



e-Learning: Managing Success

By David Holmes and Cedric Richardson

Successful implementation of e-Learning can be bittersweet. Everyone loves you...but a bit too much. Unanticipated surges in demand by learners and the business can broadside the training process.

The implementation of an e-Learning platform is arduous. The program of work includes analysis of business requirements, resolution of technical issues, selection of an appropriate learning management system (LMS), and vendor negotiations as well as rigorous management of multi-discipline teams through the implementation process.

Dramatically increasing the project's overall success are effective change management strategies that engage the organisation's business units and promote strong sponsorship within senior management ranks. Timely communications create a sense of anticipation within the learning audiences. Individuals, groups and management ask, "When will we receive online learning?"

Success = Panic

If you have done it right, and some organisations in Australia have, then the stress and angst associated with fear of failure disappear shortly after Week 1, post-LMS Implementation...to be replaced by panic in the months that follow. The reason? Successful implementation of an e-Learning platform can result in unanticipated waves of demand from both learners and the business. Learners want access and the business wants online courseware...now!

The Waves of End User Demand

Peter Tilton knows the frenzy that only the sweet smell of success can bring. As head of the ANZ's eTrain initiative, Peter implemented the WorldLearn Australia Pty Ltd learning management system in mid-November 2000. He identified distinct demand "surges" since going online:

- Early adopters were attracted to the eTrain environment by its simple user interface. Within one to two clicks learners can access the required information.
- Remote users had limited access to traditional training materials. Online learning provides equal access, therefore triggering the second wave of voluntary registrations.

- Compulsory training brought about a shift from voluntary registrations to enforced compliance as learners must now use eTrain to access compulsory certification programs.

One third of the ANZ work force has jumped on the eTrain in the first three months, and the stampede is not over yet. Peter predicts another demand surge as I.T. staff jockey for access to 300 technology related training modules scheduled for release next month.

The Telstra experience has been different. According to Graeme Wright, National Manager, Learning Technology Support, when they launched the Southrock LMS in 1997, they did it in two phases. The first phase saw 12 modules of online learning launched and marketed to about 500 staff. This gave them a short but useful breathing space to stabilise the system.

The second phase, six months later, introduced broader learning management functions and enabled managers to enrol staff for all learning, be it online or instructor led. Requiring manager's input in the enrolment process helped to steady the end user demand.

The next step at Telstra is to allow all staff to enrol themselves in courses they wish to complete, without line management involvement. This is likely to see a rise in enrolments, and also introduce some challenges for line managers as they prepare staffing rosters. To tackle this, the LMS at Telstra allows line managers to specify whether their staff need their authorisation for enrolment.

Managing the Waves

Both at Telstra and the ANZ, the launch of online learning was intentionally kept low key. At Telstra this was through targeted marketing to selected business units. At the ANZ a soft launch approach was taken, without big sales pitches. However, in both cases, the take up by end users has been enthusiastic and has outstripped expectations. Peter recommends that organisations should add twenty percent to their most optimistic estimates of staff take up.

Peter's experience also suggests that strong IT involvement is essential, to manage increased demand for online resources. He also believes that their Helpdesk provided vital support for staff exploring a new online learning environment for the first time.

Managing the upsurge in end user demand is only one element of success. The other element is keeping staff interested and ensuring they come back a second and third time. Peter suggests that having a critical mass of good quality, custom

developed and off-the-shelf courseware will keep staff coming back.

Graeme also cautions against being disappointed by training completion statistics. He suggests that the number of staff enrolling and beginning a course is what really matters. Graeme comments, "...assessment and reporting of completion is valid for just-in-case training, but makes little or no sense for just-in-time training...people enroll and only do up to the section where they were short on knowledge and then stop."

Keeping the Business Contented

Both Peter and Graeme cite a steady increase in requests from their respective business units for online training content. Graeme states that over the past twelve months there has been a "flip" in the nature of these requests: it was 80% instructor-led and 20% online learning, now it is the other way around.

Graeme and Peter have some practical tips for keeping the business supplied with online content:

Manage expectations:

It's a key factor in controlling demand. In the heat of the moment, parts of the business push to convert much of the current training to an online format...even if it results in electronic page turning. Reject these requests to ensure that the quality of online materials is maintained.

Develop close relationships with custom online content developers:

This ensures the training department can meet the demands from business units and maintain quality. Peter says "Make sure you have relationships with good courseware developers so you can help meet the demand...with different specialist skills, because different companies do different things".

Upskill your teams sooner than later:

At Telstra, Graeme found that courseware developers needed upgrading to web based rather than a linear approach to development. To a lesser extent, instructional designers required some skill enhancement. Development tests your grit, but maintenance will kill you. Graeme emphasises the need for an effective courseware maintenance strategy.

Ensure that content developed now will be easy to maintain:

This helps to free up resources for new content development as the maintenance workload increases.

Waves Follow the Winds of Change

Based on the experiences of both the ANZ and Telstra, it is possible to foreshadow some of the business unit demand and to prepare business units so they make informed choices about online learning. What seems clear is that waves of demand for online courses follow on the heels of change initiatives:

- **Major change initiatives** - such as a large systems implementation or upgrades. This demand is easy to predict due to long planning cycles for these projects. These online learning projects can therefore form the backbone of any online learning rollout plan.
- **Minor change initiatives** - such as changes that are focussed within a small business unit. These are harder to predict because they may not appear on broader organisation change plans. However they can expand the demand for online learning content dramatically. Incorporating these into an overall online learning rollout plan will give a much more realistic estimate of demand.
- **Maintenance initiatives** - As old courseware requires maintenance, business units may decide to convert to online. The timing for these requests can often be negotiated with business units to help to level out the demand for online content rollout.
- **Hidden demand** - When business units see online learning at work, ideas that have sat on the back burner due to technology or cost constraints often resurface. These may be in areas such as value added services for customers or remote staff training initiatives that could not be justified on earlier cost estimates. This demand is nearly impossible to predict but increases as the take up of online learning grows.

Implementing the LMS platform acts as the trigger point for converting the latent demand contained within the change initiatives into the actual requests for end user access to online learning content. Conducting an environmental scan of your organisation's change initiatives is the first step in calculating the post-LMS demand curve.

Summary

e-Learning: it's a success, everyone loves you, and even though you feel loved a bit too much, that's fine. You've done the planning to handle it.

Successful implementations of learning management software result in large

numbers of end users demanding access to online learning materials. The business moves quickly to convert current training to an online format, and also looks to online learning for addressing the changes brought about by major change initiatives. This environment can quickly generate a backlash within a training department unless it is prepared to manage the outcomes of its own success.

Working with the business to understand the nature of proposed change initiatives, as well as shaping expectations well in advance of LMS implementation, have been successful strategies used within organisations such as the ANZ Group and Telstra Corporation.

Reprinted from the June 2001 issue of *Training and Development in Australia* with permission from the Australian Institute of Training and Development.

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