

Grand designs for e-learning – can e-learning make the grade for our biggest corporates?

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Abstract

Purpose – *The aim of this paper is to discuss the key issues of deployment for large enterprises keen to adopt new web-based learning techniques.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper complements the writer's own expertise with external research and reference to large enterprise scale e-training deployments recently implemented for global companies, including PepsiCo.*

Findings – *The paper finds that big business is waking up to the efficiency and cost benefits of wide-scale e-learning deployment.*

Originality/value – *This paper launches the debate for enterprise wide e-learning architectures in large companies.*

Keywords *E-learning, Large enterprises, Training*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Arguably, big enterprise perceives itself to have been badly served by e-learning. With no established channel for entry, e-learning programmes have often seeped into big organisations through back doors left open by early adopting evangelists. Finance is a good example here, where compliance managers, rather than training managers, have often been the purchasers of e-training. While this has served to highlight the raw potential for e-learning within large operations, seeing potential and harnessing it are two entirely different things – especially for big corporates frequently ill suited to rapid change?

“If it ain’t broke don’t fix it” is the mantra for many of our blue chips when it comes to training today. With an established infrastructure to support mature workflow practices, larger businesses may be attracted by the potential of today’s most exciting training systems but reticent to take the brave first steps towards genuinely scaleable enterprise wide e-learning.

As the CEO of the e-learning operation that has recently converted companies like BBC, PepsiCo and global IT provider Insight to the benefits of enterprise scale training on the web, Mohive’s[1] Lars Unneberg is more familiar with the problem than most.

“Rapid e-learning is defined as the rapid creation of e-learning content, usually by someone who understands the topic of the intended material, yet not necessarily an expert in e-learning production themselves. They are usually referred to as subject matter experts (SMEs). The SMEs typically use easy to understand software tools to create the content, and are able to publish finished pieces in a matter of weeks.

“In 2003 rapid e-learning began to gain significant attention as a way of producing e-learning. This was due in large part to the reduced time and cost of creating e-learning and the ability to address timely training issues without requiring significant investment of resources.

“Over the past three years, the rapid e-learning market has grown to represent a significant portion of e-learning content. By 2005, rapid e-learning represented 36 per cent of all e-learning produced. Furthermore, market trends show that this segment will continue to grow and will potentially reach 50 per cent of all e-learning produced by 2008 (according to Bersin & Associates).

“Key reasons for this market segment growth include the fact that a recent survey of HR managers by Bersin & Associates indicates that up to 72 per cent of training requirements are time critical and need to be addressed inside 60-90 days. This requirement ties in quite tightly with the tenets of rapid e-learning.”

The driving concepts behind rapid e-learning are:

- a reduction in the time spent in creating e-learning;
- enabling SMEs to be the primary source for content development; and
- having easy-to-use software tools that lower the barrier to creating content.

“In addition to these benefits, organisations find that rapid e-learning’s rise in popularity has to do with not only the costs saved in creating e-learning content, but also in the benefits these e-learning modules provide. Organisations are able to create in-depth, track-able training and ensure the staff is able to take it in a timely fashion.”

Examples of this include:

- *Product training.* A product manager, or other subject matter expert, is able to rapidly create an e-learning module to train a sales force on a new/updated product. This ensures they are able to sell more efficiently and effectively.
- *Best practice training.* Team members that have proven to be quite adept at a given area of expertise are able to quickly produce a module that disseminates this best practice to the rest of the organisation. This is most common in a sales setting where salespeople can share techniques with other team-members to ensure better overall sales efforts.

New generation gets taste for enterprise scale e-learning

“With large workforces geographically dispersed, directing numerous business segments or product lines, our most innovative brands and businesses are now locking on to the potential of e-learning across the enterprise.

“PepsiCo is a typical example of a global enterprise now turning to wide-scale web training. As enterprises become more complex, efficient e-learning infrastructures tend to become more mission critical: How can the corporate centre of a world leading convenience foods organisation be absolutely sure that meals served in its Western Australian outlets meet the exact standards developed in the Illinois-based headquarters? How does the quality controller at the head office of the major drinks company ensure that sodas sold in the Czech Republic taste the same as in Downtown New York?

“Enterprises like PepsiCo usually have an extremely broad training requirement. Often mandated by corporate initiative to provide employees with training specific to their job. This training can include regulatory compliance, quality control, health and safety, diversity, product, process, and internal systems training.

“Over the past three years, the rapid e-learning market has grown to represent a significant portion of e-learning content.”

“In the case of product training, enterprises typically have a large number of products, large sales forces, and in many cases, are supposed to present solutions to the customer rather than just a series of separate products. All of this greatly increases the need for up to date training. In the case of Global IT provider Insight for instance, post taking over a major competitor, dramatic revision of the businesses e-training infrastructure has become a corner stone in the company's consolidation drive. Since acquiring Software Spectrum last year, Insight has been eager to integrate as quickly as possible and share best practices across the newly enlarged enterprise. Making the Mohive e-Learning Publishing System accessible across the entire organisation has been the fastest way to ensure that knowledge and critical information is disseminated at the speed today's competitive marketplace demands.

“Insight's new enterprise scale e-learning system will support training hubs in the UK, France, Germany and three sites located in the USA, with web-based programs accessible to the company's 4,500 plus team-mates, operating out of more than 170 countries.

Harnessing the potential

“The challenge for enterprises like PepsiCo or Insight is to develop training programs that address the business issues within the organisation and ensure the training is consistent, approved, and delivered to the entire organisation in a timely fashion while ensuring costs are reasonable.”

In order to implement a successful rapid e-learning initiative in a large organisation, the following ten concepts should be considered.

1. Content creation time

One of the cornerstones of traditional rapid e-learning in any organisation – large or small – is that implementing rapid e-learning will reduce the time spent on creating content. Industry guidelines suggest that traditional e-learning projects (produced in-house) can take ten or more weeks from conception to final publishing. This number goes up significantly depending on the number of people involved in the review and approval process. Rapid e-learning is designed to reduce this number down to several weeks; therefore, any rapid e-learning implementation should demonstrate how it will reduce the production time of e-learning content.

2. SMEs

The second of three cornerstones in traditional rapid e-learning is the use of subject matter experts as the primary source of authoring for the content. These SMEs will be the ones to produce the content, therefore any program that is put in place should address their needs and requirements, and ensure they are able to efficiently create e-learning.

SMEs are usually sought after to provide content for e-learning since they tend to know the subject matter best and are able to use the right messaging and terminology.

Engaging SMEs not only refers to having software that makes it easy for them to create content, but also ensures they are able to do so efficiently. Factors to consider include ensuring they are enabled to create content, they are able to reuse existing content, streamlining the creation process by providing approved graphics and media, and simply ensuring there are as few bottlenecks as possible so that they can be more efficient.

3. Software tools

The final aspect of traditional rapid e-learning involves the software tools used to create the content. There are currently numerous desktop and server-based solutions on the market that provide a variety of functionality, ranging from converting Microsoft PowerPoint files into Flash, to advanced web-based software systems that make it easy for SMEs to create interactive sequences without requiring advanced technical skills. Selecting the right piece of software will go a long way to ensuring a successful rapid e-learning program. When

selecting the software that will be used to create e-learning, create a list of requirements and ensure that the product(s) you select meet the above requirements.

4. Project management

Arguably the most important aspect of any enterprise rapid e-learning implementation is project management. This not only includes the implementation of this process within an enterprise (vendor selection, process definitions, budgeting, etc.), but also includes the day-to-day usage. Many organisations cite poor project management as being a major source of frustration in any e-learning project.

The following are four tips that help ensure an enterprise rapid e-learning project goes smoothly:

1. Define the quality assurance, review, and approval process before beginning the project.
2. Ensure the SMEs are able to dedicate the time.
3. Get commitment from the various stakeholders in the project.
4. Define the business outcome of the training ensuring there is a goal beyond increasing the audience's knowledge on the topic. for instance, if this is product training for the sales team, the goal should be their ability to sell more products and to do so more efficiently. This provides a better framework to structure content.

5. Review and approval

In smaller organisations, the review and approval process can be handled in a more informal manner. In many enterprises this approach will not scale, especially publicly listed organisations where strict controls are often placed on the review and approval procedure. Given that e-learning courses disseminate a wide variety of information (including mission critical product and process training) various internal groups need to participate in the review and approval process for any given piece of content. This can include legal and marketing departments that need to ensure the e-learning content meets regulatory compliance, approved messaging guidelines, and a variety of other issues.

It is therefore important to not only understand the review and approval process internally before beginning an enterprise rapid e-learning process, but also to ensure the software infrastructure implemented around this process will support it.

Ensuring you answer these and other questions before implementing an enterprise rapid e-learning process will help reduce the risk of loss of control of the project.

Some common questions include:

- Do I have a centralised repository for all feedback provided?
- Is there an audit trail so that the project manager can track the comments provided?
- Am I able to see when a person or group has signed off on a project?
- Am I able to create a reference group to ensure the content meets the target audience's needs?
- Am I able to track who has reviewed the content and who has not?

6. Collaboration

Outside of the smallest e-learning modules, almost all projects will include some aspect of collaboration. This includes numerous authors contributing content to the same course, editors reviewing an author's contributions and many other scenarios where multiple individuals contribute on content creation.

Ensuring that there is a platform available to support this collaboration will greatly reduce unplanned delays in the content creation process. The ability to have several people participate in one project, either as an editor, author, or a reviewer tends to greatly improve

the quality of the work produced, and with the right setup, not drastically increase the time spent on creation.

7. Reusing and repurposing content

Creating content, even in a rapid e-learning setting, takes time, effort and dedication. Any enterprise rapid e-learning initiative should take into consideration the possibility to reuse and repurpose existing content in order to reduce resource consumption and enable a more efficient e-learning program.

Reusing content. It is important to verify that your e-learning infrastructure makes it feasible to quickly modify existing content then have it exist as a new piece of content. Being able to quickly update a piece of training to take new aspects into consideration will greatly reduce time and costs, compared to having to recreate the content from scratch. This includes updating product training to reflect new functionality, adjustments to internal processes, and other, less obvious aspects like supporting new graphical design elements (rebranding efforts, new logos, etc.).

Repurposing content. Repurposing means to take something and use it in a different way. Typically e-learning content exists as a Flash or HTML-based file that resides on a server and is viewed via a web browser. But given the effort and costs associated with producing e-learning, the ability to repurpose the content that has been used in creating an e-learning module.

Aspects to consider when considering repurposing content include:

- supporting mobile devices;
- creating SCORM or AICC conformant packages;
- using the content in an offline/standalone format;
- distributing content via CD-ROMs or DVDs; and
- printing the content and having it available in booklet form.

8. Assessment

Many enterprises require some form of testing for their employees. Whether this is certification training that is mandated by law, or simply internal rules that require employees to be tested to ensure they are competent. E-learning can enable an organisation to perform these tests in an efficient manner, and furthermore delivers a tracking platform that delivers results into systems like learning management systems (LMS). While many certification training programs fall outside the scope of rapid e-learning, even enterprise rapid e-learning, the concept of creating assessments in enterprise rapid e-learning remains vital to ensuring employees are retaining information.

Things to consider when deciding on what sort of assessment functionality is required include:

- the ability to create a pool of questions for randomised testing;
- infrastructure for tracking results from the assessment; and
- incorporating pre-existing questions and tests into an e-learning assessment module.

9. Software installation and integration

Another aspect to consider when implementing an enterprise rapid e-learning process has to do with an organisation's IT policies. This includes software installation policies and integration with existing systems.

Installation. On the surface this is not a relevant point, as many policies will allow for software to be installed on computers involved in various projects.

Things to consider when selecting software infrastructure are:

- Will per-author licensing make the involvement of numerous SMEs prohibitive?

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- Are there policies prohibiting installation of certain technologies (Flash, JavaScript, ActiveX controls, etc.) on a computer that will limit an organisation's ability to involve SMEs?
- For software systems that are server based, is an externally hosted software system allowed/encouraged/discouraged?
- For server-based systems, what processes are required to host the software internally?
- What technologies are necessary when an end-user is taking an e-learning course? Flash? JavaScript? Other? Does the content run on all necessary operating systems?

Integration. Enterprises typically have an expensive, customised IT infrastructure. This can include a LMS, a Content Management System, directory listing of employees (LDAP server), plus a variety of other systems that represent the cornerstone of an enterprises IT strategy. When selecting an e-learning initiative, it is impossible to consider the existing infrastructure to ensure that an organisation's assets are used to the fullest extent. Things to consider include using content stored in a CMS in an e-learning course or ensuring that e-learning content will track 100 per cent in the company LMS.

10. Media

Various media elements help differentiate e-learning content from straight text documents. The ability to incorporate sound, videos, and a variety of imagery greatly enhance e-learning content. However, it is not uncommon for enterprises to have a pre-approved set of graphics and designs for use in all forms of company communications.

Four things to consider from a media usage perspective are:

1. Does the authoring software include either its own media database or integrate into existing content management systems?
2. Many organisations use “rights managed” imagery and photography. This means that there is some form of pay-per-use associated with the imagery. Are you able to track this usage to ensure no breakage in licensing?
3. Do you have a company standard design template for e-learning? Does your software infrastructure allow you to change this without re-doing your entire module?
4. Are you able to create a repository of all approved media for any given project in your software infrastructure?

Conclusions

“As rapid e-learning continues to grow as a concept and drive the training industry forward, there will be an increased level of maturity in terms of implementations and tools available. Until the concept matures however, it will suffer from the same pitfalls that all emerging technologies and concepts face, and that is the “buzz” effect of over-hyping and promising to be a fix-all solution. This article was written to provide a list of consideration points to ensure anyone implementing an enterprise rapid e-learning initiative is able to make sound business decisions that take many aspects into consideration.

“A final thing to consider is that while all rapid e-learning implementations promise reduced content creation time, there still needs to be content produced. It is critical to ensure that an enterprise rapid e-learning project has a committed team to ensure its completion will be driven forward, not dragged along.”

Note

1. Mohive develops the Mohive e-Learning Publishing System (eLPS), a system that enables an organisation to collaboratively plan, author, review, and publish e-learning. It is a web-based software system that publishes e-learning content directly into an LMS. In other words, Mohive, combined with an LMS, provides the critical infrastructure needed to unlock the potential of e-learning within an organisation. A partial list of Mohive customers include: BBC, Charles Schwab, Hornbach, UPC/LibertyGlobal, PepsiCo, Promina, and If Insurance.

About the author

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