On the other side, the Training staff, who find that the Information Technology people want “heavy-handed” control of everything having to do with computers and technology. Working with IT slows everything down, as it seems to take forever to approve, test, and install hardware and software. The view of many Training professionals is that IT will make them abandon promising learning innovations and experimentation in favor of a more conservative approach. Furthermore, Training often sees the IT organization as too fragmented into specialty groups such as networking, desktop, databases, hardware, application software, and security, each with its own myopic viewpoint and often not working together. This fragmentation can make project approvals more like an endless string of paperwork and meetings – with nothing getting done. Everyone chimes in, but no one seems to own the overall solution.

At the end of the day, Training may view IT as far too rigid and process bound; a sluggish bureaucracy that needs to be much more flexible, client-focused, and responsive. In short, they'd say that, “unless Information Technology becomes more responsive to our needs, they put us in a position to fail.” The Training group is concerned that a learning or performance solution might not be implemented in time, and may not meet the business need it's intended to address.

So, in many organizations, Training and IT perceive each other as adversaries who put each other in jeopardy. It's little wonder that these two functions have difficulty collaborating.

Risks of maintaining the status quo, and the benefits of working together

So why should they try collaborating? One could argue that IT and Training have such different missions and personalities that it is only natural their views would diverge. That would be fine if these divergent views did not limit the effectiveness of both groups. But they do. Tension and dysfunction between IT and Training poses many risks for the larger organization. Without a true collaboration with IT, a Training group cannot sufficiently penetrate the organization to have the impact it needs to be successful. When a Training group cannot work with IT, it might engage its own outside vendors for IT services or build its own redundant data centers and technical resources. Yet Training must still go through the organizational network to deliver many of its services. As a result, IT cannot deliver the cost savings, reliability, and security needed by training applications; much less integrate learning into

the workplace. So not only does IT fail to achieve its goals, so does Training.

Conflict between the two groups ultimately affects employees outside of both. With less immediate access to learning and information, employees waste time looking for the content they need or wait to attend classroom courses. As a result, the organization might fall behind in the marketplace, losing valued business to competitors whose employees, partners, and customers have immediate access to the precise tools, information, and training needed inside of the organization. Lack of cooperation between IT and Training might also result in delays in delivering critical programs to large numbers of people. This sluggishness takes its toll in company competitiveness and agility. The friction and conflict between Training and IT is counter-productive, drawing attention and resources away from more critical areas. Eventually, the organization's leadership may try to end the tension through the expedient route of outsourcing one or both groups.

Such an estrangement can no longer be tolerated. For technology-enabled learning to fully permeate the workplace, IT and Training must cooperate. Beyond this basic imperative, both organizations realize a number of benefits by moving to a more collaborative relationship.

Multimedia-rich applications, like video and simulation, require extensive system resources to run efficiently on users' systems. This, in turn, fuels an appetite for increased power and bandwidth, areas in which the IT organization can bring expertise and economies of scale. Training groups really do not have people to spare to work on upgrading technology services. By letting IT focus on bandwidth, servers, and systems, Training can focus on its core skill: designing and delivering learning and performance improvement. In turn, this strengthens Training as it seeks to move from being a provider of courses to a group focused on improving organizational and individual performance.

IT benefits by building a strong partnership with Training, too, because, if for no other reason, e-Learning, when done well, has demonstrated a return on investment.

Four areas of mutual benefit seem to be the most immediately apparent. First, significant new learning and performance solutions like simulations, workflow-based training (training integrated into the workplace), and online coaching and tutoring systems provide job enrichment opportunities, showcasing new and more sophisticated technologies in a more innovative and flexible manner. Training applications can serve as a bellwether for corporate networking requirements. The advanced technology needs of Training often precede similar needs to follow in corporate communications, sales and marketing, HR, and other business functions.

The second set of benefits emerges from the seamless integration of e-Learning systems into the enterprise IT architecture. Adoption of a single sign-on (also known as a simplified user log-in and authentication) increases network security and reduces the need for Training to administer its own user accounts and passwords. Integration with corporate e-commerce platforms enables training sales to partners and customers, while mitigating the need for Training to handle its own billing and collection activities. Data integration with human resource information systems increases the completeness and accuracy of employee records, including training records. Integration with corporate portals brings training to the desktop of each person in the organization in the same familiar context as other enterprise content.

The third set of benefits emerges when new solutions and technologies are introduced. As Training groups evolve into Workplace Learning and Performance groups and increase their offering of non-training solutions like knowledge management, communities of practice, and electronic performance support, IT will not only have additional, production systems to support, but ones that are critical to the mission of the organization and that bring increased business value to business operations.

The fourth — and most significant benefit of collaborating — is realized when new programs go live. Coordination between IT and Training benefits end users, especially when an application runs well, necessary plug-ins and players are installed on the desktop, and IT is prepared to handle calls to the helpdesk. That simplifies use of a new learning application, which increases the likelihood of adoption. Only when people *use* learning applications do IT and Training ultimately benefit.

How to achieve collaboration

The growing need for interdependency must shape the future relationship between Information Technology and Training. But how can two different cultures, and years of non-collaboration, be turned around? Based on our practical experience, we offer these eight concrete recommendations.

1. **Recognize existing limitations, even while working to alleviate them**

It's only natural to want to shape e-Learning into a more interactive, media-rich experience, especially when it enhances learning. But these requirements will, at least initially, put a strain on the I.S. infrastructure. In the short-term, if the organization's capability is not yet ready to handle the desired level of sophistication, Training should design programs for the current state while IT continues to find ways to advance network capacity. So Training should focus on being ready to upgrade training applications when the infrastructure is ready to handle it, and IT should be upgrading its capacity to handle the training applications.

2. **Develop an e-learning technology strategy, iteratively and jointly**

Efforts that mutually clarify expectations and establish clear responsibilities can build a mutual understanding. One of the most effective tools is to establish a technology strategy. To strengthen the relationship between Training and IT, the strategy should seek to carefully deploy e-Learning technology, use it to solve increasingly bigger and more complex business problems, determine which components should be replicated and scaled, and, ultimately, enhance the infrastructure of the organization with each solution. If this is done well, both groups will share success, while, at the same time, keeping investment and implementation at a level that is manageable for the organization.

3. **Establish work-level relationships, partnerships and processes**

Although a strategy sets out a longer-term plan and identifies responsibilities, it usually stops at defining what happens in the everyday environment. That's the purpose of work-level relationships, partnerships, agreements, and documented processes — to create the next level of documented detail in the relationship between IT and Training. Professional development, joint goal setting, establishing cross-functional teams, and integrating training development processes with IT development processes, are just some of the ways to build better relationships.

4. **Establish an appropriate governance mechanism**

More often than not, disagreements between IT and training arise not so much out of differences in goals, but out of differences in approach. Having a mutually agreeable way to make decisions, resolve differences, allocate resources, and manage interdependent processes can help surface problems earlier, when they can be more easily resolved. In addition, a governance framework can ensure that what was learned from one experience is applied to future activities so that, over time, differences are mitigated, redundancies are eliminated, and productivity and innovation are enhanced. It is important that the CIO and CLO form a collaborative relationship to provide strategic guidance and sponsorship for lower level collaboration. One critical aspect of the relationship between the CIO and CLO is to agree to support e-Learning as a mission-critical business application that might require investment in the network, the desktop environment, and certainly, in the IT and Training people and processes that will drive success.

5. **Allow time for network testing**

Although a Training group might have already performed a variety of tests, including user acceptance testing, field testing, SME reviews, and debug testing on e-Learning materials, the IT department will likely still require testing of network compatibility and performance before a new e-Learning application or technology is "certified." Ideally, this IT testing should be built into the process for designing and developing the approved courseware, so that this step becomes part of the natural development workflow.

6. **Learn each other's language**

One of the core problems in the relationship between IT and Training is that they speak different languages. To avoid talking past each other, IT and Training must create a common lexicon of terminology, processes, and work flow. IT must develop a clearer understanding of e-Learning courseware in order to work effectively with Training. To do so, IT professionals need to acquire knowledge of training standards

and terminology. Similarly, training professionals should gain experience in developing use cases and defining functional requirements that clearly communicate learning requirements in ways that an IT professional can appreciate and use.

7. **Create a new technical liaison position in the Training group**

One of the best ways to build bridges between IT and Training is to make that someone's job responsibility. The primary responsibility of someone in this job is to build the bridges needed between IT and Training by looking for opportunities to collaborate and avert misconceptions. More significantly, this person would take a longer-term approach to e-Learning technology planning. He or she would work closely with the infrastructure experts in IT to shape an organization's e-Learning delivery capacity, and with the instructional experts in Training to understand their goals and translate them into a set of documented requirements that can be handed off to IT.

8. **Establish a technology "sandbox" for experimentation with leading edge e-Learning platforms**

Trainers must be able to experiment with new or evolving technologies in order to assess their value and appropriateness in delivering instruction and other productivity improvement interventions. By equipping Training with a private network and a set of servers under their control, IT can enable Training to test new tools and approaches without risking any negative impact to the enterprise network. This approach enables IT to monitor Training's experimentation, and helps establish a cooperative working relationship where Training and IT are collaborating from day one.

Concluding thoughts

The relationship between Training and IT is at a crossroads. Both groups understand the need to expand technology-enabled learning in the organization. Both agree on why they need learning technology, and see great advantages and benefits to the business if technology-enabled learning initiatives are successful.

What they often disagree on is how to make technology-enabled learning happen, and who does what in the process. Continuing conflict in this relationship makes both groups weaker, and increases the likelihood of one or both being downsized or outsourced, forcing internal and external clients to go directly to outside suppliers who can give them what they need. In some cases, Training's almost stubborn reliance on doing it themselves is hurting the larger organization and the "our way or the highway" attitude of some IT groups isn't helping the situation.

To build the needed bridges, trainers must develop an appreciation for the professionalism that IT brings to the table and an understanding of the goals IT people have for enterprise technology management. In contrast, IT must develop an appreciation for the business value of learning technologies, and an understanding of the goals trainers have for their e-Learning programs.

IT professionals possess a set of skills that many Training organizations do not have: systems analysis and management. E-Learning programs can have more impact when IT professionals are involved in identifying the technology requirements, and ensuring the reliability, performance, and security of the solution. Likewise, Training professionals bring to the table a set of core skills that many IT organizations do not have: human performance analysis and instructional design. By working more closely with Training professionals, IT may eventually find great value involving trainers in analyzing user performance requirements and advocating a performance-centered user interface design, improving context-sensitive help systems, and strengthening the learning and performance value of any technology intervention.

The time is now for IT and Training people to recognize that the best possible future results from a mutual collaboration. The collaboration can start with something as simple as a lunch meeting where common issues and disagreements can be discussed and joint opportunities can be identified. It can then move to some working agreements, and the birth of a simple governance model. A demonstration project can be identified where this newfound collaboration can be exercised. Small steps to be sure, but real, important progress will be the result. Get started.

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