

5 Strategic Trends in E-Learning

E-learning integrates the "multi" in "multinational" for a stronger company

By Katherine Leary

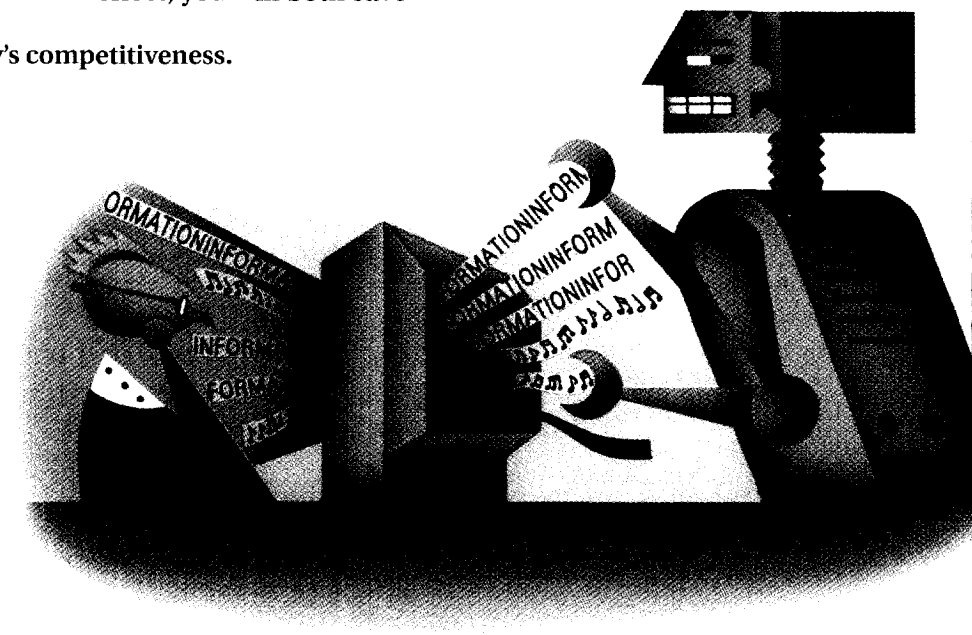
As e-learning becomes part of the workplace, five strategic trends have emerged. If you follow and put them into effect, you will both save money and increase your company's competitiveness.

Trend 1: E-Learning Mirrors Internet Characteristics

Companies are using e-learning to take full advantage of the internet and to mirror its best characteristics. Just as the internet allows us to compress time by eliminating middlemen and streamlining transactions, e-learning speeds and simplifies our access to learning materials, allows us to discuss what we learn with mentors, professors, and colleagues, and easily practice new skills through on-line simulations. E-learning in "internet time" has changed training from scheduled, occasional classroom training to continuous, ubiquitous learning opportunities—any time and any place.

Effective e-learning breaks learning into smaller, more manageable chunks. Whereas we might have once read a 10-page paper on a topic, learners now want to be able to have that same information in 10 one-page chunks, so that learning moments can occur conveniently between meetings, at home, or in a hotel room.

The internet is a democratic and personal medium, and e-learning on the internet reflects this. Learning becomes learner centered rather than instructor centered, with designs that provide learners just the information they want, when they want it. This learning is also active, rather than passive. E-learning need not be a 45-



minute lecture, but can bring together an active and engaging combination of short videos, audio snippets, performance tools, activities, chats, and discussions tailored to a person's learning style. This active learning is not only more fun but also more effective. The Research Institute of America found that 33 minutes after a lecture is completed, students retain only 58% of the material covered. By the second day, 33% is retained, and at the end of three weeks, only 15% of the knowledge is retained. When one practices and applies the concepts, however, retention rises significantly.

E-learning incorporates and encour-

ages peer-to-peer learning: While learners have access to the experts, they also learn from other.

Trend 2: E-Learning Improves Employee Engagement and Retention

The transformation to a knowledge-based economy, accelerated by the ubiquitous nature of the internet, means that companies are using e-learning as a mechanism to engage, develop, and retain knowledge workers. It is not a sidelight, but necessary for every company that wants to compete successfully.

A recent American Society for Train-

ing and Development study of 575 publicly traded companies shows a clear correlation between the levels of training investment and the financial success of the firm. Simply put, more training yields more financial success as measured by total shareholder return, gross profit margin, income per employee, and price-to-book ratios. Top-performing firms yield 24% higher gross profit margins, 218% higher income per employee, and 26% higher price-to-book ratios than do firms with lower rates of expenditure on training per employee.

In the new economy, knowledge workers act like free agents and actively pursue opportunities to enhance their skills and competencies. Given the fierce competition for competent workers, organizations that provide employees with exceptional opportunities to learn and grow greatly increase their chances to win in the retention game.

E-Learning can be a strategic tool in

helping organizations change the way they operate internally. Many established organizations are realizing the old "command and control" model that made them successful in the past

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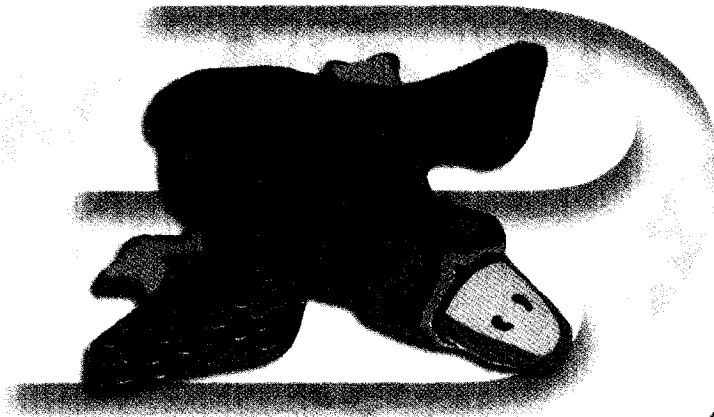
does not work as well in the new economy. Internal e-learning communities can act as a powerful means to spread a new management philosophy, train up-and-coming managers, and transform organizational cultures to be more collaborative and innovative.

Unisys, for example, is using an e-learning leadership community to help

change its culture from a "command and control" culture to one in which employees at all levels take responsibility for moving the company forward. Managers have a chance to meet and build trust during a week-long residential course on the new model of leadership at Unisys.

Trend 3: E-Learning Becomes "Branded and Blended"

E-learning is moving quickly to a model of "branded and blended learning." Branded learning simply means that content with a brand will prevail over the "no name" content. Most corporate users like to be assured of quality, and the quality of a top name in management education will certainly be preferred to a piece of content coming from an unknown or unqualified source. The names of Stanford, Harvard, Duke, and INSEAD will attract attention and evoke comfort from the corporate buyers. No one will be fired for bringing in content from a



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Blended learning means learning through a combination of in-person and on-line, synchronous and asynchronous modes, as Duke's Fuqua School of Business is doing in its Cross-Continent MBA program. Most analysts now agree that some combination of modes leads to the best learning outcomes and the most satisfied learners.

Trend 4: E-Learning Communities Build Strategic Advantage

Companies are also using e-learning communities to build and leverage strategic advantage. E-learning can be a vehicle for effective development of corporate and new business strategy, as well as a way to extend the learning and effective interaction beyond the corporate doors to the whole supply chain.

E-learning communities allow corporations to harness and optimize knowledge and to spread it quickly throughout the organization. Con-

necting knowledge workers is critical to the successful execution of complex projects and strategic initiatives. In many cases, companies are recogniz-

E-learning can be a vehicle for development of corporate strategy.

ing that the best ideas frequently reside within exceptional individuals who may lack the opportunity to work in teams, thereby creating impediments within the organization that prevent ideas from becoming actions.

Conoco is using its e-learning community to develop and refine its corporate strategy. Concerned that it was

not taking full advantage of its talented younger managers, Conoco identified a group of young fast-track managers to come up with new ideas and strategies for Conoco's future. This dynamic young group, spread across the US, Europe, and Asia, has formed an e-learning community. Using the power of on-line learning, discussions, and chats, they brainstorm, share and whittle ideas to a fine point.

Trend 5: E-Learning Develops Partner Ecosystems


Finally, the internet has given rise to another emerging trend in business—companies within supply chains sharing information and resources across organizational firewalls. This trend has made supply chains more efficient and profitable. Knowledge communities are an excellent way to share information and best practices across the supply chain.

For example, Hallmark has formed an on-line learning community that extends beyond its company borders to include its retailers, who are independent operations. The retailers now share their ideas and insights about business with each other and with Hallmark. This inclusion has made it possible for Hallmark to have its retailers become more successful through sharing of ideas about successful selling and merchandising of cards.

In summary, these e-learning trends can become competitive weapons for your arsenal. Use e-learning to become more collaboration-driven and to improve employee engagement and retention. Ensure that your workforce has access to branded and blended learning to improve their effectiveness and performance. Use e-learning communities as a way of innovating and creating strategic advantage. And, finally, develop e-learning partner ecosystems to improve communication and best practices among your supply chain, and ultimately create value for your customers. **WT**

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