

Five Essentials for E-Learning Success

Many organizations have moved to e-learning, but too few are realizing significant, sustainable returns from their e-learning investments. E-learning offers something powerful and enduring. It is a catalyst that inspires organizations to manage learning in all its forms. Organizations that understand the role of learning in the achievement of business goals and that integrate e-learning strategically with other critical learning interventions will win the ultimate prize: improved performance across the extended enterprise.



ICF Consulting's experience reveals five essentials organizations should remember on their way to e-learning success.

1. Make E-Learning Part of a Broader Learning Framework

To be successful, e-learning needs to be grounded in a larger organizational learning strategy tied to business objectives. Before implementing e-learning programs, organizations should consider the following questions:

- What is our learning philosophy? What is our approach to adult learning? How does it fit into our mission and strategy?
- How much are we currently investing in learning and what benefits are we realizing?
- How do we manage all learning (training, education, performance support, communication, coaching/feedback, knowledge management) to achieve business goals?
- How do we leverage learning across the extended enterprise to suppliers, channel partners, and customers?
- How do we measure success?

Organizations that actively address such strategic issues and implement structures to support learning as a core business process will realize the benefits of e-learning the fastest.

2. Technology: Get Practical

The quickest way to realize the full potential of e-learning is to simply get started, even if that means making do with existing technology infrastructure. Before chasing an

ambitious broadband, multimedia learning environment, organizations can gain valuable e-learning experience by resolving just a few key issues, such as how to deliver e-learning through a company firewall and how to reconcile bandwidth-intensive e-learning traffic with already overtaxed datastreams.

An important consideration is whether to implement a Learning Management System (LMS). This suite of software products can deploy courses, inventory competencies, track achievement, evaluate satisfaction, and assess how learning is applied in the workplace. However, even a powerful LMS will not support all learning applications and may require significant customization. Given that industry standards are not yet firmly established, the LMS purchased today may need replacement sooner than planned.

3. Success Demands Organizational Change

While a robust technology infrastructure can facilitate successful e-learning, technology alone is not enough. Changes in budgeting, organizational relationships, policy, procedures, and culture must be introduced for e-learning to be effective.

Perspectives

For example, the business model of an e-learning project is different from that of a traditional classroom course. With a traditional course, the costs remain fairly constant. In contrast, an e-learning project pushes most costs up front, with dramatically lower ongoing implementation and maintenance costs. Although e-learning promises significant cost savings over time, the early stages of an e-learning project may be more expensive than stakeholders expect. These differences must be communicated in advance to enable better planning and appropriate funding.

Organizational relationships are also affected by the introduction of e-learning. While human resources, training, and information technology functions bring their own strengths to an e-learning project, each has the ability to derail the project. Gaining the participation and support of each group from the start and continuing that involvement throughout the project will help ensure its success.

4. Align Content and Delivery Mode With Learner Needs

Even the best planned e-learning implementation can fail if the content is not engaging and relevant. Organizations can enliven their e-learning programs and increase effectiveness by diversifying the form (off-the-shelf or customized), provider (e-learning vendor, higher education institution, in-house), and delivery mode (Web, satellite, CD-ROM, etc.).

Increasingly, e-learning content is being developed as reusable learning modules that allow for greater customization to individual learner needs. Still, many organizations mistakenly believe that all learning content must be converted to electronic format.

In fact, for applications such as executive development, a more effective learning experience can be achieved by blending online formats with traditional classroom-based learning. While there are some common-sense guidelines for deciding when e-learning is best, most organizations develop their own criteria based on their systems, culture, preferred modes of communication, and learning preferences.

5. Make the Move to Performance-Based Metrics

As organizations increasingly link learning to business outcomes, success metrics are evolving from passive measures, such as “numbers trained,” to performance-based indicators, such as “speed to competency.” By its very nature, e-learning is redefining the metrics of success. For example, course completion as an indicator of training success is less relevant when e-learning encourages participants to access only those learning segments they need to perform their jobs better.

For more information on ICF Consulting’s e-learning capabilities, visit www.icfconsulting.com.