

E-learning Q&A with Michael Getz, President, Illumina Interactive **March 2009**

Capitalizing on E-Learning Trends

A Q&A with Michael Getz, President, Illumina Interactive Learning

By John W. DeWitt

Corporations and government organizations spent more than \$134 billion on employee learning and development in 2007, according to estimates from the American Society for Training and Development (ATSD). Moreover, nearly one-third of all learning content is now made available through technology-based learning systems – e-learning – and the market for e-learning is growing rapidly, despite (or perhaps because of) the current global economic downturn. We talked with e-learning veteran Michael Getz, president of Dedham, Mass.-based Illumina Interactive Learning, about the latest trends in technology-based learning and how organizations can most effectively capitalize on their investment in e-learning development and systems. Getz has spent more than 20 years in design, programming, production and management of Internet- and multimedia-based applications for corporate, industrial and educational markets. Clients and users of his company's award-winning e-learning solutions include Boston Scientific, Covidien (Tyco Healthcare), the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Veterans Administration, and the National Institutes of Health.

J. DeWitt: *Given the current economic climate, as well as the evolution of technology-based learning solutions, what's happening and what's changing in the way companies and other organizations approach learning, training, and development?*

M. Getz: Companies and larger organizations historically have been very structured about learning. Now they are definitely starting to explore alternative methods of learning to replace traditional classroom and paper-based instruction. The timing is right for looking at more efficient and cost-effective ways of delivering training and conducting learning in the business.

Judging by the continued demand for what we do – development of custom e-learning solutions – e-learning seems to be on an upward trend and more and more companies are starting to build the technology-based infrastructures to build it and to track it. Many organizations now are investing in learning management systems that track employees' participation in required or assigned trainings. Managers can use these systems to identify efficiencies, and often those learning management systems can tie back into corporate employee management systems.

What, in a nutshell, are the advantages provided by the use of e-learning and learning management systems?

Using e-learning obviously offers big advantages with regard to cutting costs for delivering training. These costs can include travel and lodging expenses, as well as the expenses involved in getting employees off the line and all together at one time in a location. There are also cost and

efficiency issues with new hires and the ability, by using e-learning, to deliver just-in-time training to them when they need it rather than when it can be scheduled.

By utilizing high-quality e-learning – which I would define as learning that is developed with the participation of your organization’s key experts, and is instructionally sound – you can deliver high-quality training without repeatedly taking those experts away from the more important aspects of their day-to-day jobs. Rather than having these experts deliver repetitive generalized training, they can focus on more specialized training – more hands-on kinds of training or other interactions where there’s value in having a direct dialogue between the educator and student.

Training can be just in time for the learners as well. That means they can take courses when it’s most convenient for them, and they can pause in the middle and pick up where they left it at a different time. Classroom instruction doesn’t offer this type of flexibility.

Last but not least is consistency. E-learning can be designed to a certain quality level, then the training is always consistently delivered at that quality level.

However, I would emphasize that these points are not new – even if they are new for many companies that are just now implementing e-learning. These are all the standard benefits of e-learning that have been around for 20 years.

So how has e-learning evolved and improved in recent years?

The ability to deliver a high-quality learning experience has definitely improved over the past five-plus years. We have definitely enhanced our ability to deliver a rich, engaging learning experience that might involve graphics and animations, case study scenarios, and interactivity that closely mimics the real-world environment where the learner works. Examples of this include learning a software application in a guided experience – or the ability to explore different options in some kind of a branching case study where learners are able to see the ramifications of their decisions.

Today, we are able to better convey complex ideas through more rich media.

Another thing that has evolved is the ability to tailor the instruction to the needs of individual learners. Because they have a particular role, they are presented material for that role. Or by taking some kind of a test, they are able to show mastery of certain concepts, while indicating that they need help on other concepts.

How does e-learning help large, geographically dispersed businesses?

Obviously e-learning breaks the boundaries of geography. Today we can deliver the same consistent e-learning experience to users across a wide geography, as well as present translated versions of the content in multiple languages so these programs are localized and translated.

How does your firm handle e-learning development projects that require instruction in multiple languages and perhaps sensitivity to local cultures?

Illumina Interactive Learning recently managed a large project where we translated a medical device training program into 11 languages. When we do a language globalization and localization project for a client, we work with a translation company that handles the language translation. Then that translated content goes directly to regional experts at the corporation in each of those countries, so they are able to look over the content and make sure it is appropriate to their audience.

You have to be sensitive to the obvious issues of depicting diversity in e-learning visuals, making sure that the imagery as well as the written and spoken content works for the target audience. So it's always implemented on a case-by-case basis.

How does Illumina balance the need for speed in e-learning development versus the importance of consistent quality in learning solutions that will be utilized by a large audience?

There are strategies that we can apply to the design and development of e-learning programs that can streamline that process. We call them rapid e-learning strategies. A lot of people think that rapid e-learning involves taking PowerPoint presentations and delivering them via the web. I've heard other e-learning practitioners describe that approach as "rapid non-learning."

We look at rapid e-learning strategies as happening at different points of the development cycle. We use tools that make it easier for subject matter experts to get at the content – for example, forms and checklists that guide them in creating the content, so that a lot more of the onus is on them to produce the content, but in an easier way.

Then we look at rapid production techniques using certain tools that can streamline the development process. Those kinds of tools can accelerate the whole process of integrating the course into a company's learning management system. What you can do is cut out certain portions of the development cycle while keeping emphasis on the most important ones – which include creating the thought flow, creating an engaging learning experience, and producing it in a way that will be valuable for the learner.

We hear more and more about so-called Web 2.0 technologies – wikis, social media, messaging, m-learning, and so on. What's the impact of the latest technology trends on organizational learning?

Some of the simplest examples are things like discussion forums where employees can share best practices and tips. New technologies improve the ability to share and get information rapidly, to have the instruction at your fingertips. This could be simple self-contained videos that can be quickly reviewed on a smart phone, providing just-in-time training to workers in the field.

Other examples are performance support tools that can be used on the job. Performance support has really been a catch phrase for as long as computer-based training and e-learning have been around. The term really describes any kind of a tool – checklists, online help, etc. – that helps people do their jobs at the moment they are doing it.

The online help that comes with software is one example, but it could be more elaborate – a little piece of embedded training, such as instructions that explain an arcane, rarely used procedure, or that show a medical professional the particular settings that are used on a medical device.

Technology-enabled on-the-job training and performance support tools are pretty synonymous. The point is that you are not breaking away from the job to get training, but getting training on the job.

What should companies and other organizations think about when approaching e-learning? What are the pitfalls and how can you avoid them? How can you maximize the benefits?

Companies know that employees' time is incredibly valuable. And there's a need for so much training now – whether it's human resources training, ethics or safety training, training on procedures in their job or on products in their company, employees need a ton of training. So training has to be done effectively and efficiently.

However, poorly done, poorly designed, poorly executed training can be worse than no training at all, because it can turn learners off to the content. You can have “page-turning training” where you don't really learn anything, and that in turn can create a turnoff towards training in the company.

That's why you need expert guidance in designing e-learning, to ensure that it accomplishes your learning goals by engaging learners, and does it within the means of the company. There are always constraints – whether it's budgetary or other constraints – and you want to create the most efficient and effective learning experience. That's where experts really make a difference.

Technology also is making a difference today in terms of cost. The cost to develop e-learning has come down because of more robust tools, more ubiquitous use of learning management systems, and the availability of lower-cost e-learning systems. Moreover, because of process efficiencies – of lessons learned and the application of best practices to e-learning development – companies can do more with less now.

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