

Elearning: Building an Effective and Engaging Solution Online

There's a lot of buzz about elearning, and with good reason. When done effectively, organizations find it can reduce time away from the office and decrease the cost of training by eliminating the need for travel. Studies show elearning can also reduce instruction time, save energy, and increase the learners' retention of the content.

Not surprisingly, an increasing number of organizations are turning to elearning for these reasons. A recent study by *Chief Learning Officer* magazine revealed that 75% of responding organizations used elearning. According to the Bersin & Associates Corporate Learning Factbook, elearning has increased 2% over the last 5 years accounting for 20% of all learning delivery.



Online learning offers the ability to reach learners where they are or where they work and provides a consistent, convenient way to deliver content across all parts of the organization. The challenge, however, can be designing content and tools that engage learners and keep them focused and on track during the learning journey. When designing engaging and effective learning experiences, the same rules apply to both traditional and online. Your goal should be to connect people at a deep level to the information they're learning. In an online learning environment this means you have to present information more clearly, nurture your learners more often, and create a human connection despite the fact that the learning environment is virtual.

According to a study by eLearning Industry

- Today, elearning is a \$56.2 billion industry, and it's predicted to double by 2015.
- Corporations now report that elearning is the second most valuable training method that they use.
- Elearning can save businesses at least 50% when they replace traditional instructor-based training with elearning.
- Elearning can cut instruction time by up to 60%.
- Elearning is also eco-friendly. Recent studies conducted by Britain's Open University have found that elearning consumes 90% less energy than traditional courses.
- According to a recent study conducted by The Research Institute of America, elearning has the power to increase information retention rates by up to 60%.

Why the Increase in Elearning?

According to a recent study by eLearning Industry, elearning can save businesses at least 50% when they replace traditional instructor-based training with elearning, can cut instruction time by up to 60%, can consume 90% less energy than classroom training, and can increase the retention of information by 60%.

Technological advancements are making it possible to develop more cost-effective and scalable eLearning solutions. For example, Web-based technologies offer employees more flexibility and choices to get information when and where they need it (24/7 at work, at home, or while traveling). Presentation systems, such as streaming audio and video (live and canned), including WebEx and HorizonLive, bring multimedia to multiple points at a reduced cost. Conferencing systems, both live and real-time audio and video conferencing, provide engaging virtual classroom experiences. Rich media design tools, including game-like simulations and other approaches to gamification, are now becoming a norm in workplace learning.

As we move into the future, we can predict that elearning will play a more prominent role in both formal and informal learning, especially with emerging Web technologies, such as instant messaging, web conferencing, wikis, blogs, and other social platforms, that are transforming the way people learn and share information. In addition, increasingly geographically dispersed workforces and organizations will demand scalable solutions and programs that can be delivered to specific groups while ensuring continuity of the learning experience.

Why Online Learning Can Be Just as Effective (If Not More Effective) Than Traditional Classroom Training

In an online learning setting the teacher becomes the screen. And people love screens. With the advances in smart phones and big screen TVs we've become almost addicted to the screen. In fact, screens have become people's natural habitat, especially considering that Generations X and Y were raised in the digital age. Interfacing with a screen is sometimes more normal or comfortable than interacting live with someone face-to-face.

Studies show that the primary reason students prefer online learning is that it enables them to set their own pace and consume as much or as little content as they have time for. And based on whether they "get" the information or not, it's always easy to review the content in an online course.

Online learning can empower interaction, even for those who are shy. In a classroom setting, learners who are shy will often sit in the back of the room and generally not engage or participate as much as those who are more outgoing. Shy learners are more apt to weigh in on a discussion when it's a digital dialogue as opposed to a face-to-face one, where they may be intimidated.

Online learning can allow an unlimited amount of students to enroll, or a limited number, compared to traditional classroom training that can only support a finite number of learners. In addition, while it might not make sense financially to host a classroom session for a handful of people, those constraints disappear in an online learning environment.

A Great Elearning Experience Should

- Be in the cloud and accessible on the go
- Meet you where you are in terms of experience level
- Offer collaborative tools to sustain learning
- Utilize social interaction to enhance connection

Three Steps for Creating an Engaging and Effective Online Learning Experience

1. Set Up for Success

In order for organizations to create successful training online

Craft an organizational learning strategy

Corporate learning is most effective when grounded in a well-defined strategy that aligns the needs of your people and their roles to the long-term business goals of the organization. This ensures that all parts of the organization are tied to a common strategy. A well-crafted strategy

- Determines the long-term and short-term skills training necessary at each level of the organization
- Outlines a curriculum for providing needed training to each level
- Identifies learning delivery methods appropriate for each level
- Defines whether to build or buy the needed content and technology
- Determines how impact will be measured and what the strategy will accomplish
- Establishes executive support

Set the expectation for involvement

In order to get people involved in the learning process you must communicate the importance to help the learner understand how the learning experience will benefit them. Spend time thinking about how you can motivate people to want to attend, and then communicate that well in advance of the learning experience. In your communications you can

- **Share success stories** from previous participants. Endorsements are a great way to build excitement and buzz and to help build future enrollment. Get other's talking about the change they experienced to build excitement.
- **Make it personal by sending invitations** to the learning event. Make sure to create multiple touch points before the learning experience launches.
- **Utilize prereading** content like articles, portions of the content, and questions to think about before the session to introduce people to the content and pique their interest.
- **Assign prework** during which you ask learners to think of real work problems and create solutions and goals around those problems. This not only reduces time spent away from the job but also maximizes the use of that time.
- **Share what's in it for them.** Stress the importance of completing the course. Participants need to know what is expected of them and what is in it for them. Explain why finishing the course may improve their job performance and enhance career opportunities.
- **Offer rewards** and incentives. Offer participants extra pay for completing the course or give public recognition via internal newsletters, emails, or a web site. Certificates of completion or education credits serve as important motivators to encourage participants to complete the course. Encourage continual learning

According to a report released by IBM, companies who utilize elearning tools and strategies have the potential to boost productivity by up to 50%. For every \$1 that a company spends, it's estimated that they can receive \$30 worth of productivity.

by encouraging participants to attain more skills and greater knowledge.

- **Make it competitive.** Providing a chart of percentage completion by participants to see how they compare with other participants is a strong motivator. Designing a “trainer checker” or reporting tool via the learning management system to track participants’ completion of courses will also increase completion rates. Make data available to management also, so that teams or units can compare how they measure up against other teams or units in the organization.
- **Track and measure participants’ progress.** Regularly check how participants are progressing on the course and offer support if they are lagging behind. During the course, use performance tracking data to post scoreboards on progress and link performance to the participants’ learning plan.

Create learning experiences that are meaningful and relevant

Peak elearning experiences capitalize on the ability to provide convenient access where and when the learner needs it. This means it should

- Be in the cloud and on the go, **accessible from mobile devices**, tablets, and laptops as well as personal computers at home or in the office. Make sure it’s easy to benchmark where each learner left off in the last visit to the learning portal to ensure that each learner returns to complete all the assignments.
- Meet the learner where they are. Consider **shaking up the learning delivery**. Learning must be experienced via one’s personal learning preferences, so use a variety of delivery options. Consider designs that can appeal to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners.
- Allow participants to pace their own learning. **Divide courses into modules** or “chunks” that allow participants to stop and return to the training when it is convenient for them. Provide access to a “virtual tutor” who can support participants when they need help through email, phone, or online threaded discussions
- **Eliminate distractions.** Designate specific workstations for elearning in order to allow participants to leave their own desks and focus solely on training. Offer courses through the Internet or provide intranet access so participants can access the training from home or from their mobile devices.

Create collaborative tools to sustain learning

It’s important to create tools and processes that help individuals sustain the learning and move from learning to doing as quickly as possible. You can

- **Build in social interaction** to enhance connection, build mutual commitment, and make connections between your learners. Helping people see their common strengths builds communities of practice that unite people during training and create cohort groups that can support each other after training.
- **Make it easy** for both managers and their direct reports to access and utilize the

Best Applications for Elearning

- Large geographically dispersed organizations
- Call centers and industries such as retail and hospitality
- Organizations without large learning and development budgets
- Discrete audiences—a way to bring new team members up to speed
- Individual contributors—a way to help entire organizations speak the same language on a smaller budget and in small sound bites

tools they've been exposed to.

2. Launch

Launch the program to set the tone for learner engagement and create excitement.

- **Design training with the learners' brain in mind.** Learners are less likely to be engaged, motivated, and perform at their best when their brains trigger a threat response. Create nurturing elearning solutions that raise the brain's reward response by increasing the learner's perception of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness.
- **Personalize the experience.** Creating an emotional connection between facilitator and participants is even more important in online courses than in the classroom. Using personal recognition—public or private—in a program helps encourage participation.

Participants begin their online learning with the first few lessons.

- It's important to **immerse people in the content quickly.** Using small group discussions, team exercises, roleplays, video, and time for reflection within the first hour can break up the monotony of the experience. The focus is on “doing” right from the start, rather than sitting and learning.
- Make training **interactive and engaging.** Participants need to be energized to engage in learning activities with focused attention. Design activities and experiences in which the learner can be an active participant and engage in an emotional context.
- Reduce the reading of text, **increase audio conversations**, and incorporate rich graphics. Provide multi-sensory experiences that use powerful story lines and fresh animations and simulations to enhance and increase learning retention.

Connect content to real-life situations and relationships

- Make training **relevant and challenging.** Design activities and exercises in which the participants' actions require active processing and represent real-life challenges. Include learning interactions that apply the information, not just simple recall, in order to improve content retention. Have participants take action by jointly solving complex problems, not just “pushing a button.”
- Meet before the training event to **set goals and objectives with participants.** Create a learning plan that includes SMART goals. Track progress through weekly or monthly one-on-one meetings. Tie learning goals to each participant's performance plan.
- It's important to **provide robust practice** and feedback. Feedback allows learners to assess where they are and course correct for quicker improvement.

About The Ken Blanchard Companies®

The Ken Blanchard Companies® is one of the world's leading training and development experts. We create lasting behavioral change that has measurable impact on the organizations we work with. We provide training that makes a difference.

Our programs are based on behavioral models that add a situational context to the training experience, so individuals learn to be more productive in real-world scenarios and make the shift from learning to doing more quickly and effectively.

As the innovator of the most widely used leadership development system in the world, Situational Leadership® II, we provide groundbreaking thinking and a memorable learner experience. We begin with a collaborative diagnostic process identifying your unique needs and business issues, then develop an appropriate leadership strategy.

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You can ask a coach or colleague to watch learners practice in real settings using real issues in a safe environment.

3. Sustaining the Learning Journey

- *Get learners to come together to debrief.* This gives them an opportunity to interact with peers to discuss learnings, talk about application, and share success stories.
- *Provide additional lessons* and debriefs to help participants strengthen key relationships, facilitate a more effective partnership, and work on career development.
- Get learners to *continue to utilize system tools* to connect what was learned to the job and create sustained learning.
- *Host lunch and learns*—Bring learners back together to share experiences, watch reinforcement videos, engage in skill reinforcement, and use roleplays. You can host face-to-face or virtual meetings.
- Provide coaches and mentors—Performance improves with *coaching and mentoring*. Before you begin to prepare people for the learning experience, identify coaches who can support each group of learners.
- Try to make refresher tools available via *online portals* that can be accessed anytime and anywhere so people can refresh their memories and tap into content easily. If online accessibility isn't an option, make sure people have easily accessible hard copies of key portions of the content they'll need to reinforce what they've learned.
- *Focus on performance outcomes* rather than on acquisition of content. Set the context to ensure that training is aligned with the vision, goals, and strategies of the organization and is supported by senior management. Managers make powerful role models when they demonstrate the value of continuous learning.

Online learning allows organizations to provide a consistent, convenient way to educate their employees. In fact, some experts believe that online learning is the way of the future. When designed effectively it can be just as powerful as, if not more powerful than traditional classroom training in addition to saving your organization time and money. Following a few smart guidelines will enable you to design and deliver effective online learning experiences that meet the needs of your learners.