

Briefings

12 Truths about e-Learning

Facing the Hard Realities

Overview

In 2004, IDC predicted that only 35% of corporate training will take place in traditional settings.¹ The majority of training now makes use of some form of technology and distance learning techniques.

As designers develop these new learning systems, they are faced with the challenge of creating:

- Training that people *actually take*
- Training that *changes behavior*
- Training that managers *can leverage*
- Training that can be *easily managed*
- Training that can be *quickly developed*
- Training that can be *rapidly deployed*
- Training that is *cost-effective*

In the haste to “get it out there,” organizations are ignoring some basic realities about technology and learning, and about today’s learners.

This paper introduces twelve “truths” that cannot be avoided if distance learning is to be successful. These truths come from discussions in e-learning literature, from customer feedback, and from ej4’s experience in creating rapid deployment learning situations.

The truths can be used as a roadmap to create an effective distance learning strategy, or as a checklist to evaluate the effectiveness of current approaches.

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TRUTH #1: It's All About Compelling Content

It's the question asked more than any other by learning professionals:

How do I get people to take this class?

They need to have someone put a figurative friendly arm around their shoulder and tell them in the spirit of constructive criticism, "That's not the problem. People vote with their time and attention, and they're telling you that your content sucks. If learners clearly benefited from your courses, employees would be beating down your doors to sign up."

TechLearn Trend's distance learning guru Elliott Masie gets right to this crucial point about e-learning when he emphasizes, "It's all about compelling content!"

Designers should not confuse bells and whistles with effective learning. In a race, content counts far more than delivery style—if the content is compelling enough. Buyers spend hours on the Internet pouring through a myriad of Web sites and chat areas looking for information about their next big purchase. They laboriously go through horrible text-only pages seeking medical information on a current illness or injury. No one is spoon feeding them anything. They are *pulling* information out of a user-unfriendly system because the content has such benefit to them.

Distance learning is not simply an inexpensive way to deliver ineffective training. If a course helps someone make money, save time, reduce problems, make life easier, excel at work, stay healthier, look better, have fun, etc., then learners will take the course voluntarily. That's the primary requirement of *all* learning—regardless of delivery method or clever instructional design.

TRUTH #2: Single-event training doesn't work

In an emergency, no one wants to get CPR from a person who had the course ten years ago and has never used it since. They're liable to push on your face and blow on your chest. It's just been too long since the initial training to keep those life-critical skills fresh.

Most learning professionals operate on the philosophy of, "They took it. They know it forever." Once a course is completed, then that's a skills check-off for the rest of that student's organizational life. Unfortunately, this attitude contradicts all known learning theory.

The key concept is what psychologists call memory "decay." Most people can't remember what they had for lunch two Thursdays back, much less recall 152 text-laden PowerPoint slides they saw in a 2-1/2 day class 14 months ago. *Over time and without reinforcement and use, we forget nearly all of what we learned in any single event.*

Conducting a training event without also providing after-the-event continuing refresh learning and application learning is a waste of time. From a competency standpoint, refresh learning is actually *more* important than the initial event.

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TRUTH #3: Management support is a requirement

We've heard employees joke that they stay away from their boss right after a managerial training class because he or she always comes back with all these weird ideas. If subordinates just lie low for awhile, the real world beats it out of the boss and everything is back to normal again in a few weeks.

Another factor that turns worthwhile learning events into total wastes of time is the lack of cultural and managerial support systems that reinforce the newly trained behaviors.

What happens during the first few trials of the new skill after a training event is critical. If learners attempt something they learned and are shot down for it, they'll *never* do it again. If they do something they learned and no one seems to care, they'll realize that it's unimportant and let it fade away.

Performance management processes must specify the new behaviors. Management must expect and coach to the new behaviors. Employees must see that they will be formally and informally rewarded for using the new behaviors. And the new behaviors must *work*.

ej4 feels so strongly about this point that we refuse to accept learning engagements unless the appropriate support and follow-up systems are included. Otherwise, it is failure for everyone involved.

TRUTH #4: Focus on task vs. topic

Most curriculum is organized the way trainers want to present it (by topic) rather than the way learners need to use it (by task).

For example, trainers create topic-specific management classes such as Coaching, Communications, Conflict Management, Appraisals, and so on. While these are often necessary to convey basic skills and concepts, they are difficult to apply. The supervisor with a problem employee has to take all these courses and then figure out how to integrate them when talking with the subordinate.

What learners prefer are courses that address specific tasks they have to do *now*. Course titles such as, "What to do when the job isn't getting done," "How to leave phone messages that get returned," or "Making the pre-harvest sales call" enable learners to get right to work. The content is already "pre-integrated" for easy use.

TRUTH #5: It's not blended, it's learn/apply

"Blended learning" is a key buzzword when talking about distance learning. Blending typically refers to the process of taking a set of content and dividing it up in terms of delivery method. For example, one portion might be taught in the classroom, another portion using e-learning, and the remainder done with supervisor coaching.

Blended delivery methods make sense, but this is the wrong way to separate content. The most effective and cost efficient way to blend is to use distance learning

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for knowledge/skill learning, and use person-to-person for “apply on the job” learning. Supervisors are not expert trainers, but they know the task at hand.

Some ej4 clients have completely eliminated their classroom training programs, using *ej4 Campus* distance learning as the sole training approach. They have instead replaced classroom training time with team and individual sessions that show learners how to *apply* the training content to specific daily tasks. The result is that employee satisfaction and actual performance has improved versus classroom training.²

TRUTH #6: Content must be tailored

The minute a learner at a bank sees a factory example, he turns off. The minute a consumer goods employee sees a service industry example, she turns off. ej4’s experience is that generic training programs generate low learner satisfaction. As one executive put it, “This vendor had 1,000 online courses ... and none of them applied to me.”

Even with relatively generic content, simply creating custom background graphics, putting the instructor in a logo shirt, and changing a few stories can make all the difference.

ej4’s design model is to provide *tailored* content. Each course can be customized for every client. This is economically possible because of ej4’s digital video-based rapid deployment model. The result is learners who are more engaged by a course that feels uniquely aimed at them.

TRUTH #7: Use the voice of the learner

The best distance learning connects directly to what the learner is actually thinking. Executives typically want content that follows a perverse Home on the Range approach, “Never is heard a discouraging word ... and the skies had better not be cloudy all day.” The problem is that this creates a sense of disconnect with the learner, who is sitting there thinking, “They don’t get it,” or worse, “This is b***s***.”

Content can’t be an “everything is wonderful” propaganda rag. If the new product being described sounds eerily familiar to a previous total failure, then that issue should be candidly put on the table and addressed. The learner should be sitting there thinking, “YEAH, that’s exactly what I’d ask in a meeting ... if I had the guts.”

The more candid, honest, and “real” the content is, the more engaging it will be. The more focused it is on learners’ concerns, needs, and benefits, the more successful it will be. That means not ignoring things, but handling those sensitive issues in an open and forthright manner.

TRUTH #8: It’s a TV generation

People now learn differently than in the past. According to the A.C. Neilson Company, the average American watches more than four hours of TV each day.

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And there are six million videos rented daily versus three million library items checked out daily.³ According to an AOL Games poll, half of Americans age 12 to 55 play electronic games each day on their PC, phone, handheld, or TV game box.⁴ With the average age of video gamers at 29, it's clear that today's workers are "wired" for a different learning experience.⁵

Learners are used to getting their information by watching real people integrated with special effects ... such as a newswoman with a video window over her shoulder or the weatherman superimposed over an animated map, i.e., *interacting* with the content. There are no cartoonish animations, text-only slides, or disembodied talking heads beside a static visual.

The fancy Web animations used in many training applications today are not only needlessly expensive, they often are not even effective. Learners sneer, "This looks like my video game from about 15 years ago."

The result is that digital streaming video, with special production and instructional design, has become an ideal teaching medium. To reach these new learners, ej4 uses a proprietary method of superimposing instructors *on top of* their PowerPoint slides or documents, much like the evening weather person. This captures the spirit of the live instruction, lets non-programmers create complex graphics and animation effects, and *dramatically lowers the production cost and time.*

In his annual year-end *Predictions* report, e-learning analyst Josh Bersin said this about ej4 streaming video, "One of the biggest challenges in self-study e-learning continues to be the problem of engaging the learner. Recently we have run across some very compelling and exciting uses of Flash-based video. It is now possible to take a fantastic instructor or celebrity and put them online." As a result, Bersin highlighted ej4 as a key learning technology for 2005.⁶ (<http://www.bersin.com>)

TRUTH #9: Shorter is better

Many instructional designers ignore the realities of learner attention span and absorption rates. Courses are often like throwing a bucket of water on a kitchen sponge. No one wants to start a marathon training program in a work environment where the average time between interruptions is mere minutes. And many people simply can't be taken off the job for extended periods.

Everyone has had the experience of signing on to an e-learning course and groaning when the first page number has "Slide 1 of 122" on it. A consumer goods firm requires all of its satellite TV training programs to take up the entire one-hour programming slot window—despite complaints about excessive course length.

In an MTV world of fast cuts and four to seven minutes between commercials, learners struggle with lengthy courses. ej4's instruction design model is to keep courses in the 15 minute range, with typical times running from 5 minutes to an occasional course of up to 30 minutes in length—and the latter only when absolutely required.

Complex topics should be divided up into shorter segments. It's always better to have five 15-minute programs than one 1-hour course. This is good discipline for the instructional designer in organizing the material into bite-sized chunks.



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It also drives stronger retention by providing more occurrences of short learning times—the ideal approach to studying and retention.

TRUTH #10: Engagement = Interaction

Many instructional designers start from the false assumption that physical interaction is a requirement for effective distance learning. As a result, organizations have created custom-programmed Web courses with fancy animations and mouse clicks, and installed complex satellite TV systems with remote networked handhelds—all for the sake of interaction. These are no longer needed, and are costing organizations millions of dollars in unnecessary expense.

What is required from a distance learning course is mental “engagement.” Two TV series that accomplish this are *I, Detective* on Court TV and *Command Decision* on The History Channel. These programs use a structured question and answer discovery approach at regular points in the broadcast to get viewers involved and thinking about the stories ... and to keep them from switching channels during commercials.

According to George Snyder, a Stillwater, Oklahoma based media e-learning expert, when done properly this “mental button pushing” creates the same learning effect as actual physical actions. This means that a supposedly passive medium like digital video, with the right instructional design, can deliver the same learning benefits as interactive learning ... at a fraction of the cost.

TRUTH #11: Deliver where needed

A cross section of employees from a distribution firm were asked where they wanted training delivered. Management was surprised when workers said they wanted to take training at home or during their leisure time.

One employee said, “I’m anxious to get going in the morning, and tired when I’m done with deliveries in the afternoon. I want to get home, have dinner, spend some time with my family, and get the kids to bed. Then maybe I’d climb on the computer for a short course.”

Another employee commented, “I get up at 5:00 a.m. every day. Sleeping late on Saturday is 7:00 a.m. The soccer games don’t start until 9:00 a.m. I’d take a course then. Or I’d listen to something on audio while I’m jogging or mowing the lawn or driving around.”

Learners want to learn when they can, where they want to. Organizations need to start delivering training in non-traditional ways ... mobile computers, wireless devices, media-enabled phones, Palm and PocketPC handheld devices, audio CDs or MP3s, and so on.

TRUTH #12: Create once, deploy many

Organizations need to take compelling content and deliver it for the variety of uses required to maximize learning, retention, and application. The mistake that most instructional designers make is trying to develop a version of the training

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for each primary use. This “create many, deploy once” approach is time-consuming and enormously costly.

The digital video-based ej4 process described in this paper is just the opposite. What ej4 calls Multi-Purposed Learning™ is a “create once, deploy many” approach that minimizes development costs while maximizing deployment options.⁷ Designers can create a single video that can then be deployed on the Web and accessed in a linear or non-linear fashion whenever and wherever needed. The same video can be used five different ways for: initial learning, refresh learning, team meetings, one-on-one coaching sessions, and performance support on the job.

Summary

These are the “12 truths” about distance learning and technology, developed by listening to learners and taking a realistic look at current e-learning offerings. Organizations can ignore these at their peril. The penalties are burgeoning expenses, classes that no one takes, and unfulfilled business opportunities.

The benefit of building these concepts into learning systems is the fulfillment of the promise of rapid deployment distance learning—training and communications that are more compelling and engaging, that people actually take, that leaders can leverage, that cost a mere fraction of traditional methods, and that get better business results.

¹ “Business Strategy: How to Sell an e-Learning Initiative to Management,” *BNA HR Library*, <http://www.hrlibrary.bna.com>, February 2005.

² Spirgi, Heidi, “Pepsi-Cola Bottler Field Sales and Service Training,” *Bersin & Associates*, December 2004.

³ Herr, Norman, “Television,” *The Sourcebook for Science Teaching*, <http://www.csun.edu>, 2001.

⁴ Carney, Spencer, “Now Playing: Video games reach new levels thanks to blockbuster budgets and next-generation technology,” *Hemisphere Magazine*, March 2005, pg. 32.

⁵ Grossman, Lev, “Out of the Xbox,” *Time Magazine*, May 23, 2005, pg. 52.

⁶ Bersin, Josh, “2004 E-Learning Research Year in Review: Predictions for 2005,” *Bersin & Associates*, December 2004, pgs. 11-12.

⁷ Cooper, Kenneth Carlton, “Multi-Purposed Learning™ Content: Beyond ‘Blended Learning,’” *ej4 Briefings*, Version 4, October 2004.

About the Author ...

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