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

BY LANCE DUBLIN

You 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
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 fantasy.

Myth #1: Everyone knows what you mean when 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 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.”

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 fantasy.

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’ — 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 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 stakeholders 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
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.

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 you 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...
tag line, a 60-second “elevator” pitch, and accompanying project identity (i.e., logo, font and colors, “look ‘n feel”). You might create and distribute brochures and posters, tent cards and door-hangers, mass emails and voicemails, mailings, and giveaways (e.g., mouse pads, mugs, pens, t-shirts). The purpose is to make sure the message you want your stakeholders to hear is broadcast loud and clear.

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 continual and overlapping 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

---

**Tools & Techniques for Managing Successful e-Learning Projects**

**Managing the Plan, the Project, and the People**

In this workshop you will prepare a comprehensive approach to managing your e-Learning projects. This workshop addresses three critical elements for successful e-Learning projects: Managing the Plan, Managing the Project and Managing the People.

- Explore options and alternatives for building and implementing e-Learning strategies.
- Learn new ways to approach your plans and your people.
- Discover ways to increase the impact and power of e-Learning in your organization.
- Receive checklists, spreadsheets, and planning forms as well as a CD filled with practical examples that you can apply immediately.

**Public Workshop Dates & Locations**

- Chicago — July 10 & 11, 2003 — Marriott Chicago Downtown
- Washington DC — July 21 & 22, 2003 — Hyatt Crystal City
- San Francisco — July 24 & 25, 2003 — Renaissance Parc 55 Hotel

**Who Should Attend These Workshops?**

- Training Managers and Supervisors
- Project Managers
- Senior Development Staff
- Empowered Team Leaders
- Anyone who is responsible for managing the e-Learning projects and initiatives in their organization.

**Workshop Authors and Instructors**

Doug Whittle and Joel Ramseyer, The Diagonal Group, LLC

Dr. Doug Whittle and Joel Ramseyer have decades of experience leading organizations in a corporate business environment. Doug recently co-authored a book titled *The Manager as Change Agent: A practical guide for high performance people and organizations*. Joel is known for his proven record of service-driven, team building, results-producing management and methodologies across many industry disciplines.

Register Today! www.eLearningGuild.com
Do you have an interesting story to tell?

Get It Published in...

This publication is by the people, for the people.
That means it's written by YOU the readers and members of The eLearning Guild! We encourage you to submit articles for publication in the Journal.

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.

By sharing your expertise with the readers of the Journal, you not only add to the collective knowledge of the e-Learning community, you also gain the recognition of your peers in the industry and your organization.

How to Submit a Query

If you have an idea for an article, send a plain-text email to our editor, Bill Brandon, at bill@eLearningGuild.com, with the following information in the body of the email:

• 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.
• One paragraph on your background or current position that makes you the one to tell this story.
• A working title for the article.
• Your contact information: name, job title, company, phone, email. This information is to be for the writer of the article. We are unable to accept queries from agents, public relations firms, or other third parties.

All of this information should fit on one page. If the topic fits our editorial plan, Bill will contact you to schedule the manuscript deadline and the publication date, and to work out any other details.

Refer to www.eLearningGuild.com for more details.
About the Guild

The eLearning Guild™ is a Community of Practice for designers, developers, and managers of e-Learning. Through this member-driven community, we provide high-quality learning opportunities, networking services, resources, and publications. Community members represent a diverse group of instructional designers, content developers, project managers, contractors, consultants, and managers and directors of training and learning services — all of whom share a common interest in e-Learning design, development, and management.

The eLearning Developers’ Journal™

The Guild publishes the only online “e-Journal” in the e-Learning industry that is focused on delivering real world “how to make it happen in your organization” information. The Journal is published weekly and features articles written by both industry experts and members who work every day in environments just like yours. As an active member, you will have unlimited access to the Journal archive.

People Connecting With People

The Guild provides a variety of online member networking tools including online discussion boards, and the Needs & Leads™ bulletin board. These services enable members to discuss topics of importance, to ask others to help them find information they need, and to provide leads to other members.

Resources, Resources, Resources

The Guild hosts the e-Learning industry’s most comprehensive resource knowledge database. Currently there are over 2,300 resources available. Members have access to all of these resources and they can also post resources at any time!

Guild Research

The Guild has an ongoing industry research service that conducts surveys on 20 topics each year. These topics are identified by the Research Advisory Committee. The data collected is available for all members.

It’s About Leadership

The Guild draws leadership from an amazing Advisory Board made up of individuals who provide insight and guidance to help ensure that the Guild serves its constituency well. We are honored to have their active engagement and participation. The Guild has also established three committees made up of active members who help steer its editorial, events program and research efforts.

Discounts, Discounts, Discounts

Guild members receive discounts on all Guild conferences and on other selected products and services. Your Guild membership will save you 20% off the list price of Guild events!

Join today at www.eLearningGuild.com!

Become a member today! Join online at www.eLearningGuild.com.

THANK YOU TO THESE GUILD ENTERPRISE SPONSORS

CLARK Training & Consulting (CTC) is a global leader in instructional design offering both training and consulting services. Our award-winning seminars are based on the latest research in instructional psychology and human performance improvement.

www.clarktraining.com
Contact: Kimberly Perkins
602-230-9190

Spectra Interactive is a unique, full service, e-Learning consulting company — growing and expanding in North America and Europe to meet the growing need for expertise in e-Learning strategy development, instructional design and program implementation.

www.spectrainteractive.com
Contact: Brenda Pfau, President
bpfau@spectrainteractive.com
Ottawa, Canada (613) 230-9978

Cyclo...