Getting Started with Elearning:
Eight Questions to Consider

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Executive Summary

The face of corporate learning has changed. It is no longer possible to develop your human capital with a single approach. Today's corporate environment calls for out-of-the-box thinking, incorporating the advantages of many types of learning to benefit your company's single biggest investment: your people.

This handy guide will help you navigate the growing number of learning solutions and equip you with eight must-ask questions as you develop your learning program.

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Workplace learning has changed

All organizations, large, mid-size or small, are looking for ways to maximize the effectiveness of elearning to move beyond workplace skills and align elearning assets to strategic business initiatives, such as increased sales, customer service, industry certifications, quality programs, compliance, communications and leadership.

How workplace learning is being delivered has changed dramatically. According to industry reports[1], the use of elearning in formal learning has increased more than threefold since 2001 and during this same time period, traditional classroom delivery has been reduced by a fifth. This is good news for you. So whether you are in a large, medium or small organization, you can leverage the experience of others and use elearning to save you money and time.

Is one still the loneliest number?

It turns out being one among many is quite common. About a fourth of all training departments in the United States consist of a single person. So doing more with less can be a real challenge. A well-run L&D department with fewer people can still make a significant contribution to an organization[2]. How do they do it? Easy: They ask the right questions and include others in the query process. Here are some suggested strategies to assist you in ensuring your efforts are effective.

- *Keep a business perspective* – Maintain your credibility by conducting programs that focus on delivering increased performance. The key is communicating with stakeholders and asking questions about their business issues. Adding value is essential and training alone doesn't increase performance. Stay connected. Talk to everyone and be seen at the right times and places. Isn't that why you were hired?

- *Marketing provides visibility* – Let sponsors, management and your target audience know what you have planned and how it will assist them to accomplish their goals. Spreading the word will help to increase performance and justify the necessary budget for your learning programs.

- *Partner with the best* – Think about it: You have to do it by yourself and you can't do it alone. You need a supplier(s) who will act in partnership to increase your organization's performance. Your joint focus should be on the transfer of learning to performance, not just delivery of content.

- *Measure what matters* – Agree on what matters and track the outcomes accordingly. Always be ready to toot your horn about all of the time and money you have saved your organization. Be sure to acknowledge anyone who came to your aid.

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[1] *State of the Industry Reports*, ASTD, 2011 and 2012.

[2] *The Training Manager's Quick-Tip Sourcebook: Surefire Tools, Tactics, and Strategies to Solve Common Training Challenges by* Susan C. Patterson. Pfeiffer, 2003.

Why ask questions?

That's a good question. Just as the students of Socrates discovered, you can learn a lot by asking questions. The CEO of a web-search company said, "We run this company on questions, not answers." This executive knew that if you keep asking questions you can keep finding better answers. (This is known as the Socratic Method.)

By framing your questions in the context of your workplace and business needs, you can determine quickly if a supplier has the best solution for your organization, and whether they have the right qualification to enter into a learning partnership with you. Asking the right questions can assist you in making the best choice about elearning. The following eight questions will start you on your way toward improved learning and performance within your organization. Let's get started.

Question #1 – What is elearning?

Over a decade ago, Elliott Masie, a leading industry expert, defined elearning as "the use of technology to design, deliver, select, administer, support and extend learning." More recently, he stated that elearning has now become "all learning" and as we go forward, organizations will routinely use a mix of on-demand and live content, context and collaboration. The term "all learning" means everywhere, everyone, effective, efficient, embedded, engaging and every time. His point is that whether you call it elearning or something else, its use has evolved to the degree that savvy organizations are using it to bolster their ongoing training and productivity efforts[3].

For this paper, "elearning" is used to define a wide array of learning interventions provided by technology, which can include online courses, books, videos, websites, chats, portals, quizzes, job aids, articles, recordings, presentations, learning management systems and similar online resources. Content can be either ready-to-use or custom developed. Here is a review of some of elearning's unique features you will find helpful. Elearning content is…

- *Rich* – an enormous collection of rich and varied web-accessible learning resources that support a multitude of job roles, various learning styles and wide-range of organizational imperatives.

- *Ready* – available anytime, anyplace or anywhere a learner and web-linked device happen to be, making all forms of electronically-developed instructional and informational content readily accessible closer to the point of need.

- *Everywhere* – delivered either synchronously (same time) or asynchronously (different time). For example, an individual can access a course, book, simulation, case study, assessment, video, and/or attend a virtual meeting.

- *Scalable* – the size of your audience can range from a single individual to a thousand globally diverse learners. You remove physical constraints of the traditional classroom and your program delivery moves from bricks to clicks.

- *Flexible* – works just as well in a formal or an informal setting. Studies have shown that workplace learning happens in an informal environment. Unlike classroom-based training, elearning can support the just-enough, just-in-time, self-guided learning that workers employ while doing their regular work.

No longer is elearning being thought of as an emerging technology. It has been universally adopted and used by a wide-range of companies, higher education, government and global industries to educate and inform employees, students and customers. We have reached the point where elearning is now truly globally ubiquitous.

Question #2 – What benefits does elearning provide for my organization?

Elearning offers a wide-range of benefits to any organization. Chief among these are saving time and money in delivery of learning and an increased transfer of learning into performance through the reduction of "scrap learning"[4].

Think of these two major benefits as essentially two bags of money given back to your organization:

- *Delivery of learning* – Elearning does away with the need for travel, allowing content to be easily shared across any organization, large or small. Whether you buy or build, elearning content usually costs much less than traditional classroom training. Elearning has its greatest impact when it is used in a multitude of formal, informal and social learning situations. When elearning is blended into structured programs with traditional methods, or available for use as self-directed learning, or teams are allowed to collaborate about how the content can be included into their workflow, higher retention by the individual occurs. This characteristic proves to be a very effective attribute in the transfer of learning into the workplace.

- *Transfer of learning to performance* – The purpose of using elearning is to shape the knowledge, skills and attitudes of employees to make an organization more productive. Elearning has an extremely low scrap rate compared to training delivered via traditional methods (classroom). The common scrap learning rate is often between 50 to 80%.

The quantitative (hard) savings obtained from the reduction in expenses, either actual or forecasted, usually offset the initial costs involved in bringing elearning into an organization. The qualitative (soft) results provide an increased focus on work processes, customers and overall productivity. While difficult to measure, the "fuzzy" benefits are usually assumed. (For a listing of potential hard, soft and fuzzy benefits, be sure to check out the recap of elearning benefits on page 12.)

Question #3 – How does elearning reduce scrap learning?

Learning programs create value only when the new knowledge and skills they impart are transferred out of the learning environment and put to use in the work of the individual and organization. If learning is never used in a way that improves how things are done, then it is learning scrap. Before we discuss how to resolve this problem, let's review some important findings:

- *Scrap learning rate is high* - The cost of not transferring learning into the workplace in terms of time, money, resources, lost opportunities and customers is incredibly high. Dr. Robert Brinkerhoff, an expert in training evaluation, estimates that scrap learning rates are as high as 50%-80% of all learning delivered. No company could stay in business if its other processes were as inefficient as most learning and development programs seem to be. Despite such long-standing and clear articulation of the problem over the last few decades, the failure of learning transfer continues to be the "elephant in the room" today that no one mentions[5].

- *Most learning is informal* - The U.S. Department of Labor estimates 70% or more of work-related learning occurs outside formal training. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) similarly believes at least 70% of learning occurs through informal learning processes driven by workers seeking to find the information they need to do their jobs. CCL breaks down the remaining 30% into two groups. The first (20%) is through non-formal or social learning which is developed through collaborative relationships, networks and dialogue. The balance (10%) occurs in well-designed formal learning programs[6].

- *Finding content can be difficult* - Informal learning implies a search for the right piece of information or the clearest set of instructions. Finding these learning assets is almost as important as having the assets themselves. Research shows that knowledge workers spend 15 to 30% of their time gathering information and these searches are less than successful 50% of the time. That is why it is essential to provide for people's ongoing needs to gather information efficiently and to learn through formal, informal and social means.

So why is the scrap learning problem happening? There are several root causes. The biggest one is the lack of shared responsibility between managers and the L&D department. Managers believe learning is important but want to outsource because they are too busy. On the other hand, L&D feels they have no control over the work environment. In reality, both own the failure or success of any learning effort; however it's the learning professionals who need to take the lead in solving the problem because they have the most to gain.

The second reason could be how we think about learning. Whenever a specific set of knowledge or skills need to be acquired, most people think of going to a traditional classroom. It is part of our language and L&D perpetuates this mindset when they offer mostly formal classroom events. Classrooms by definition take place in a different time and location that is far from the work environment. Based on research 70% to 90% of learning actually occurs in an informal and social setting. This means that formal training, where most money and effort are spent, only addresses a small portion of learning. Meanwhile, most learning occurs in the workplace, where the least learning support is being made available.

Unlike traditional classroom methods, elearning can be directly embedded into the workflow and is immediately applicable. This distinction allows the seamless integration of formal, informal and social learning to the daily work efforts. Along with instructional and informational design, elearning can be easily located and available when and where it is needed.

KnowledgeAdvisors conducted a survey and found that 86% of Skillsoft learners were able to apply what they learned within six weeks of the training. This translates into elearning scrap learning rate of 14%—far below the norm. Learners felt that elearning was able to impact the critical areas

[5] *The Six Disciplines of Breakthrough Learning: How to Turn Training and Development into Business Results, Second Edition*, by Wick, Calhoun, and Roy Pollock. Pfeiffer. 2010.
[6] "References"by Jay Cross. *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways that Inspire Innovation and Performance.* Pfeiffer.

of business performance, help them close their skill gaps and build confidence that is essential to performance. Elearning provides just-in-time access and personalized learning that maps to the learner's schedule rather than the instructor's availability[7].

Question #4 – How do I select the 'right' elearning content?

Content is king and context is its queen. Together they rule the kingdom of how your audience locates and uses formal, informal and social content within your organization.

Contrary to more traditional approaches, elearning can be embedded and/or delivered closer to the actual workplace, whereas traditional training (classroom) is, by its very nature, separated in time and distance. Aside from the vast array of learning styles that make up your audience, learners most often seek information in an informal, casual manner. To address the needs of a wide range of formal, informal and social learning needs, employees need a rich array of learning resources that encompass a full set of business needs.

Here is some advice to assist you in selecting the right elearning content for your consideration:

- *Instructional content* – Formal elearning content (courses) supports both formal and informal learning efforts. The course content must be instructionally sound, current and well-designed. Take the time to evaluate how well the course supports the transfer of new skills directly into the workplace. The best instructional content is based on adult learning principles that emphasize problem solving, critical thinking, learner initiative, self-management and experiential learning. The course should use user-focused performance objectives and learning activities appropriate for those objectives and exercises, along with assessments to measure the learner's achievement of those objectives.

   The best instructional content emphasizes problem solving, critical thinking, learner initiative, self-management and experiential learning and is based on adult learning principles. The course should have learner-focused performance objectives and learning strategies appropriate to meet these objectives. Engage the learner often with exercises and include assessments to measure the achievement of the course objectives.

- *Informational content* – Most common forms of informational content include books, webpages, reports, manuals, videos and other audio-visuals tools. Since most workplace learning occurs informally, having quick, searchable access to a wide range of informational content wherever the learner is located is essential to provide just-in-time performance support.

   Every organization has professionals, such IT technicians, engineers, HR specialists, accountants, security and project managers, who are certified in various disciplines and need to stay updated. These knowledge workers need fast access to information on a routine basis and seek the same rapid response to policy, procedural or leadership questions. Critical content need to be accessible quickly and precisely when and where it is required. Since learners apply new skills in an informal setting much more often than in a formal environment. Information content such as videos, book summaries and audio can be more effective, than instructor-led training.

- *Ensure quality content* – Dr. John R. Mattox II, director of research for KnowledgeAdvisors, stresses the importance of appropriate technology and says, "Learners are getting more savvy with higher expectations of quality. Learners will not suffer through pages and pages of text when interactive options are available[8]." Don't waste your time on poorly-designed courses or page-turners, poorly organized "shovelware" (repurposed content that emphasize quantity not quality), anything that doesn't use SCORM or AICC standards and above all, don't select content that doesn't teach or respect the adult learner.

- *Learn to blend and reinforce content* – Blending includes a combination of formal, informal and social (collaborative) approaches that improve the effectiveness and efficiency of learning. The blend must also include practical reinforcement activities. By reinforcing learning, you increase the individual retention, which in turn, leads to increased transfer of skills into the workplace. Without multiple (at least six) reinforcements within a 30 day period, retention can fall as low as 10% and your overall investment will be greatly diminished.

Question #5 – Should I buy or build elearning content?

Obtaining high-quality elearning content is critical to your success. Content can be obtained in three basic ways. You can buy or lease content from a supplier, have custom developers create it for you, or build it using your internal resources and their subject matter expertise. As a rule of thumb, half of all learning within any organization is generic, meaning that the same general content and learning objectives apply across the industry, while the remaining half is unique to the personality of that organization and needs to be custom-developed either internally or externally.

Every organization needs leadership, management and supervisory, communication, legal compliance, IT, desktop, project management skills and so forth. This list of common topics can be very long, so consider using ready-to-use content rather than building customized content wherever possible. Creating brand new elearning assets can be very expensive and time-consuming. Instead, select existing content that meets at least 85-90% of your needs. If you feel the ready-to-use course still needs some customization, expect the supplier to be able to guide you to a tool that allows you to make these changes or simply find a way to fill the gap with your own content.

According to Bob Mosher[9], the pace of business along with constant change has shifted the use of learning content from a scarcity model to one of abundance, where information and learning content are available in many ways. In the current environment, learners need help filtering and finding the right information for a specific moment of need. Mr. Mosher states that because of this rapid change, formal learning should be less about information dissemination and more about information aggregation. Perhaps organizations will be less likely to spend a lot of time and money on creating and maintaining large scale custom content because of shorter shelf life. More and more they will seek outside sources for current, well-designed learning content.

Question #6 – What is blended learning?

A major foundation of effective learning development is the ready availability of high-quality learning content covering a wide range of enterprise needs. The ideal blended learning model is one that integrates functions that empower learners to participate in several formal, informal and social learning activities.

High-quality blended learning establishes a balance between the instructional advantages for the learner and the learning objective. It allows learners to pick and choose how they want to learn and also affords them flexibility and convenience about when to take it.

A true blended solution includes online courses, online access to reference materials (books, white papers, job aids, etc.), instructor-led training, mentoring by seasoned experts and other information resources. These resources should be readily available, utilizing a search function to quickly allow access to the learning asset at the moment of need.

Question #7 – Which topics should I address first?

Well-designed elearning content does a good job of addressing the formal and informal needs of a wide range of business, technical, desktop, compliance and safety topics. Begin by setting your learning goals based on your organization's strategic goals so you can ensure that what you begin with will benefit your company. You should make a conscious effort to find content that applies to all levels and all functions to ensure that your learning investment is directly correlated to desired business outcomes.

The real question is what workplace skills are important to you and your organization right now and what will be your needs a year from now? Start with your immediate needs first and then think about what you will need following those needs so you can keep the momentum of learning and increased performance in motion.

As a general rule of thumb, we find that organizations that include instructional and informal learning content for key stakeholders assist in building support for their elearning efforts. It is critical to choose a partner who has the resources to meet your company's varied learning needs and corporate goals. The following topics will begin closing skill gaps right away in most organizations:

- *Management or leadership skills* – Blending new elearning assets into your existing program helps to build support for elearning for the rest of the organization, increasing the skills and attitudes of your leaders.

- *General business skills* – Have courses, books, simulations, videos and other elearning content readily available for your professional people and knowledge workers.

- *Desktop skills* – Every job role has a need to close skill gaps dealing with desktop technology and most don't have time to go to a class. Often people waste time by asking someone else who does know or they are advised to perform a task incorrectly.

- *Professional certifications* – There are several people who need specialized support to achieve or maintain their professional standing. Subject areas can include technical such as IT systems engineers, project managers, and HR professionals.

- *Legal compliance* – Your organization must communicate legal and behavioral expectations to your employees and keep them updated as laws and regulations change. Topics include sexual harassment, safety, hazardous situations and many more compliance subjects that reduce your risk.

It is important to find a learning partner that has the depth of informal content to meet your needs. The high cost of instructor-led training plus travel expenses, along with the time away from the job, is no longer a viable option in today's economic climate. The onslaught of the dispersed and diverse work force has added a host of logistical issues to the already complicated problem of onsite training.

Elearning has the power to tackle several of these issues, simply because of its nature as a SaaS or Cloud-based technology. Any workforce can view elearning content without having to travel. If your supplier of choice offers localized courses, your learners can view relevant courses in their native languages. Elearning is the ideal tool for "level-setting" employees at multiple locations with basic skills. It is often incorporated into new-hire training to ensure that employees in various job roles have the information they need right from the start.

Question #8 - How do I ensure the success of my elearning program?

Success for you and your organization should be defined as how well your organization will use elearning to improve performance and strengthen your business. Getting your people to use and include elearning into their work life takes time and effort. You will need someone to partner with who has the content, services and experience to ensure your success.

There are many aspects of the learning program that need to be managed and implemented to increase the success rate of your initiative. Finding the right partner is critical in a successful transition to elearning. The Skillsoft Learning Growth Model®[10] was developed to assist our customers in planning for what lies ahead for their organization.

The key success factors included in this model include:

- *Business case for elearning* – Focus on reducing the cost of delivery, remove redundant content and increase the scalability of elearning. Once learning becomes more aligned to business goals, look for ways to increase overall business impact through greater transfer of learning into performance.

- *Learning culture* – Build a culture where learning is focused on performance outcomes. Recruit managers and executive leadership in using and supporting a learning culture. Expect you and your learning staff to be elevated within the organization as business partners and your budget to be increased when performance results are clearly demonstrated.

- *Blended design* – Blending begins right away by providing elearning content before, during and after classroom events. Move forward to create blended programs that include for formal, informal and social learning elements. Skillsoft's *Eight Phases of Workplace Learning*[11] white paper provides a good roadmap to guide you in blending formal, informal and social learning programs.

Summary of elearning benefits

For the Organization

Hard
Quantitative

1. Increase sales
2. Increase customer service
3. Increase quality
4. Increase output
5. Reduce travel time & costs
6. Reduce employee turnover
7. Reduce lawsuits
8. Reduce time away from work
9. Reduce scrap learning rate

Soft
Quantitative

1. Increase transfer to productivity
2. Increase agility & flexibility
3. Increase content deployment
4. Increase availability
5. Shorten development cycles
6. Increase on-boarding content
7. Recruit better employees
8. Retain high-potential employees
9. Ease of remedial training
10. Observation of OJT transfer

Fuzzy
Difficult to measure

1. Increase global capability
2. Increase employee loyalty
3. Increase scalable content
4. Increase deployment
5. Increase market share
6. Increase 'Green' technology
7. Consistent, accurate content
8. Support innovation
9. Support the disabled employee
10. Maximize current systems
11. Nurture learning efforts for high potential employees

For the Learner

Hard
Quantitative

1. Reduce travel time & costs
2. Reduce learning time
3. Increase learner retention
4. Increase engagement

Soft
Quantitative

1. Increase career opportunity
2. Improve content mastery
3. Flexible and available
4. Just-in-time training
5. Repeated practice

Fuzzy
Difficult to measure

1. Increase collaboration
2. Self-directed learning
3. Increase personal freedom
4. Wide selection of assets
5. Personalized learning
6. Safe environment for learning

For the Trainer

Hard
Quantitative

1. Reduce travel time & costs
2. Reduce training backlog
3. Track training progress
4. Measure learning transfer
5. Create blended programs
6. Evaluate learning gains

Soft
Quantitative

1. Reduce overall costs
2. Platform independence
3. Leverage existing technology
4. Training for disabled persons
5. Greater storage capacity

Fuzzy
Difficult to measure

1. Track learning by usage
2. Align to business objectives
3. Revitalize classroom training
4. Multiple learning styles
5. Enhance L&D's image
6. Obtain proof of certification
7. Ease of making updates
8. Increase ways to teach
9. Reach neglected employees
10. Expand business orientation

- *Promotion and marketing* – What we now know is "if you build it, they will come" doesn't work. It is not enough to just provide elearning content and make these assets available to your workforce. You need to promote the use of elearning to your audience on a regular basis.

- *Learner adoption* – Usage of elearning content is a basic metric to determine how well your promotional efforts are working. Generally, learning starts out slow and begins to climb as you increase promotion and reinforce new methods such as blending. At first you push the learning out and as learners become more comfortable and management support builds, the "push" from you will change into "pull" from the learners.

- *Learning evaluation* – Basic metrics include usage (uptake), assessment scores (Kirkpatrick Level 2) and behavior changes within the workplace (Kirkpatrick Level 3). Later on, you will conduct targeted ROI (return on investment) studies and develop management dashboards to give regular updates to your management team.

Your elearning partner should offer assistance in all of these areas in addition to assistance in how to perform some administrative tasks. It is critical to have the support of your supplier in the implementation of your learning program. They should be able to start you off on the right foot and boost learner usage right away.

Summary

Getting started with elearning can have many benefits to your organization, from a cost, time and learning perspective. As an employer you now have the ability to influence more than formal learning process. Now, thanks to elearning you can influence and tailor informal learning to meet the needs of your biggest assets—your people and your customers.

Skillsoft strategic planning resources

The following Skillsoft white papers are available on our commercial website at www.skillsoft.com

Skillsoft Learning Growth Model: A Blueprint for Integrating Learning into the Life of the Enterprise in Five Manageable Stages This paper will help you chart a realistic direction for your organization, allowing you to choose to implement the right learning resources at the right time.

The Skillsoft Impact Analysis: An Introduction of the Process and its Benchmarks
This paper provides an overview of Skillsoft's Impact Analysis, which is a simplified process and toolkit offered to support Skillsoft clients in demonstrating the impact of elearning investments in both qualitative and quantitative terms.

What Usage Can I Expect?: How the Skillsoft Learning Growth Model® helps clients understand what to expect This paper, a companion to *The Skillsoft Learning Growth Model*, explores the dynamics of usage in a variety of situations.

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[10]*The Skillsoft Learning Growth Mode: A Blueprint for Integrating Learning into the Life of the Enterprise in Five Manageable Stages* by Dorman Woodall. Skillsoft, 2012.
[11]*Eight Phases of Workplace Learning: A Framework for Designing Blended Programs,* by Dorman Woodall. Skillsoft, 2011.

Moving the Needle: How Skillsoft Learning Impacts Performance of Individuals and Organizations What value does Skillsoft training provide to individuals and organizations? Some of the key findings include high applicability, business impact, confidence, increasing value over time. Taken together, the findings illustrate the powerful role that learning can play in a company's success.

Eight Phases of Workplace Learning: A Framework for Designing Blended Programs
This paper proposes a structure of eight phases of workplace learning that can serve as a framework for designing blended learning solutions with formal and informal components.

10x10x10 Framework: A Model for Creating a Nimble, Adaptable Global Workforce
This paper explores a new framework for delivering information in easily-digestible 10-minute nuggets that satisfy a range of informational needs.

A Set of Best Practices for Targeting, Aligning and Measuring Learning
This paper addresses the changes in the global marketplace and how workforce demographics are accentuating the need to leverage human capital as a competitive differentiator.

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Blended Learning Strategies: Selecting the Best Instructional Method
This paper will assist you in answering key questions about how you can deliver the various components of a well-designed blended learning program.

Guide to Reducing Scrap Learning: Scrap Learning, the Failure of Learning Transfer
This paper explores why learning is successfully delivered but not applied on the job and the high costs that comes with scrap learning.

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