



E-learning vs. face-to-face training: And the winner is...

Can e-learning compete with face-to-face training?

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Picture an all-too-familiar training classroom scenario. An employee walks into a training room and is greeted by a trainer. He sits back, relaxes and appears to listen to the trainer drone on about the subject matter. Then the lights dim.

He is barraged by a multitude of boring PowerPoint slides; maybe he takes some notes. He starts to drift. His mind wanders to the multitude of messages in his inbox waiting for a reply. He snaps out of it briefly as the trainer engages a nearby participant in a question-and-answer exchange and possibly even a discussion. But the instructor continues to drone on and he drifts again.

At some point he may complete some questions either verbally or on paper. He might even be asked to perform a task or procedure. At the end of the session, he walks away with some printed material that the trainer says is already out of date. He might even receive the phone number of the trainer for further questions, but he is pretty much on his own.

The assumption has been that face-to-face training -- with a human being actually providing the training -- leads to greater interaction than computer-based training, and as a result, leads to greater success. But that assumption is not based on fact.

True e-learning provides many, if not more, opportunities for interaction than instructor-led training. From a conceptual perspective, e-learning is a holistic view of training and performance support embedded in the actual work environment.

Designing effective e-learning tools requires stepping back and evaluating what support the learner needs before, during and after the point of need. The resulting e-learning solution can include many of the traditional attributes of training and performance support as well as several new components enabled by technology.



E-LEARNING INTERACTION

The following depicts a blended e-learning scenario that includes a high degree of interaction:

To begin his learning experience, the employee logs onto a self-paced Web-based-training program to familiarize himself with basic concepts. The web based training (WBT) interface is intuitive. The content is presented in modularized segments that are easy to absorb, and there are plenty of engaging interactions requiring the employee's input.

The employee receives effective feedback immediately and is given the opportunity to go back and review material if necessary. If he has a question, he can browse the "frequently asked questions," explore the more detailed online support or click a link to initiate a live chat with an expert.

Deepening his knowledge, the employee participates in a real-time learning experience where he, other participants and an instructor are all interacting in a live training session over the Internet. The instructor presents information using a live video feed, video clips, animations, diagrams and slides.

The employee clicks a link that tells the instructor he has a question. There is an online whiteboard where he takes control and makes annotations to the diagram that is presented. The instructor lets another participant answer the question while all participants observe. The employee wants more information, but chooses to ask that participant to join him later in a private off-line discussion.

Then the instructor posts a series of review questions for all participants to answer. The instructor notices that several participants did not correctly answer the questions. He therefore reviews some of the material and posts more questions to measure retention. When complete, the tabulated scores are posted for all to see and a discussion begins. This pattern of interaction is repeated several times until the entire session is complete.

After the session, the employee has a question, so he posts it in the threaded discussion for the instructor and other participants to respond. He also has access to an extensive knowledge base that is continually updated. If he is still at a loss, he can request a live chat with an expert to get resolution.



AN ACTIVE ROLE

As can be seen, e-learning doesn't prevent interaction from taking place. In fact, e-learning can actually increase interaction as it shifts the participant from a passive learning role to an active learning role. It also provides both the participant and the instructor with tools to measure real-time retention of information and allows for corrective measures to be made accordingly.

E-learning can even include scheduled or randomized post-training assessments to measure the retention of information over time. At its best, e-learning is more than just interactive. It is collaborative. The participant is connected to learning peers through the virtual learning community. He also has access to mentors, experts, colleagues and professional peers, both inside and outside his organization for problem solving and decision-making.

By taking a holistic approach, a company can arrive at a training process that is more engaging and effective than traditional face-to-face learning at an economical cost. With the focus on the participant, e-learning can ensure employees fully master the training content, ultimately leading to greater job performance and a stronger bottom line.