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THIS WEEK: Management Strategy

What's Ahead in 2009?

By **Bill Brandon**

Whatever happens in the global economy this year will be the major influence over what happens in e-Learning. As we look ahead, this is shaping up to be the one undeniable fact about 2009, and it will drive what I believe will be three important trends in e-Learning:

- For Development: Shifts to cut costs and to improve productivity in development tools, in hardware used to create and support content, and in delivery channels;
- For Design: Accelerated evolution of learning strategy; and
- For Management: Pressure to improve the business process of e-Learning.

During 2008, as the movement from potential recession, to recognized recession, to deepening recession took place, the situation and trends in my forecast for the year also changed in number and in kind. I'll begin with a quick comparison of the trends for the two years.

2009 versus 2008

The 2009 trends are consistent with the nature of the current crisis. They are also mostly different from the type of change that I was talking about in my forecast article last January ("Nine Trends That Will Shape e-Learning in 2008," January 28, 2008). Those trends were:

- Business conditions: Recession
- Expanded availability of broadband and WiFi
- Mobile devices with built-in 3G and WiFi
- "Working in the cloud"
- Video
- Enterprise social networking

In 2009, recession (and possibly economic depression) will shape the e-Learning world far more than technology developments. The trends will be simple and few in number, although that will not make them easy to deal with. This week's article presents the three big trends, and tips for dealing with them.

A publication of



- Expectations of users and decision-makers
- Ongoing redefinition and refinement of “e-Learning”
- Continued blurring of e-Learning tool categories

Technology change takes a back seat, but technology adoption rules

Five of the nine trends last year were about changes in technologies. Most of the technology that will play a part in producing content to support learning this year actually appeared or came to prominence in late 2007, or the first half of 2008. Don't look for anything huge that hasn't already been announced to happen in software, hardware, or standards for the next 12 months (at least).

At the same time, you can expect that adoption of certain technologies will increase this year, due to the pressures of recession. For example, the use of online video should expand, as a “quick and dirty” way to support skill development, to provide performance support for field personnel, and to enhance Web conferencing. Using video will save development costs as well as travel costs, and can reduce the time an employee spends in training and out of the office. As another example, social networking will extend the reach of management and of employees, will support

innovation and collaboration, and will require little or no investment. All of these are desirable outcomes.

Learning delivery via mobile device is another area that is almost certain to grow, along with the growth of broadband access and wireless networks. And we can almost certainly expect that the use of hosted applications (“cloud computing”), which requires no investment in servers or staff, will expand. Mobile devices provide support for revenue generation, while broadband, wireless, and hosted applications help to reduce costs. You can expect that management will support these, since their adoption and application can take place as small projects that yield good-to-great Return on Investment (ROI) in under a year. In other words, they are the kind of projects that people do when times are tough.

Business issues take the lead

Last year, the other four trends were sort of a mixed bag. One of them, the slide into recession, has unfortunately become a global concern – and it could still turn into a depression with even more serious consequences. The other three were softer issues: expectations, figuring out what it is we are doing, and trying to categorize the tools we use. This year, there really is no confusion: the important e-Learning issues are all about business.

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Management, design, and development of e-Learning will certainly adapt to the challenges brought by the economy. There is no other choice. For the most part, since 1997 e-Learning has tended to have the same business model and to operate in much the same way as traditional training, despite the differences in delivery mechanisms. This could be the year that the model changes. Let's look at the way we can expect the business of e-Learning to change.

Productivity in development tools

This is the easiest trend to see, and the one that may be the least significant in the long run.

During 2008, as predicted, we saw more applications moving "to the cloud" – becoming Web apps instead of desktop applications. Most of these were office productivity and media applications. Even so, this potentially helps e-Learning development productivity in a number of ways, not the least of which is the opportunity for collaboration. And, of course, there are potential cost savings associated with moving these applications off the desktop.

However, e-Learning applications, including learning management, courseware authoring, and delivery systems, are also moving to the cloud. I recommend keeping an eye on resources such as Jane Hart's *E-Learning Pick of the Day* and her Twitter stream (@c4lptnews) to keep up with new applications, and with old applications that are finding their way to the cloud.

Accelerating the evolution of learning strategy

For some time now, "blended learning" and "e-Learning" have been moving to simply being "learning," and in 2009 the pace of this movement will quicken. This will happen as producers continue to integrate classroom, synchronous online, asynchronous, social media, and Web 2.0 applications into strategies for didactic delivery, and for cooperative and collaborative learning designs. The same economic pressures that drive Business Process Improvement (see the next section of this article) will largely drive these changes. Will the "e-" and "blended" disappear from our vocabulary? I have no idea, but it seems unlikely that they will survive for much longer.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) noted this shift as early as a November 2005 survey, and reported it in its November 2008 *Helping People Learn*. (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/helping-peoplelearn>) Respondents agreed rather strongly that, "A shift is taking place from training – an instructor-led, content-based intervention – to learning, which is a self-directed, work-based process leading to increased adaptive capacity." Clive Shepherd also documents this ongoing shift in his Weblog (<http://clive-shepherd.blogspot.com>).

The rift between learning, performance support, and knowledge management probably won't begin to close until next year, if then. This is more difficult to bring about, because, in general, performance support and

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knowledge management are processes that Information Technology (IT) departments own, whereas for the most part Training Departments own the learning processes. Successful Business Process Management initiatives should pave the way for unification. Watch for changes to the required skill sets of instructors, designers, and developers along with this evolution. It is difficult to imagine that, after 2010, the resumes of “traditional” classroom instructors would not include documentation of synchronous online instruction skills. It is just as difficult to imagine that an instructional designer will be able to work without being able to show facility in designing asynchronous applications to facilitate learning, or without understanding how to include social networking online in a learning strategy.

Lesser trends in learning strategies

In 2009, the use of synchronous Web conferencing for e-Learning will rise more quickly than ever before. The trend will be greatest in the category of low-cost and Open Source applications. More recording of conferences and e-Learning events for later playback will occur. Conferencing services that offer recording capability and more robust feature sets will have an advantage over those that do not. Some “free” services will not survive 2009. Expect to see many convert to price models that include “value pricing” for certain basic services, and premium pricing for additional features. This will be true for other hosted e-Learning services as well.

As the recession continues to put pressure on costs, expect to see less effort to accommodate generational differences and learning styles. Employers will insist that people just get on with it, whether Boomer, Gen Y, visual, kinesthetic, or whatever.

A priority in some organizations will be teaching employees how to effectively use Web 2.0 applications to facilitate collaboration, learning, and adaptation to change. These organizations will come out of the recession with employees and processes that will better support them in the next round of growth.

A related issue for individuals will be learning to manage all those online “relationships” they’ve been developing through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and any number of other social software applications. This is no trivial matter, and if social software is to be a useful pathway for informal learning, developers must come up with ways to support users’ networking efforts, whether through e-Learning or development of mash-ups. There was great hope at the beginning of 2008 for OpenID, OAuth, and OpenSocial efforts. However, progress on making the entire Web your own personal network by removing information silos seems to have stalled. In the meantime, Facebook Connect (a proprietary standard) seems to be moving

forward to dominance in 2009. Marshall Kirkpatrick does an excellent job of discussing the latest developments on ReadWriteWeb at http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/facebook_connect_vs_open_id.php.

Improving the business process of e-Learning

I think this will be the most significant development of this year. Based on what has happened in past recessions, it is reasonable to expect that corporate leadership generally will place emphasis on business process in 2009. In fact, Gartner Blog writer David McCoy says he expects business process management (BPM) to be a priority this year, along with cost management. (See <http://blog.gartner.com/blog/bpi.php?itemid=4138>)

BPM, and its sibling, business process improvement (BPI), has a long history, and they tend to reappear when things get tough. Briefly, this means paying attention to “doing things right.” (In better times, business tends to attend to “doing the right things.”) The objective is to make better use of resources by reducing variation and waste in processes. The larger goal is to make a radical change in the way an organization performs. Incremental steps implemented over several quarters are out – bold measures are in. This can be, but need not be, upsetting to those caught up in the sweeps.

There are many books and online resources to guide BPM/BPI efforts, so I’m not going to attempt a tutorial here. The process is simple. For those of us in e-Learning, it would seem that we need to identify elements of our larger organization that are undergoing such transformative efforts (if, in fact, the entire organization is not adopting BPM or BPI), and work with them to provide support for their strategy and to leverage e-Learning technology. We can also adopt business process improvement for our own organizational elements (departments, project teams, etc.).

In the previous issue of *Learning Solutions* (“Surviving 2009,” January 5, 2009,) I offered three suggestions that fit into the BPM/BPI strategy:

- Base decisions about whether to keep, suspend, or drop current e-Learning offerings on quantitative ROI, cost savings, or revenue contribution;
- Base decisions about making new offerings on estimated quantitative productivity improvement; and
- Look for people in other companies or industries who are “doing magic,” and find out how they do it – especially look for new business models and best practices.

Keep in mind the challenge for e-Learning in these efforts. The most important results of our efforts in e-Learning are intangible (employee readiness to par-

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ticipate in the revised processes, organizational flexibility, employee satisfaction, etc.). However, in 2009, the management focus is going to be on tangible bottom line results, as measured in cash. We will need to make the case that the intangibles are essential to getting the tangibles, and that both sets of results are essential this year. One way to do this would be to show how e-Learning fits into the Balanced Score Card for the larger organization, from each of four perspectives:

- Financial perspective (bottom line contribution);
- Customer perspective (generation of more sales to the most profitable customers);
- Internal process perspective (creating and delivering the customer value proposition); and
- Innovation and learning perspective (the internal skills and capabilities required to support the value-creating internal processes – this requires a long-term focus).

You will need to establish and use benchmarks; in other words, measure your results. If you are a fan of Donald Kirkpatrick's training evaluation model, this means pulling out all the stops to identify and measure results at Levels 2, 3, and 4. Level 1 tends to be "soft" data, and won't help you much in benchmarking. If you are not familiar with Kirkpatrick's Levels, <http://www.businessballs.com/kirkpatricklearningevaluationmodel.htm> is a great introductory overview.

Summary

This year's forecast has been more difficult than any other in the recent past, mainly because the global situation is so much more complex. Regardless, (e-)Learning professionals will do well as long as they:

- Keep up with the changes in hosted applications, and adopt the hosted applications that best support reduced production costs;
- Adjust learning strategies for their organizations to take advantage of evolving design models and delivery modalities; and
- Participate in business process re-alignment (or simply innovate their own improvements) to improve productivity and ROI.

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