

# THE **e**LEARNING DEVELOPERS' JOURNAL™

Strategies and Techniques for Designers,  
Developers, and Managers of eLearning

JOURNAL™

## THIS WEEK — MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### If You Only Look Under the Street Lamps... Or Nine e-Learning Myths

BY LANCE DUBLIN

**Y**ou know the story. A man (of course) has lost his keys. After searching diligently for them he returns to his house, empty-handed. When asked by his family why he didn't find them, he replies, "I looked under each street lamp and they just weren't there!"

It seems to me the e-Learning industry is a good example of that man. We keep looking for answers to why our e-Learning isn't "successful." We keep talking about the technology,

instructional design, and content, when the real issue is getting people to use what's developed, and getting organizations to truly integrate e-Learning into everyday life and operations.

The e-Learning industry has had its chance. We've been in the spotlight for the last few years. Most organizations have deployed some form of e-Learning. Learning management systems (LMSs) are now standard tools. Thousands of people have come to conferences. The term e-Learning is in common use (without a common definition I hasten to add, but

that's another issue). Large investments of time, money and resources have been made. And yet, there still exists a high degree of skepticism at all organizational levels about e-Learning. It's safe to say the honeymoon, however short-lived, is over. We are beyond "proof of concept" and "pilots;" results are now expected — and often mandatory.

We all know the hackneyed (and often misquoted) line from Kevin Costner and his movie, *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." ASTD and others have

*Continued on next page*

*The e-Learning industry is obsessed with finding the answers to the question, "Why hasn't e-Learning been more successful?" Perhaps we have been looking in the obvious — but wrong — places because our mythology of e-Learning is misleading us. Follow along as a consummate changemeister examines the myths and suggests new ways to understand e-Learning.*

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**The eLearning Developers' Journal™** is designed to serve the industry as a catalyst for innovation and as a vehicle for the dissemination of new and practical strategies and techniques for e-Learning designers, developers and managers. The **Journal** is not intended to be the definitive authority. Rather, it is intended to be a medium through which e-Learning practitioners can share their knowledge, expertise and experience with others for the general betterment of the industry.

As in any profession, there are many different perspectives about the best strategies, techniques and tools one can employ to accomplish a specific objective. This **Journal** will share these different perspectives and does not position any one as "the right way," but rather we position each article as "one of the right ways" for accomplishing a goal. We assume that readers will evaluate the merits of each article and use the ideas they contain in a manner appropriate for their specific situation. We encourage discussion and debate about articles and provide an Online Discussion board for each article.

The articles contained in the **Journal** are all written by people who are actively engaged in this profession at one level or another — not by paid journalists or writers. Submissions are always welcome at any time, as are suggestions for articles and future topics. To learn more about how to submit articles and/or ideas, please refer to the directions in the sidebar on page 6 or visit [www.eLearningGuild.com](http://www.eLearningGuild.com).

modified that phrase to ask, "If we build it, will they come?" Any way you phrase it, the answer is, "Only in Hollywood!" (See Sidebar, Field of e-Learning Dreams, to the right.)

The simple truth is that designing and building the very best e-Learning program does not guarantee that learners will use it and that organizations will support it.

But the simple truth may not be all that "simple." There still exist many myths about what you can and should do to ensure your success with e-Learning. Let's explore nine of those myths and what you can do to make sure your e-Learning implementation is based on fact and not on fantasy.

**Myth #1: Everyone knows what you mean what you talk about e-Learning**

The truth is that the term e-Learning means different things to different people. When the phrase was first popularized in 2000, it most often referred to computer-based training delivered over Intranets and the Internet. "e-Learning" replaced "Web-based training" which, during the high-flying dot-com days, was just not sexy enough. It was a time when we were putting an "e" in front of everything, "e"-letters, "e"-toys, "e"-commerce, "e"-banking, "e"-pets — the "e"-list goes on and on. But the constant was a reference to delivering courses online.

Then in 2001, ASTD published a report that offered an expanded definition of e-Learning. They wrote that e-Learning is, "...instructional content or learning experiences delivered or enabled by electronic technology... that is designed to increase workers' knowledge and skills so they can be more productive, find and keep high-quality jobs, advance in their careers, and have a positive impact on the success of their employees, their families and their communities." Now *that's* a mouthful! And one that you don't often hear repeated.

At the same time, reflecting the buzz and enthusiasm of the dot-com world, Gene Ziegler, former CLO of Corpedia Education, suggested:

"What is different is the ability of the Internet to build all this [rich learning] on the fly, on demand, and almost independent of time and place. Unlike the written word, the experience is only as linear as we want it to be. We can allow our whimsical personalities to drive us to any place in

**SIDEBAR** *Field of e-Learning Dreams*

**ASTD Study — E-Learning: "If We Build It, Will They Come?"**

- 31% of learners fail to register for compulsory e-Learning
- 68% of learners fail to register for voluntary e-Learning
- Drop-out rates of 50 - 80% are not uncommon

the world of knowledge that our imaginations desire. And we do so using both halves of our brain, firing on both cylinders, learning at unprecedented speeds." (<http://www.linezine.com/6.2/articles/gzyn.to.htm>)

This certainly reflects my experiences using the world's most powerful e-Learning tool, Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com))! Somehow, no matter what I start to search, I end up spending hours exploring — and learning about — related and unrelated topics I'm led to both consciously and unconsciously.

By the end of 2002, many of the industry's experts were offering a definition of e-Learning along the lines of, "The use of technologies to create, distribute and deliver valuable data, information, learning and knowledge to improve on-the-job and organizational performance, and individual development." The number of e-Learning vendors and resources and tools was now vast. Everything from LMSs to authoring tools to content management systems (CMSs) to virtual classrooms to enhanced PowerPoint™ presentations to courses-online to portals to performance support systems. The list goes on and on.

At the same time, there was a constant debate about what the "e" actually stood for. Responses I heard included, "everywhere," "extending," "enhancing," and "enabling," as well as the obvious "electronic."

So it is no wonder that learners, managers and executives are confused about what we do mean when we talk so confidently of e-Learning.

**Myth #2: e-Learning is really no big deal**

The truth is quite the opposite. e-Learning is a big deal because it represents a change that ripples through an organization. And change is always a big deal to adults, with most of us reacting to it based on what seems to be only 30% logic and 70% emotion.

Organizations are complex systems that balance culture with technology, management, competencies, and business processes. Visualize a diamond with these at the points and at the center. (See Figure 1 to the right.). Which ones are at the points and which one is at the center may change with time and point of view. The important thing is this: if you connect the points it becomes clear that any change in one will have an immediate and direct impact on every other point.

With e-Learning we seem to be changing the *process* of learning in an organization. And, by definition, the technologies, management systems and structures, competencies and culture will be changed, along with business processes. Our choice then is whether to try to manage these changes, or ignore them and just let them happen.

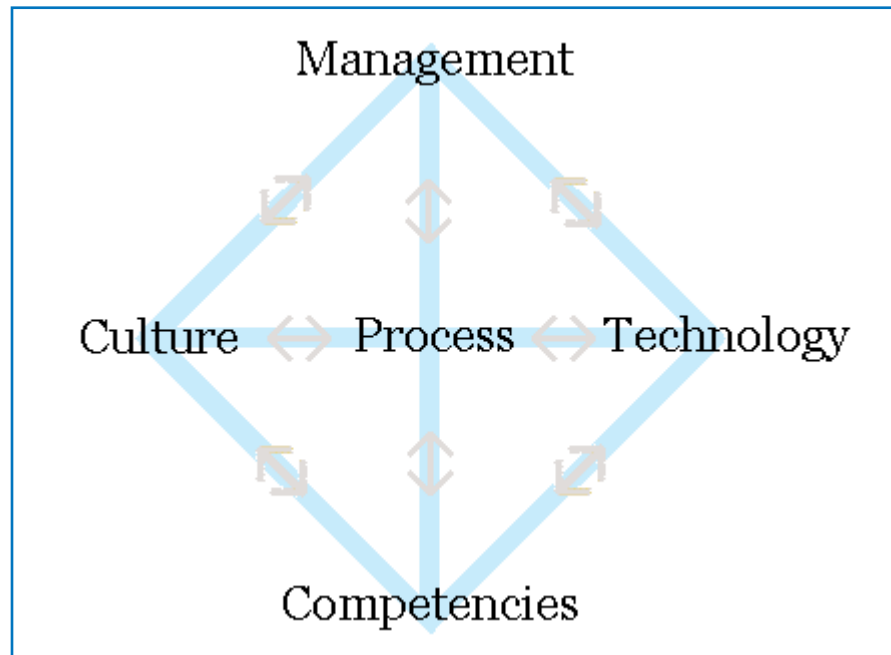
### Myth #3: The 'hard-stuff' — the technology — is what's really difficult

There exists more than ample evidence that in fact it is the "soft-stuff" — the human issues — that are really the most difficult. After all, technology itself has no emotions to respond to or feelings to be hurt. It's a world of ones and zeros whereas we humans are one complicated species!

Much has already been written about the change process and how humans move through their own personal change journey so I won't go through that again here. (Jay Cross and I also addressed the change process in our book, *Implementing e-Learning*.) But I do highly recommend that every e-Learning professional learn about these models and theories. Whether we like it or not we are in the change business.

Once you understand change, you can then make a plan to manage your implementation. My colleagues and I at Dublin Group developed, over many years, the "Ready-Willing-Able" model for implementing large-scale change. This model works well to ensure that your e-Learning is accepted and used by the learners, and to get it embraced and supported by the organization as a whole.

*Ready* refers to the fundamental systems and structures that must be in place and working. For e-Learning this means the technology itself must work, and help desks and support systems are in place in case it doesn't. It also means the learners



**FIGURE 1** Any change to any element of the organizational system immediately affects the other four.

have the means to access and use the e-Learning (i.e., properly equipped PCs, correct passwords, etc.) and the organization has the systems to support it (i.e., manager approval, registration, tracking, etc.).

*Able* refers to the education, training and job aids required to make sure the learners know how to access and use the e-Learning you develop and distribute. Although your e-Learning adheres to standard conventions, you need to make sure learners know how to logon, how to use all of your program's features and functions to optimize their learning experience, how to get help (i.e., when to call the Training Department, the IT Department, or the vendor).

Finally, *willing* refers to the change management systems and internal marketing activities necessary to ensure learner acceptance and organizational integration. This entails winning the hearts and minds of your stakeholders. Although it's hard, by having the necessary sponsorship and leadership, change communications and education, and linkage with ongoing organizational processes (i.e., performance management), it can be done.

### Myth #4: It's the learners who really count

Yes, learners do count — but so do many other people within the organization. A wide range of organizational stakehold-

ers includes the 'C' level types (CEO, CIO, CFO, EVPs), middle and line managers, the Human Resources Training staff (i.e., trainers, instructional designers, training managers) and anyone else with a vested interest. Add all these people up and you realize this is a large number.

The good news is that you don't have to get all of them on-board and embracing your e-Learning at the same time. Through the work of Everett Rogers (*The Diffusion of Innovations*) we have learned that people adapt to new innovations (and change) along a bell-curve. Some percentage of each stakeholder group are "innovators" while others on the other end of the bell-curve are "diehards." In between are the "early adopters," the "early majority," the "late majority," and the "late adopters."

The fact is if only 5% of each stakeholder group embraces your e-Learning, it will eventually become embedded in the organization. Once you get 20% of each stakeholder group supporting your e-Learning efforts, the integration picks up tremendous momentum and becomes unstoppable!

### Myth #5: Learners know what to expect from e-Learning

Actually, learners typically don't.

One of the root causes for this is that there isn't one accepted definition for e-Learning, and therefore we don't have a

common understanding to begin with. Another factor is the poor job we do of marketing our e-Learning to all our stakeholders, and especially to the learners.

The purpose of marketing today is to maintain profitable long-term relationships with customers or in our case, stakeholders. As Larry Wilson said in *The One Minute Salesperson*, "People love to buy but hate to be sold." Therefore, critical elements of an effective marketing strategy and approach are branding and positioning.

Walter Landor, the renowned marketing guru, is quoted as saying, "Simply put, a brand is a promise. By identifying and authenticating a product or service it delivers a pledge of satisfaction and quality." (See [http://www.buildingbrands.com/definitions/O2\\_brand\\_definition.shtml](http://www.buildingbrands.com/definitions/O2_brand_definition.shtml).) Think about the implied promise of brands like Coca Cola™, BMW™, Nordstroms™, McDonalds™, Lexus™, IBM™, Apple™, and Revlon™. What does each of these brand names promise the user? What mental images do these names and logos evoke?

What's interesting about brands is that there are really two views to consider: 1) the company's desire or hope concerning how the buyers and users will feel about it; and, 2) the buyers' or users' perception. When both of these views are

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aligned strong brands develop. When they don't, you end up with an Edsel or Pet Rock.

Are your hopes aligned with your stakeholders' perceptions? Try answering this question: if your e-Learning were an automobile, what brand or make would it be, and why? What brand or make would your

stakeholders perceive it to be, and why? Does your perception match theirs?

In other words, how have you positioned your e-Learning? Is your e-Learning to be used for professional development? Or for on-the-job support? Is it infotainment? Or is it enter-training? Unless you have a clear position defined *and communicated*, your learners and the organization will not know what to expect or why.

### **Myth #6: Communication enables us to tell our story**

The American Heritage dictionary defines communication as, "the exchange of thoughts, messages or information." The key word in this definition is "exchange." Exchange implies a two-way process, not a one-way flood. All too often organizations develop "communication plans" that, in reality, are simply marketing communication plans. Their purpose is to tell a story in a convincing way rather than foster true two-way exchange.

To effectively implement e-Learning you need both a change communications plan and a marketing communications plan.

A marketing communications plan needs to tell all of your stakeholders about the vision and mission for your e-Learning initiative. It needs to present a memorable

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A change communications plan is necessary to support your change management efforts. Its purpose is to support the learners and the organization as a whole as they move through the three phases of change adoption: awareness, engagement and involvement. For each of these phases, the plan must present specific activities, messages and timing for each key stakeholder group.

### **Myth #7: Success is getting it to work**

Getting your e-Learning to work — completing the installation — is really only the first stage in being successful. And it is the easiest. It's the next two stages, implementation and integration, that are the really difficult ones.

You know you've succeeded at installation when your e-Learning runs error-free, the sound can be heard, the video images played, and the LMS tracks whatever it is you decide you want to track, and then some. Your focus during installation is on the technology.

You know you've succeeded at implementation when your targeted audiences are accessing what you've developed. It's at this stage that there is a lot of conversation about the e-Learning and the ROI (return on investment) anticipated and delivered. Your focus during implementation is on ensuring that your e-Learning is used in the way you intended it.

Getting through the next stage, integration, is the hardest. You know you've succeeded at this stage when your e-Learning is invisible. You are no longer absorbed with the technology or even talking about e-Learning. Your focus is on your organization, and e-Learning is just another part of any business process. Your e-Learning has been absorbed into the fabric of your organization.

### **Myth #8: Once is enough**

Oh, how we all wish this could be true! To be successful, you need to be in contin-

ual and over-lapping cycles of preparing, launching and sustaining. Within each of these cycles you must be in the process of learning —> planning —> developing —> implementing —> supporting —> learning.

Almost as soon as you have done the preparation and launched Version 1.0, you

should begin the preparation for Version 2.0. And, in parallel, you need to be working within the organization to sustain the initial momentum. This is then repeated with Version 2.5 or 3.0 and on and on.

Think of e-Learning as if it is organizational software that is in a continual

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Even if you have not been published before, we encourage you to submit a query if you have a great idea, technique, case study or practice to share with your peers in the e-Learning community. If your topic idea for an article is selected by the editors, you will be asked to submit a complete article on that topic. Don't worry if you have limited experience writing for publication. Our team of editors will work with you to polish your article and get it ready for publication in the **Journal**.

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- **A draft of the first paragraph**, written to grab the reader's attention and identify the problem or issue that will be addressed.
- **A short outline of your main points** addressing the problem or resolving the issue. This could be another paragraph or it could be a bulleted list.
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process of improvement and refinement. Plan regular reviews and conduct what I've come to call "tune-ups." In these tune-ups, you might decide to look at some or all of the following: learning/e-Learning strategy; business case (including ROI, if established); e-Learning architecture, components, and delivery mix; content and instructional design; tools, technologies, and infrastructure; marketing; change management; evaluation and metrics; supporting organization and processes; sponsorship and governance; and roles and responsibilities.

### Myth #9: It's magic


Clearly, being successful with e-Learning is not magic. There is no one model or formula to follow that will guarantee your success.

e-Learning enables you to change your current learning processes to be more efficient and more effective. If done right, e-Learning becomes a critical force to improve the performance of your workforce and your organization as a whole. This is not the same as "converting" an instructor-led course. This is big stuff, and therefore requires the best thinking from the best people inside and outside your organization.

### One minute summary

In order to ensure your e-Learning is used by your learners and embraced by your organization, remember:

1. It's about business and providing a business solution, providing a "Return on Expectation" not just a Return on Investment.
2. It's about enabling learning and driving performance, not training.
3. It's about people, not technology.
4. Marketing and change management are critical, not optional!

Good luck with all of your e-Learning endeavors! 



### AUTHOR CONTACT

Lance Dublin has been an advocate for innovative approaches to learning and change throughout his career. He went from designing a weeklong

"Experiment in Free Form Education" program in high school to co-founding one of the first fully accredited "University Without Walls" in the United States. Then, recogniz-

# About the Guild

ing the impact of new user-centered technologies on people, business and learning, he founded and built Dublin Group, a company which became a leader in improving individual and organizational performance and implementing large-scale change.

Lance is now an independent management consultant, international speaker and author based in San Francisco, and serving clients world-wide. He specializes in strategy development, program design, and implementation for corporate learning programs and organizational change management. He brings to his work more than 30 years' experience in adult education and training, communication and change leadership, and motivation and innovation. He is the co-author of the capstone book in ASTD's e-Learning series, *Implementing e-Learning*.

Lance was Founder, President and CEO of Dublin Group from its formation in 1983 until he sold the company in 1998. Under his leadership this company became recognized for its innovative solutions to improving individual and organizational performance and effective approaches to successfully implementing large-scale change initiatives. Prior to this, Lance was the founder, Dean and later Provost of Antioch University/West, an innovative accredited bachelor's and master's degree program serving 1,000 students in the western states and Hawaii.

Contact Lance directly at [ldublin@pacbell.net](mailto:ldublin@pacbell.net) or 415.759.1258.

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4. Click on Add A New Message.
5. Enter your message. It will be posted as soon as you hit the Add Message button on the form.

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