

Lessons Learned

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From Training Space to Any Place: Expanding Approaches to E-Learning

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More than ever, our hyperconnected world demands that organizational leaders consider how to deliver professional development and training without physically gathering everyone in the same space at the same time. Employees work from dispersed sites across multiple time zones. Tight resources limit “face time” workshops and meetings. New staff members must ramp up quickly. And, the need for specialized skills in the workplace demands just-in-time learning. These factors and others are compelling many organizational leaders to move out of their comfort zones of traditional organizational training programs to examine what good adult learning looks like in a digital environment.

But, what exactly constitutes e-learning and how can it be used most effectively? In a rapidly changing environment, even seasoned e-learning professionals grapple with these questions as some previous conventions no longer apply. Is e-learning a free-standing, self-paced (*asynchronous*)

tutorial? Is it an instructor-led online course? Is it a recorded webinar? Yes, yes, and yes, but that’s not all. In an era of information everywhere and always, e-learning encompasses much more: from online communities of practice to cloud-based sharing and collaboration to facilitated blended learning courses.

As an experienced developer of e-learning solutions, Education Northwest staff knows that the constant stream of digital information presents both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity to reframe what learning can and should look like today. Noted mathematician, educator, and technologist Seymour Papert observed: “You can’t teach people everything they need to know. The best you can do is position them where they can find what they need to know when they need to know it.”

Seen this way, e-learning offers an opportunity to deliver training and tools that enable learners to:

- Find specific modules to enrich their training or professional development (PD)
 - Create a structure to document and share what they learn formally and informally (on their own and from others)
 - Retrieve job aids that will deepen expertise and assist in their work
 - Receive incentives to promote and facilitate ongoing learning
 - Measure ongoing learning as it applies to job success and PD goals
- Accomplishing these objectives requires a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to e-learning. We offer five *Lessons Learned* to consider when evaluating your organization’s e-learning needs and working with professionals to deliver the right tools for your organization.

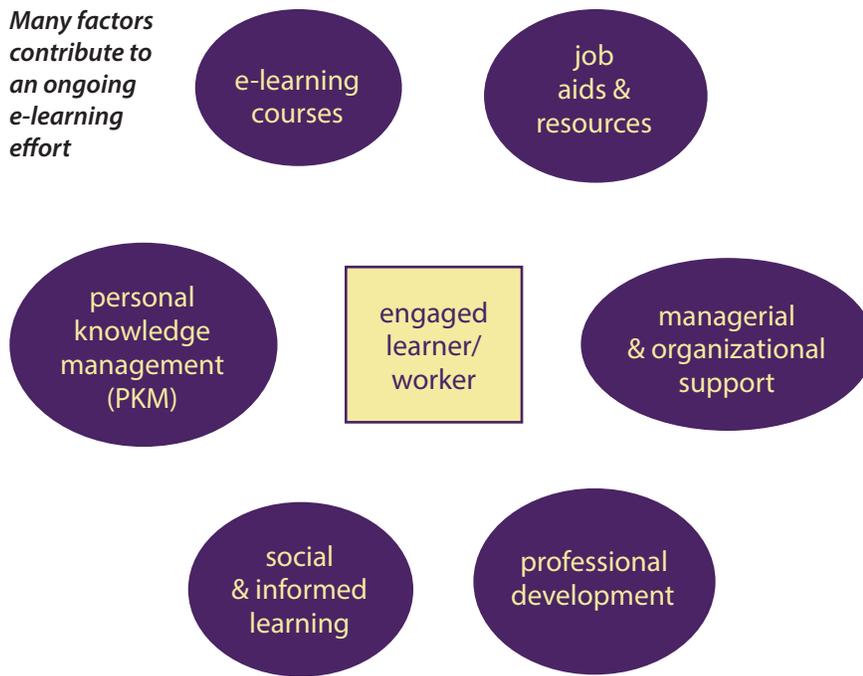
Lesson #1 Look for solutions, not (just) courses or “shovelware”

You’ve decided your organization needs to incorporate e-learning into its training or PD program. Given limited time, budget, and expertise, that often means posting resource documents, offering a few narrated slide decks, or perhaps investing in an interactive course on what seems like a straightforward topic. If you move too quickly or haphazardly,

Lessons Learned About Approaches to E-Learning

1. Look for solutions, not (just) courses or “shovelware”
2. Teach only essentials and provide support for the rest
3. Think beyond the course
4. Promote active learning—put the activities first
5. Take advantage of native (i.e., existing) workplace tools to integrate social learning and digital literacy

Many factors contribute to an ongoing e-learning effort



however, you might be setting yourself up—and more important, setting your learners up—for failure.

Creating e-learning is similar to developing any other training or PD program: It's critical to map the vision, goals, and metrics of what success will look like before you begin. The difference between a traditional approach and e-learning often lies in the way learners interact with, retain, and apply knowledge delivered through digital media. No one would gather learners at a live event and ask them to read sections of text for 50 minutes. That would be a wasted opportunity. But, that is exactly what happens when you post PDFs and slide sets on a website and call it e-learning. Shoveling existing resources (often featuring dense text) onto web pages does not equal e-learning. Unfortunately, these *shovelware* solutions are an all-too-common misstep.

Instead, you should ask: What is the specific action or behavior the learning intervention seeks to address? Are there reasons people are not taking this action already, other than a lack of skills,

knowledge, or understanding? What do learners actually need to know to thrive, and what else would make them even more successful if they had access to the right information at the right time, with opportunities to apply what they're learning? The answers to these questions will drive the development of content delivery mechanisms that fit.

E-learning practitioners are instructional designers (IDs), and among the many things that IDs do is *design* an e-learning program that raises awareness and addresses the needed knowledge and behavioral changes that can lead to increased learner/job success. The conversation starts with identifying those learning need(s)—often through a formal needs analysis—that yields a set of learning objectives for design focus.

As one example, the e-learning team at Education Northwest recently developed a course for nonprofit supervisors on the requirements and procedures for criminal history background checks for AmeriCorps and VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) members. Through design thinking, we examined not just the

necessary content, but the deeper needs for the course. We asked: Was the primary problem a lack of awareness of the legal requirements for checks? If awareness wasn't the issue, then perhaps it was motivation, or frustration with the complexity of the process. If so, the right response might be simply providing the tools and documents at the appropriate time to facilitate a more efficient process.

Not surprisingly it turned out to be a combination of those factors. We uncovered that the primary problem was a lack of understanding of when, how, and (most of all) for whom the checks are required. After three months and 55 revisions, our designers came up with an engaging, interactive tutorial that focuses on why background checks are important, what the requirements are, and how to get started conducting checks.

Lesson # 2 Teach only essentials and provide support for the rest

In general, this is a lesson that e-learning professionals understand: *Teach them three things and they'll remember three things. Tell them 10 things and they'll remember three things.* The best e-learning focuses on the few skills, facts, and contextual knowledge that are essential to meet the identified learning goals.

An e-learning course offers the opportunity to strategically layer rich background materials, performance support, and tools. Some of the most effective e-learning courses do little more than train a person how to find and use information that already exists to complete necessary tasks efficiently.

Our tutorial on criminal background checks illustrates this lesson. The course design focuses on the main objective: describing the “who,

when, and how” of the background check process. The numerous tools, forms, and links necessary to complete the process are available with a simple click, so they don’t distract learners. In addition, the course features a section of helpful resources that can be easily updated and accessed when the learner needs them.

The caveat here is that the critical job aids, tools, and support systems must be present and remain in place after any initial e-learning or training “event” concludes. If they aren’t, then it is the e-learning developer’s job to find or create them.

Lesson # 3 **Think beyond the course**
The notion of “doing the training” was probably never a useful paradigm, but is even less so in our always-on digital world. Training (including e-learning modules and courses) is not a singular event. What information will learners have already found on their own before taking the course? What social media posts have they read about the subject or training event they will attend? After the fact, where will they turn and what will they discover to reinforce, amplify, or potentially torpedo the e-learning activity?

Learning is an ongoing activity that now takes place significantly online. Rather than thinking of e-learning as a discrete event, smart learning organizations deliver timely, useful information on a continuous basis. This approach capitalizes on the natural inclination of people to search for interesting, useful, and engaging information. What’s more, the quickly expanding field of Personal Knowledge Management (see glossary on p. 5) gives e-learning practitioners another avenue to help

learners organize and make sense of an onslaught of data.

Human nature demands that we find patterns, connect the dots, and synthesize information. How does your organization deliver information so that people are learning lessons that map to their success? And, how do e-learning products and tools—whether courses, webinars, job aids, or social media posts—fit into that larger strategy? Consider engaging the expertise of an e-learning professional to examine your PD and training goals and determine which digital methods make the most sense. Often, e-learning will become an act of information curation rather than—or in addition to—content creation.

In our criminal history checks example, we purposely structured the product, via the learner path and formal navigation queues, to make it an easy job aid tool as well. That

is, a site supervisor could go back to the course and quickly find the particular section on a topic such as what types of volunteers require state checks, federal checks, or both. With experience and repetition, the supervisor will rely less and less on returning to the information, but there’s still a need for ongoing reference that leads eventually to deeper learning. Effective organization, information architecture, and user interface design, along with organizational support, are as essential to overall success as the well-designed e-learning course itself.

Lesson # 4 **Promote active learning—put the activities first**
Despite conventional wisdom, bulleting out learning objectives is rarely a good way to launch an e-learning session. The

Anticipate and Address Learner Objections

Not all people welcome training, even if it’s well thought out and executed. Some may find it irrelevant. Others may see it as an unwelcome intrusion on their already overflowing schedules. Some people object to the nature of a specific type of training, such as compliance or harassment training. And, still others may reject the entire notion of training as too abstract or academic to apply to them.

It’s important to dedicate part of your needs analysis and instructional design time to investigate and plan methods to address learner resistance. Don’t ignore what may be valid attitudinal barriers to training. The best way to address these issues is by engaging learners up front with the relevance of the topic at hand. One method is to make it personal by telling a story or creating a real-life scenario. Stories can help learners see there may be real consequences—organizational, legal, and/or personal—if key lessons are not absorbed and internalized.

For example, we were aware of a certain lack of enthusiasm among our learning cohort in the criminal history background check project. The introductory course addresses the relevance for our learners in two ways, each woven into a narrative structure:

- **Carrot:** “The ultimate purpose of ... [checks] is to keep people—especially those most vulnerable—safe.”
- **Stick:** “When programs fall out of compliance, immediate corrective action ... and financial consequences [ensue].”

We also used real-life scenarios throughout the course to capture and keep the learner’s attention.



Requirements of the regulation

Answer a few quick questions to learn which checks apply to your specific situation. Hover over blue text to see definitions of the terms.

Will the individual receive a salary, living allowance, stipend, or education award through a national service program? **Y**

Will they have access to vulnerable populations? **Y**

Will they have recurring access? **Y**

Three check components are required. When the answer to all three questions is yes, conduct NSOPW, State(s), and FBI checks for your candidate.

The *Dru Sjodin* National Sex Offender Public Website (NSOPW)

State Criminal Background Check (State of residence and of service)

FBI Criminal Background Check

Try again Next section

Three early decision points, with an invitation to fail.

old course structure of “tell it, try it, quiz it” often does not work particularly well, either. To engage and hold the learner’s attention, consider instead immersing her in an activity from the outset (ensuring that clarification and additional support are available).

As long as it is a safe learning environment (i.e., learners are not watched or judged harshly on their activities), e-learning can encourage risk-taking, exploration, and play. An e-learning course that begins with a learning activity, even one that may baffle or confuse at first, draws participants in to explore, make mistakes, learn lessons, and apply them. The best training often occurs when learners aren’t “looking”—that is, not paying attention to the fact that they are supposed to be learning. The activities invite them to construct new meaning or apply concepts to their individual circumstances. They can prompt participants to draw and strengthen

their conclusions, reinforcing new learning.

Beginning with activities is especially useful to the digital native “millennials” who are often quite comfortable exploring a digitalscape or game with no clearly stated objective (or even purpose) up front. Again, be sure to provide job aids, context, and follow up to all activities as appropriate.

In our example course, we lead with questions and decision points. Learners answer basic questions about whether an individual needs a background check, and if so, which type(s). The learners are offered explanatory roll-over text to guide their decisions. However, most users (including us) will choose Yes or No at random to see what happens *before actually accessing the explanation* that would help them choose correct answers.

We invite exploration and incorrect answers: It frames the mind and readies the learner to more carefully

consider the correct information in the larger context.

Lesson # 5 **Take advantage of native workplace (i.e., existing) tools to integrate social learning and digital literacy**

In most organizations, learners spend much of their day in front of the screen. Don’t be afraid that email, the Internet, or Twitter might distract learners from the e-learning at hand: Of course it will! This is exactly the same environment that learners face when they retrieve and apply lessons in their day-to-day work lives. In other words, it makes sense that learning occurs in the native environment of work, rather than apart from it.

With some creative thinking, what was once a worry can become an asset (see Lessons 1–4). Flip the scene to imagine how social learning, the organizational Intranet

or forum, and the larger onscreen window-to-the-world can benefit your learning goals.

Learners carry their mental worlds with them, not to mention their smart phones or tablets. It is to your advantage, if done thoughtfully, to invite this world into the e-learning experience. Make a browser search part of a directed activity. Require that they instant message (IM) a manager or colleague at key points throughout the course. Guide them to add to the Intranet forum on a given topic. Why not? Learning is not separate from, but integral to, our working lives. The outside world is not a threat if you bend it to your needs.

What's more, for many topics, the computer that learners train on is the same one they use in their work. All the better! Learners are much more apt to remember and transfer e-learning lessons when supported by the same visual and environmental cues present when the lessons were learned.

Summary

It is time to break the barriers between *learning time* and *working time*. In our digital world, work is learning, and vice versa. Smart organizations internalize and integrate this reality into e-learning programs that empower learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, as the lines between the personal and professional blur, e-learning can promote learners to bring ongoing learning to bear on their personal and professional growth and organizational success.

Organizations that want to leverage the digital world effectively need to adapt along with technology-driven changes. E-learning is increasingly becoming, simply, *learning*. And learning is the essential skill of modern workers.

E-Learning Glossary

course: A set of learning activities (modules) that compel the learner to synthesize compound/complex skills or principles together into a larger understanding and/or application; often set sequentially to build skills or knowledge and commonly assessed through learning checks or simulated application.

digital native: A loosely defined term to indicate those born after 1980 for whom personal computers, digital media, and Internet access have always been a part of their lives and who (presumably) are at ease using digital tools and media.

instructional design: A practice for creating meaningful learning experiences based on considerations of content, learner needs, media delivery, instructional objectives, and learning outcomes and their application.

job aid: Tools and/or materials that are meant to be used on the job, as a task is completed (such as step-by-step directions or a code reference).

just in time (training): An instructional delivery methodology that is available to the learner at the time when he or she requires the given knowledge or skill, as opposed to receiving training prior to when it may be directly applicable.

learning objectives: Exactly what you expect learners to know or be able to do at the completion of the learning activity; often the result of needs analysis.

module: A discrete, usually short learning and/or training activity that delivers only one or a few learning objectives; it may or may not be part of a larger course.

native workplace: A term instructional designers and trainers use to indicate the setting, objects, tools, and materials that are already part of the learner's workplace; if a learning activity is based on the native workplace, it doesn't require external/introduced tools or materials strictly for the purpose of instruction (e.g., training manuals, special website access, etc.).

needs analysis: A formal process, often performed by an instructional designer, to identify each aspect of a learner's operations so that the skills, concepts, and attitudes of the learner are fully appreciated to create appropriate training requirements and interventions.

personal knowledge management (PKM): A collection of regular processes that a person uses to gather, classify, store, search, retrieve, and share knowledge.

shovelware: An informal, mildly derogatory term for posting large amounts of text pages and downloadable text-based documents online with the expectation that these will successfully meet learners' needs.

synchronous/asynchronous/blended: A *synchronous* learning event occurs when learner(s) and instructor(s) interact in real time and place, even if that "place" is online via a conference, chat, or webinar. An *asynchronous* event is one in which the learner interacts with the material without an instructor, on his or her own. A *blended* event(s) combines the two types into a course over a longer period of time (days, weeks, or months).

training: A learning activity that teaches specific skills and/or behaviors that are applied to a job, vocation, and/or specific activity.

Contact Us

Education Northwest's expert instructional designers, project managers, facilitators, developers, and graphic designers apply a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to increase learner effectiveness in mission-driven organizations. We welcome your inquiries and ideas on how we can help your organization achieve greater results through increasing knowledge, retention, and measurable success. Contact Ben Carmel: Ben.Carmel@educationnorthwest.org

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