Just in Time

The Beyond-the-Hype Potential of E-Learning

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💬 "Essential reading for understanding how e-learning will fundamentally change the way we transfer knowledge."

— Earving L. Blythe, Vice President Emeritus for Information Technology and CIO, Virginia Tech

Ways to Get Started

While we hope this report leads to a better understanding of the applicability and potential of e-learning in general, the considerations below offer specific ways to think about applying e-learning—individually, within your organization, and for your external audiences. In each case, e-learning can supplement your *existing* competencies or be used to develop entirely *new* skills and services. But remember, a digital device won't improve learning by itself, and it could just get in the way. It's not the online medium itself that has the potential to elevate learning; it's how you use it to engage more deeply, enhance creativity and collaboration, and continuously improve.

Individually: Engage Deeper, Continuously

Taken together, e-learning innovations have passed a threshold that extends beyond previous individual learning opportunities. The speed at which you can access learning is now faster. The scope of educational offerings is broader. And increasingly, the education you can receive via online lectures, discussions, and simulations—with rich opportunities to engage with subject-matter experts and peers—is *deeper*. To get started:

1 Start Small, Stay Focused, But Open

As one thought leader put it, "Learn a little, try it and experience it, reflect on what you observed, and cement the learning for real-world application. . . . Focused e-learning in specific areas is likely to be a better solution for busy leaders who are both flying the plane and learning to fly at the same time."

New portal sites such as **Learn Big, SkilledUp**, **Noodle**, and **Knollop** can be helpful for accessing and navigating e-learning content (ranging from Khan Academy lessons to courses provided through **Coursera**, **edX**, **Udacity**, **Udemy**, and **MIT OpenCourseWare** to professional training via **Lynda**). Some navigation sites even provide user ratings and reviews. But be prepared to sift through a lot of content, try things, and keep track of providers and instructors that suit you. If you are a nonprofit leader, you may want to check out the **Gift of Learning** program from the Cornerstone on Demand Foundation, which provides nonprofits with access to e-learning resources at no cost.

2 Learn from Millennials

Look to students and young people as technology guides and teachers. Advances over the past half-decade in cloud computing, social media, search, video, smartphones, and tablets have fundamentally reshaped how we function. When aggregated, they make for a different

world. While later adopters can help us understand the challenges these new technologies pose, younger millennials possess creative, integrative mindsets that can help the rest of us see what's possible.

We have a young colleague teaching us new ways to build websites and a young digital graphics designer showing us new ways to visualize information. By making them part of our core team and giving them license to tie disparate functions together, we have seen the quality of how we present our content improve.

3 Use More Video

We can do a lot with video using smartphones, iPads, and other mobile devices, but consider investing in a decent video camera and webcam (learning guru Elliott Masie **recommends this one**). *McKinsey Quarterly* recently **reported**: "As video communication rises in importance, effective leadership will increasingly require the kind of creative skills we know from the world of 'auteur' filmmaking—an authentic voice, imagination, and the ability to craft compelling stories and to turn them into media products that make people take note and 'lean forward.'"

Video is not always the right medium, but it is playing an ever-increasing role in many aspects of our lives (now accounting for **53% of all Internet traffic** in North America) and organizations. As just two examples of this increased focus, consider the recent announcement of the third annual **Video Experience Conference** and the success of the **Nine Academy**, a sophisticated video-learning lab that offers training in digital storytelling to organizations and individuals.

For advice on how to create engaging video content, we suggest logging on to **edX101: How to Create an edX Course** and going straight to the "Producing Videos" section for guidance from the head of edX's media department and Sal Khan. If you'd like to try on-screen recording or remixing content, here are two free tools: **Screencast-o-matic** (the easiest free tool out there for screen recording and voiceovers) and **OERPUB** (a free publishing tool that allows you to bring together all the content you want, edit and adapt, and publish in a unified format).

Within Your Organization: Optimize and Innovate

Over time, changes in technology have made it less costly and more feasible to codify, demonstrate, and share best practices among busy staff members across locations. Today's e-learning offers to further simplify and greatly improve many of these processes—from capture to presentation to participation. More important, e-learning can extend the learning conversation from one-way to two-way (indeed multiple-way). The traditional approach of documenting and distributing information too often results in static content that quickly

becomes outdated. E-learning enables continuous improvement via an ongoing exchange of views, data, and information that can be tracked, analyzed, and adjusted. A few ways to get started:

1 Put E-Learning on Your Agenda

If you buy into the premise that e-learning has the potential to change the way we transfer and access knowledge and, in turn, how we learn, and if you believe that how one learns and adapts will be key to most work, then consider putting e-learning on your organizational agenda. You might set up a "choreographed" session consisting of a dozen or so compelling and innovative examples of ways in which people are using e-learning for knowledge transfer and delivery. (In addition to examples offered throughout this report, you may also want to check out **Udemy for Organizations**, which allows businesses and organizations to create customized learning libraries and courses of their own for internal use.)

Mario did something similar in the mid-'90s when he and his team walked leaders from a child-advocacy organization through a series of websites to illustrate how the Internet was changing the face of politics and organizing in America. One leader shook her head and exclaimed, "I'm not sure whether to cry as I realize how far we are falling behind or celebrate as I see the potential for our work." The result was profound and led to online advocacy efforts that are considered mainstream today.

2 Find Your E-Learning "Change Agent"

Consider identifying or recruiting someone who will be your organization's inspiration and force for leveraging e-learning to rethink and improve operational processes, program and service delivery, and human capital development. Your change agent must be highly strategic, steeped in the ways of your organization, and able to effect change through program, development, communications, and executive staff alike. Akin to a chief information officer who advances the use of information and IT within an organization, this person would advance e-learning to improve organizational learning and processes—all in service of meeting organizational mission more effectively. Some larger organizations are already responding to the changing digital world by creating the role of **chief digital officer**. Even if you can't create a formal position, you'll still need someone who understands change management and can inspire, demonstrate, nudge, encourage, suggest, and help navigate if you hope to integrate e-learning into your organizational DNA.

3 Designate or Become a "Learning Concierge"

Apart from your "change agent," who must be a leader in your organization, consider designating someone with a background in professional development and training as your "learning concierge," charged with the responsibility of becoming an expert on videos, online courses, games, simulations, apps, and other online educational content relevant to the

needs of your organization. The key is developing an expertise in how to navigate, search, and find relevant content to tailor for others in your organization. The role of the learning concierge is more akin to the role of the **modern librarian**, with sophisticated navigation and communications skills, than to that of an administrator. As award-winning social learning expert Jane Hart **explains**, the learning concierge provides "personal advice directly to workers on how they can address their own workplace learning and performance problems in the way that works best for them."

Author and social media guru Beth Kanter **points out** that the learning concierge fills the critical gap between directed learning (trainings, webinars, and the like) and self-directed/self-managed workplace learning. According to Kanter, it requires a significant set of skills: "information curation skills, collaboration skills, community management and connected leadership skills." For support, check out the **Learning Concierge Society**, which Hart set up in 2013as a new network for workplace-learning professionals. There are also **workshops** that can help you get your learning concierge function up and running.

4 Increase Your Knowledge Capture

Consider using video for your communications, but also for knowledge capture. Footage you capture now—from webinars, trainings, Skype sessions, Adobe Connect working group sessions, and so on—can be used later to create videos that convey operational procedures, provide explanations, and serve as how-to guides. The video medium makes knowledge easily accessible. Capture it now, even if you're not yet sure how you will use it later.

5 Realize the Power of Remixable Content

Once you are in the habit of capturing the knowledge you create, consider the power of remixing it with other rich content openly available on the Internet. Just as people use iTunes or Pandora to create playlists of their favorite music, educators and learners can remix various course modules to create "learning lists" of their favorite educational content or lessons. With video-editing capabilities on hand, you can create (and then update as needed) the highly customized content your organization needs to improve staff skills and the services you deliver.

For External Audiences: Share, Collaborate, Improve

Enabled by computer networks and the Internet, vibrant communities of practice have played critical roles in enhancing sharing, learning, and cooperation for decades. Interactive online learning broadens the potential for sharing your institution's successes, lessons learned, and ways of doing business, as well as getting timely, relevant feedback from external audiences that span the globe. In this way, e-learning can enrich existing communities of shared interest and help you identify new approaches for your organization. Here are a few ways to get started:

1 Understand What's Involved

Producing, packaging, and marketing e-learning content for external audiences beyond your organization is a big undertaking. Realize that e-learning is not just a new medium you can use to scale existing products and services. What worked in a classroom or conference room won't necessarily work online. Don't fall into the trap we hear far too many people contemplating: "We have great teachers and content. All we have to do is video them and put it online." Wrong! As one thought leader noted, "If you want an e-learning tool that helps people quickly refresh themselves, you can't make them sit through the whole course again."

Benefit from the experience of others who have been through the process of creating online courses. A few places we've found most useful are **Devlin's Angle**, a professor's blog about his experience creating a MOOC; **Ed Tech Frontier**, which offers pedagogical recommendations from **Paul Stacey**, an ed tech expert for adult learning with experience in both the public and the private sectors; a **report from Duke** about what it takes to prepare a Coursera course; and advice from MOOC expert **Donald Clark** on everything from the design of questions to how images should be used.

Even when you have great e-learning content, you're still just getting started. How are you going to design, augment, or deliver it differently for greater effect? Will you add graphics, programmed interaction, animation, web design, simulation, multimedia, or assessment? The success of your e-learning content will depend on the content itself, of course, but it will also depend on how it is packaged, marketed, promoted, distributed, and supported. As one leader put it, "You can make an outstanding video but we know that it won't really transfer skills. . . . Interacting heavily with the customer/learner and being able to meet them where they're at and put them in control of their experience seems like it's the key skill to develop."

For most, entering the world of e-learning is going to take more talent, funding, planning, and research than you expected.

2 Bring In the Experts

You don't have to go it alone, nor should you try. Organizations are sure to fail if they persist in launching e-learning offerings with existing staff resources and a cobbled-together infrastructure. Recognize up front the number of skillsets you are going to need, including course design, video editing, web design, production, and social media and online strategies.

Consider partnering with organizations that are production experts. Have an idea for a course? On the high end, consider partnering with Udacity, Coursera, edX, or NovoEd. It never hurts to ask! Otherwise, it's all the more necessary to invest in quality production, product management, and distribution capacities.

3 Adopt a Product (and Media) Mindset

When you're producing content for an external audience, keep in mind that the expectations for product quality are high. You'll need to develop a product management capacity—someone who can lead "product design" (what it is and how it's delivered) and the overall integration of the work so it stays focused on satisfying user/market needs. Otherwise, while individual pieces of content may be great, they may end up appearing cobbled together rather than as a unified, marketable product.

4 Target Early Adopters

The market for e-learning is growing, but don't make the mistake of assuming that the audience you target for your offline work is the right audience for your online work. Not everyone in your current audience is ready. E-learning represents a fundamental change in approach. Focus your efforts on the predisposed, both within and beyond your current target audience. You're not going to convince people who don't think it makes sense—at least not any time soon. Early evidence indicates that the Georgia Tech **online master's degree in computer science** targets a ready audience. In its first admissions process, the program turned away **nearly 2,000 applicants**. As Georgia Tech, in partnership with Udacity, has demonstrated, the more you understand and encourage the "believers," the more your base of early adopters will grow, eventually bringing along those who are (or become, by desire or necessity) open to change.

5 Prepare to Invest

We've seen well-intentioned plans from well-intentioned organizations fail to take into account the financial investment required. Developing a single high-quality course can easily cost $100,000 to $150,000 or more. To get a sense of the cost drivers, check out these two infographics: **Determining the Cost of a Custom E-learning Course** and **The True Cost of 1 Hour of Learning**.

There will always be remarkably talented people who produce wildly successful e-learning courses quickly and at surprisingly low cost (think Sal Khan). We admire and celebrate these luminaries and learn from their accomplishments and innovations. But they are rare outliers. Producing high-quality, effective e-learning courses generally takes significant time, talent, and money.