

Uses for E-Learning

Online learning can be applied to any function or constituency; some ideas from vendor OutStart

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One of our main discoveries during this Summer of E-Learning is that online learning can be attached to any function or constituency inside or outside the enterprise, and that e-learning is just as much about creative application as technology.

Take customers. You might not be inclined to think of them as a perfect audience for e-learning but, when you consider the importance of training, the proposition changes. We recently heard a good illustration along these lines from OutStart CEO Massood Zarrabian, who detailed work his company has been doing with time management software specialist Kronos.

While employees were the first and natural target for e-learning, current vendor technology makes it easy to apply the concept elsewhere, as Zarrabian explains. "Kronos' complaint was that training was a nightmare. It was generic: a manager and user would get the same training."

To make things worse, Kronos' products are broken out by role and vertical, requiring a greater degree of specialization when it comes to learning portal. OutStart addressed the problem by addressing authoring (giving content matter experts the ability to create learning material in PowerPoint, Word, and other popular formats), role- and vertical-based delivery of material, a unified content approach (all learning content remains in the OutStart content repository, which can also be used to supply data to offline instructional materials, online help, and other outlets), and auditing (the ability to track user interaction with learning material).

Granted, e-learning isn't usually associated with end users, and it's true that OutStart's solution for Kronos doesn't include a courseware component. Realistically, you're not going to be evaluating your customers on their knowledge of your product. That said, the principles of e-learning apply, because you're leveraging an online platform to teach people more about your products.

Zarrabian emphasizes that a lot of the learning material already exists within the enterprise, but it takes a full-fledged learning tool to bring together the development, delivery, content management, and auditing components. He also underlines the value of the interface and the content. "Users have access through a portal, and there's a combination of simulations and Flash to make it more interactive," he says. "Kronos defines training around topics, break topics down by role, and then customizes by vertical."

As with other cases of e-learning adoption, Kronos has found the concept to be applicable in other parts of the enterprise. The company is considering using OutStart for partner training and even for its sales organization.

Sales is another area that I don't heavily associate with e-learning, but Zarrabian offered an interesting example of its applicability. "One of our customers is using e-learning to do assessments based on sales meetings. They give rewards to the highest score."

Finally, OutStart is doing traditional e-learning business as well, with one of the company's standout clients being the U.S. Navy. The engagement offers examples of why e-learning beats out synchronous, classroom-based environments. "Sailors can be any place in the world, and equipment can be placed wherever they are, but they had to come back to schoolhouses in the U.S.," says Zarrabian, describing the legacy learning environment. "Now they're installing the learning system on ships and submarines."

It's part of the Navy's move to personalization in training. For example, if a recruit passes a standard assessment, they can simply skip certain modules. If a recruit fails, s/he can receive more mentoring from a real-world teacher prior to retaking the assessment. The teacher is now coded as someone to help the student, not someone who has to be involved at every single level of learning. That allows the Navy to be more flexible in its training, to let recruits advance at their own pace, and to cut down the costs involved in bringing all learners to the same real-world environment.

One common thread between the Navy, Kronos, and other users of e-learning is the importance they place on simulations. Actually, simulation-based training first gained real currency in the armed forces, which today consider video games a mainstream form of training. I wonder if other organizations have realized the full value of simulations yet. Unfortunately, my conversation with Zarrabian left me with the impression that e-learning is still a vastly underused technology.