

eLearning: What Is It Good For?

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This is the first in a series of articles aimed at those taking their first steps with elearning. Here we will look at where elearning works well, and also where you should consider other training methods.

My two-year-old son loves Bob the Builder. Bob is an animated handyman who can turn his hand to anything. He has a positive 'can-do' attitude and attacks each job with great gusto. As Bob will tell you, the key to doing a job well is choosing the right tool.

In the training industry many of us are like Bob the Builder. Every project, or training need, is different. We often have limited time and resources, there are numerous pressures upon us, and we need to choose the best tool, or training method, to get the job done.

When times are tough and budgets are tight it is tempting to look to elearning as a panacea for meeting training requirements. eLearning is scalable; so the cost of training 10 000 people is virtually the same as 100. It is flexible, fast to deliver, and it can be very quick to build.

Many organisations are now considering building their own elearning content in-house using 'rapid' elearning authoring tools, or outsourcing content development to external providers. These can both be very effective approaches for many training needs.

However, elearning is not a fix-all solution. It is simply another tool in the trainer's toolbox. So how do you know if elearning is the right tool for the job? There are no hard-and-fast rules however here are some guidelines that will help you decide. eLearning works well when:

- ✓ **The target audience is large and/or geographically dispersed.** eLearning becomes very cost-effective when you need to train a lot of people to do, or know, the same thing. It is very scalable, so the larger the target audience the lower the cost per head of training.
- ✓ **There is a relatively small amount of content.** It is difficult to hold people's attention for long periods of time in any form of training, particularly if it involves self-study. For this reason elearning content should be relatively short. Aim for 'chunks' of no more than 20 minutes duration.

- ✓ **Your audience need to learn fast.** If you need to train people quickly, with minimal impact to the business, and check that they have understood the material, elearning is a good solution. Short chunks of elearning can be studied as part of a person's working day, removing the need for travel or time away from the organisation. Even better if the elearning can be in 2-5 minute chunks and readily accessible whenever the person needs it.
- ✓ **You need to train people to use an IT system.** Whether it is one of your own in-house IT systems or standard software, elearning is very well suited to delivering this kind of training. It is possible to easily build guided tours and interactive simulations of IT systems where people can learn to use the software.

You should consider other training methods when:

- **The target audience have widely varying needs and prior knowledge levels.** eLearning is not a 'one size fits all' solution. A trainer can tailor what they deliver, *as they deliver it*, to give extra help to those that need it and answer additional questions from those surging ahead.
- **The content has a lot of text.** If the content is very text-heavy, don't make people read it from a computer screen. Intensive reading from a computer monitor is tiring and people will find a way to print the content out.
- **You need to bring about attitudinal changes in people.** This can be done with elearning, but to reliably change people's attitudes they must have the opportunity to ask questions and explore the material.
- **Lots of peer interaction is required.** If it is key to the effectiveness of the training that people can work together and share experiences, consider another training method.

Remember also that elearning does not have to be a structured course that people work through. It could be a blend of electronic training methods, for example a podcast, an online quiz, a video clip, an intranet page, documents, interactive scenarios, SMS messages, a virtual classroom session and more. So as you can see, within elearning there is a further array of tools to choose from, and they should be selected on a project-by-project basis. We'll look at how to utilise this 'blended' approach in another article.

As a producer of bespoke elearning you may be wondering why I'm encouraging you to consider other training methods. The answer is; when you take your first steps with elearning I want you to get it right first time. With the right knowledge at the outset you will have a much greater chance of making elearning a success within your organisation.