The ABC of e-learning

By: Lesanne Brooke – business development executive of Dialogue Communications Training

E-learning programmes require time, insight and an understanding of how technology impacts on the training environment.

The next decade will be critical in how you develop people.
Time, diversity, limited resources and fast-changing environments challenge the way organisations need to think about talent development. A clear, strategic learning and development programme is essential to a high-performing workplace. Technology is providing exciting answers, with e-learning one of the most obvious. However, e-learning needs to be a meaningful component of an aligned business approach.
E-learning allows remote work combined with collaboration and best-practice sharing. This gives learners speedy access to information, as well as mutual support and expert insight.

A huge benefit is employee autonomy. Specific learning programmes that include self-assessment tools and are designed to impact on individuals will be highly effective if correctly managed. Employee-driven learning – which may even allow responsibility for process and design – can be fast, powerful and extremely motivating. Employees derive meaning and satisfaction, as well as the benefit of flexible learning hours and project-based work.

However, effective e-learning programmes can't merely duplicate conventional training programmes by replacing a lecturer with an electronic version of the course. E-learning programmes require time, insight and an understanding of how technology impacts the training environment. They also need a targeted personalised approach, rather than a one-size-fits-all.

How to strategise for e-learning
It is essential to begin by creating an ethos of:
- open communication and learning support
- strategic development processes
- a performance focus aligned to the needs of the business.

Conventional Blended Learning provides e-learning and an instructor in an old-school model of a classwork/homework mix. However, this is not enough.

Assess before you start
Before designing an expensive learning process, assess the learners' ability to manage their process and the current environment. How will each person respond to this programme? What are the pitfalls and blind spots? How can you accommodate existing systems? How can you create learner communities to enhance this process?

Learners need self-awareness and an understanding of their learning styles to fit functional and practical needs. Not everyone is self-motivated, and identifying key motivators is the starting point for designing the individual programmes. In addition, it makes sense to accommodate any existing training or learning processes in a way that can maximise the benefit and keep costs down.

Create an effective learning space
An effective learning programme is integrated and measureable. The learning and performance benefits must enhance your organisation, so it's critical that individual learning paths are aligned with company strategies. Transparency and sharing must become part of the company ethos and collaboration between teams and departments should be encouraged.

The electronic details need to be carefully managed and balanced with face-to-face input. Social networking, cloud technology and the ready accessibility of a wide variety of e-learning programmes give you the opportunity to be creative, meet individual needs and provide balance between multiple profiles in a team.

Cyberspace and social media allow people to spread their wings and knowledge, so you will need strategies to ensure the organisation identifies and retains benefits. Brand your learning intentions creatively to become a part of the company culture. Ensure that internal communications and media carefully embrace and reflect the learning ethos for the organisation to benefit from the rewards of the new training.

Value the personal touch
As social learners, humans require interaction and feedback to remain motivated and to clarify their learning – skill coaching, mentoring and peer coaching need to be factored into the programme.

In addition, guided mixed-group information sessions (for discussion and sharing on specific topics) ensure genuine understanding and encourage company-specific relevance. These need to be facilitated by someone who understands the learning dynamics of individuals and who can create a stimulating environment that enhances the e-learning, rather than a boring repetitive session of base information.

Integrate the learning
Base information must be integrated. For this, facilitated workshops – to provide an overview and, later, for experiential learning of key concepts – are invaluable. Simulating real-life situations in a group allows the facilitator to assess understanding and measure the impact of the learning. The need for specific interventions (one-on-one or small group coaching) can be identified as skills or knowledge gaps are revealed.

These supports are specifically valuable when learning core business skills like assertiveness, negotiation, change management, communication or presentation. Merely understanding remote concepts doesn't translate into practical skills. These need to be discussed, explored, and experienced. Often learners find that a subject they understand takes on new meaning as they engage with others and discover unrecognised gaps in their knowledge. Remember, every learner needs opportunities to question and ask for help.

Empower the learner
Finally, learning-skills support is needed for adult learners, especially if they are the only ones studying in their teams or departments. Motivation and a sense of competence are basic requirements for the success of the programme.

Create effectiveness
E-learning is more than a trendy quick-fix for time constraints and requires more specific planning and intervention than generic learning programmes. Lateral thinking, creativity and understanding human needs are essential if e-learning is to prove effective.

Step bravely into the new world, collaborate with those that have experience, consult on the business needs and make a positive contribution to the agility and success of your organisation.**mmpr**

Lesanne Brooke is the business development executive for Dialogue Communications Training in Cape Town. She has 20 years' experience facilitating groups and coaching individuals. One aspect of her work is supporting e-learning integration in companies to enhance individual and company performance.