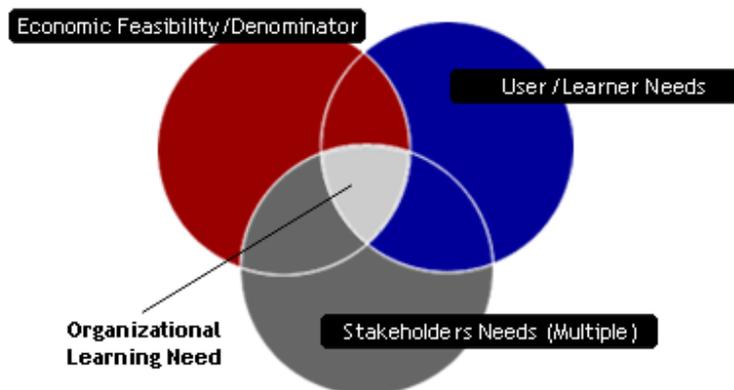


## (My) 7 guidelines for effective corporate e Learning

### 1. The business world is not about learning, it's about doing business.

So before doing training needs analysis - please, do go through a business needs analysis. It may not be the same as the strategic direction or vision statement of the company; it's more complex. We are dealing with different goals and perspectives. What needs to be learnt varies from the point of view of the CXO, training manager, product manager/department head and the learner. Catering to all viewpoints is a daunting task, but, believe me, it's the first and foremost task to do. Any shortcut is a pathway to doom's loop. We can use 3 converging circles (inspired by Jim Collins) to formulate the business context analysis of learning needs.



### 2. First collaboration, then learning

Learning is a social event, and collective intelligence is the key for any organizational success. The #1 problem of corporate e Learning today is overemphasized focus on content. Content is scattered all over the organization in many forms and formats - slides, white papers, e-mails (!) etc. These may be not in most articulated or engaging format, and can obviously be improved drastically with rich media, but at least the content is there! What's totally lacking in most organizations is collaboration, interaction and systematic process of capturing tacit knowledge scattered throughout the organization.

Since we were little, communicating has been about responding to one another. I say to my little daughter 'Daddy'. She says 'Dada'. And we go on for a while. That's how she learns. A response calls forth another response, and a theme develops. It's how we all learn - until we join organizations. Then we sit down and watch people give presentations; or worse - we put a voiceover on the slides, upload them to an LMS and name the process e Learning!

*Ask workers where they learned how to do their jobs, and 80 percent of the time the answer is "at work." Most learning takes place on the job, outside the purview of formal learning. When we do conduct formal training, 80 percent of it is wasted effort. - Jay Cross ([Workflow Learning Gets Real](#))*

Now for the million-dollar question: how do we establish a culture of knowledge sharing and a collaborative learning-working environment in an organization? The technology is here - both for synchronous (virtual classroom/meeting-room, virtual workplace) and asynchronous (blog, wiki, forum, folksonomy tools etc.). Collaborative knowledge sharing environments are a reality now, at least technically. But the hurdle is not technological; it's mainly political and cultural. Our years of ranking and certification-based education has lent our outlook towards learning a 'Darwinian'

perspective. And the same learning culture is carried forward by people into organizations after "warming the seat in the classroom"-type learning for 16+ years.

### **3. Off-the Shelf content is so yesterday, Courseware is dead.**

In the movie "The Matrix," there is a scene where Trinity and Neo, need to take over a military helicopter. When asked if she can fly it, Trinity immediately makes a call from her cell phone to obtain the necessary pilot training program. Moments later, all necessary information is implanted into her brain, and she takes off with Neo.



Although this is fictional, successful organizational knowledge dissemination should follow the same path as in Matrix. Today's knowledge workers don't have time to sit through a 2-day workshop or 5 hours of e-Learning courseware. Think about the immense opportunity cost, or the 'forget curve' of knowledge before the theories get implemented in day-to-day work. Today's knowledge workers need information-knowledge-intelligence quickly and at the precise time. The days of courseware are over. Period!

Also, by now, almost every sane organization has realized that off-the-shelf courseware is only effective in providing training on 'workplace sexual harassment' - type of subjects, and not for conducting core business training. For the same reason that you can't buy your organizational strategy off-the-shelf, you can't use off-the-shelf courseware to implement core training of the organization.

Moreover, the first-learn-then-work paradigm is out. We just don't have enough time. We learn mostly when we work, and we work while we are still learning. Honestly - what do you do when you are trying out a new software? Do you search for a manual? Call 24/7 Helpdesk support? Or would you press F1 for help?

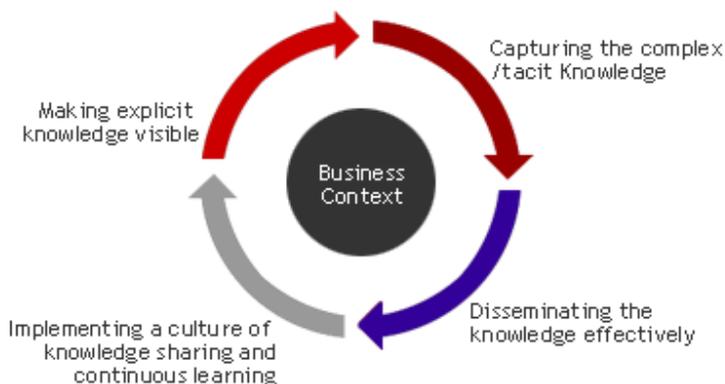
In adult learning, cognitive goals are always application oriented' we don't have any 3- hour exam to sit for - real life is our examination hall! We need both explicit and tacit knowledge when we need it - on demand.

### **4. It's not about Technology - it's about effectiveness and culture**

During the first era of e Learning, we made an egregious mistake of treating e Learning in the same way as CRM, ERP or any other enterprise technology. We forgot that e Learning is about LEARNING and not about the 'e'. It is about learning to be more effective in today's complex

knowledge economy - an ecosystem that is continuously changing and evolving. Learning is not a system, which can be installed be done with. The primary aims of learning organizations should be -

1. Making explicit knowledge visible and accessible - on demand. The computer's memory is much more efficient than ours. They, not us, should handle complicated explicit knowledge.  
Not convinced? Try this -  
 $13 \times 21 = ?$   
Reaching out for your calculator - aren't you? Well that's what I meant. Memorization is what you do in primary school, not in business.
2. Capturing the complex changes of the business context as soon as possible. Tacit knowledge is hard to gather; there is no single magic trick, which can perform the task. My experience tells me that blended formal and informal tacit knowledge gathering works best.
3. Disseminating the knowledge seamlessly. It's not to make every bit of information available to all. Please don't throw the drowning man another wave of information. Make relevant knowledge readily accessible for knowledge workers, knowledge that directly or indirectly affects their functional priorities.
4. Implementing a culture of knowledge sharing and an atmosphere of continuous learning  
Admittedly the most important and daunting task of all.  
*According to Senge: At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind –from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something 'out there' to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it.*



There is a lot of discussion about the importance of creating a learning organization. We recognize the importance in personal development of counting to engage in what Stephen Covey refers to as "sharpening the saw". But in the application of those ideas to our business and personal lives, we often fail to make a distinction about two kinds of learning.

The first kind of learning, which is far more common and more easily achieved, is to deepen our knowledge within an existing mental model or discipline.

The second kind of learning is focused on new mental models and on shifting from one to another. It does not deepen knowledge in a specific model but rather looks at the world outside the model and adopts new models to make sense of this broader world. Sometimes we don't need to merely "sharpen" the saw; we need to throw it out to pick up a power tool. If we only

focused on sharpening, then we might not see the opportunity to apply new technology that can radically change the way we approach the task.

### **5. LMS / big rollouts are out - embrace small pieces loosely coupled**

During the first era of e Learning, when a company decided to go into e Learning path, first thing they did was to select an LMS! Think about the working process of any (well...most of the) 'early adopters' of e Learning.

First, a decision-making subcommittee is formed, evaluation criteria are decided, 100 pages of RFP's are released and the tender called.

Then the fun begins. People sit together in meeting rooms, munching donuts and sipping coffee, to interview LMS vendors. The process made them feel important. After that hoola-hoop, when the LMS was finally implemented (e Learning rollout - drum roll please!), there was nothing inside it. So they filled it up with off-the-shelf courseware and uploaded all the junk PowerPoint presentations, PDF and Word documents. Finally when they realized nothing is going according to their expectations (god only knows what those were!) - they jumped to the conclusion - e Learning doesn't work!

Time has changed. After the bubble burst, companies are more careful and pragmatic to try out something new. My earnest request to you - don't play with stakeholders' money. Forget big rollouts; embrace small trial and error method. Try lots of things, with low risk factors, and keep what's working. It is usually best to get them quickly into the new flow, and plan to course-correct going forward. This is a white water rafting strategy. When you pick, you pick hard.

Find out a visionary department, and try something new. If that works - use them as 'headpin' to enter other pragmatic areas. But whatever it is, make it fast.

Also remember - **the best things in life are free**. If you need to try out things on a small scale and no enterprise integration issues are involved - why not try out free and open source technologies? Use a multi-authored [Wordpress](#) blog to share knowledge within a department. Really need a CMS/LMS? Try out [Drupal](#) or [Moodle](#). Use [Wink](#) to capture a software demonstration and publish that in the intranet. You can think about 1001 ways to use FOSS to implement low-risk e Learning initiatives. If you are successful - plan for the 'big fish'.

### **6. e Learning is not only for internal learning**

It's a common misconception that e Learning is a 'tool' to train only the insiders of an organization. The truth is that for the last couple of years at least 70% of e learning projects I have worked on, are either for channel partners or end users of a product. The easy explanation would be - In partner or end user training, the funds come directly from the product group or the marketing department, and not from the training department (which is always the poorest). But that's not the whole picture.. The internal staff of an organization will have to support, sell and market their product or solution anyway - whether they receive effective training or not. But channel partners and more importantly end users have no obligation to learn on their own if you don't provide them useful information and knowledge on time.

On the other hand, your channel partner will sell your product better than your competitors' if they are more knowledgeable about your product than other products.

### **7. Measure what really matters**

*Be careful what you measure. You might get the result and it might kill you.* (Michael Hammer, [The Agenda](#))

Imagine a situation - You are the product manager of a new product of your organization. You arranged an e Learning program to train your sales force. Every user/learner really liked the

program (at least they said so in the smiley sheet!). Tracking systems of the LMS show excellent results and so does student evaluation. Just one problem though - after 6 months of launching the product you haven't attained even 10% of the sales target! Well there may be many other factors at work here, but the point remains- without proving business results, any other measurement of the success or failure of a learning initiative is useless.

For all e Learning initiatives, measure what really matters to your business. For instance, please do not include 'travel cost saved' in the infamous ROI section of the learning initiative document. Think about opportunity cost, cost of ignorance and 2nd hand knowledge transfer. How to? First in a pre-heated oven put your pizza crust...oops! Sorry wrong blog and wrong post. Ok, seriously? The number one rule is that there is no specific rule or checklist. Always think within the business context - that's all I can suggest. If you want to dig deeper, please read [Metrics by Jay Cross](#).

CAUTION: The above 7 guidelines are not a checklist or anything of the sort. Every business is different and so are their knowledge needs. There is no one-size-fits-all formula.

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