



eLearning



# Great expectations

By Reinhard Ziegler

Can e-learning deliver on its promises? Not if the primary goal is to cut costs. To be truly effective, corporate education delivered via the Internet must focus on significant improvement in workforce performance. Here's how it's done.

**T**oday's frenzy of interest in electronic learning and the rapidly expanding list of players in the e-learning marketplace can be explained in a pretty rational way: Follow the money.

Indeed, e-learning looks like a "killer app" with something for everyone—designers get lots of work and users reap huge cost savings. True believers have not been shy about extolling e-learning's potential benefits, and when someone like Cisco Systems CEO John Chambers declares that education delivered via the Internet is going to "make e-mail usage look like a rounding error," people tend to listen.

But as is often the case with something this big (and grandly advertised), there is promise and there are pitfalls.

There is little doubt that e-learning can be kind to the bottom line, chiefly by dramatically lowering

travel and other expenses incurred in delivering traditional training. For example, Entergy, a New Orleans-based regional electric-utility company, put an e-learning infrastructure in place in 10 weeks for an investment of less than \$1 million. Preliminary estimates suggest that within the first year the infrastructure will produce savings of up to three times the original investment. With potential like this, no wonder e-learning people are so busy these days.

## **New wine, new bottle**

It's worth sounding a note of caution here, however, about the siren song of slashing expenses. An e-learning strategy that is narrowly focused on cost reduction ultimately may fail to address the larger and more important issue of optimizing workforce performance, which should be the primary objective of any corporate learning program. E-learning as a mere cost-cutting tonic is simply the same wine in a new bottle. To be truly

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effective, e-learning must be regarded as an altogether new wine, and a heady one at that.

Of course, every generation has seen technology innovations in the field of learning, which were often accompanied by bold claims and high expectations. For example, in its day the overhead projector was considered a big leap forward in delivering instruction. It was followed quickly by the advent of 16mm-film projectors. This technology promised to give learners a more realistic learning experience because film could capture motion and consistently demonstrate desired kinds of behaviors in a condensed format.

But film has a major shortcoming: It delivers the same experience to every learner. It unvaryingly starts here and ends there, period, end of reel. Hence new philosophies of “programmed,” or “branched,” learning came into vogue. If we could design different learning paths for different learning needs, said the education visionaries of the day, we could really make a difference.

### **Promises, promises**

If you take a philosophy of branched learning and add a new technology called “personal computing,” the nature of education would change even more dramatically—which is what happened in the late 1970s with the arrival of computer-based training, or CBT. This was a genuine breakthrough, and CBT remains an important tool in corporate learning. But CBT in and of itself can no more have a meaningful impact on job performance than overhead projectors or 16mm-film did in their time.

Every technology-enabled learning innovation has promised one or more of the following benefits:

- The ability to customize the learning experience to individual needs.
- An increased level of interactivity and an ability to “learn by doing.”
- The ability to deliver learning experiences to people where and when they need them.
- Increased motivation by virtue of the sizzle of new technology.
- A reduction in the cost of delivery, the amount of time required for the learner to be away from the job, and the time required to attain a higher level of proficiency and performance.

Yet despite real advances, and a number of isolated successes in learning technology and learning design concepts, few of us can point to a learning experience that had a significant impact on our job performance or on the performance of our employees.

So why should anyone listen to the current claim that e-learning represents an honest-to-goodness education revolution (finally, *really*, we mean it this time!) waiting on our virtual doorstep? Because e-learning can deliver significantly greater educational value by virtue of its ability to respond effectively to three new drivers—each with a technological, strategic and human performance dimension—propelling today’s businesses.

### *1. A nearly ubiquitous basic technology platform*

The power of the e-learning revolution is based on the Web and on the rapid convergence of high-speed computing, ever faster communications, higher bandwidth and new content management tools. Learning, knowledge management and collabo-

ration have converged on top of powerful platforms and networks. The Internet has fundamentally changed how we think about learning—where we get it and how we interact during the learning experience—and this is powerful new fuel for the e-learning engine.

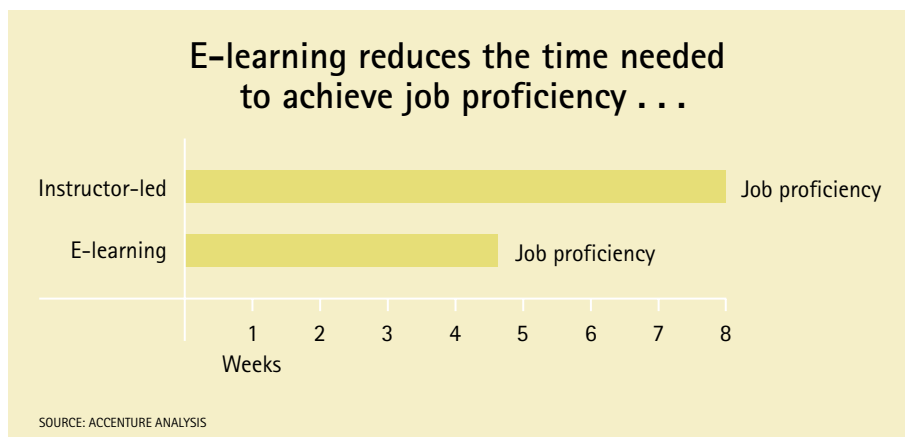
The new technologies mean that the old promise of just-in-time learning is finally being kept. Take Sun Microsystems, which is now delivering process alerts to those who assemble its workstations and servers directly to where they work—on the screens of their Sun workstations.

Before this new system was installed, an alert about a change in assembly methods would come from an engineer, who would actually walk over to one of the technicians on the plant floor and explain it. That technician would then find the group most affected by the change, explain it and give the group instructions for how to comply with the directive. Keeping track of these various alerts—which were paper-based—was a nightmare.

Today the Sun workers responsible for processes affected by a change are alerted at their workstations electronically with information that may include onscreen graphics or video clips. All alerts are dated and stored in an easily accessible database. The just-in-time learning functionality is one part of the corporation's larger electronic teaching system known as Sun University, where workers can tap into a broad array of e-learning courses to sharpen their job skills.

## 2. The need for speed

Large-scale strategic change requires commensurately important changes in employee performance. In the old days there may have been time to train large numbers of employees in



a traditional way, and have them performing optimally by the time the effects of the strategic change really kicked in. Not anymore. Things just happen too quickly today, and companies are finding that their economic viability in the wake of marketplace, regulatory or strategic change absolutely depends on the highest employee performance in new tasks and in record time.

The strategic need for speed was the primary force behind Entergy's e-learning initiative. The company had to respond quickly to the heightened performance demands created by energy deregulation in Texas. In the new competitive environment, Texas consumers would be able to choose their energy supplier.

## Ripple effect

Just imagine the ripple effect of such a change on the way the company works, how it is organized and how it serves customers. Employees at Entergy have a new set of imperatives for how they think about and deal with customers. In addition, the employees who need to perform in new ways are geographically dispersed. All in all, it's a perfect strategic, operational and employee fit for e-learning.

As with most e-learning solutions, Entergy's approach involved both a

learning management system, or LMS, and a delivery system. The company chose Docent as its LMS and Centra as the delivery platform, which now provides the "virtual classroom" capability Entergy needs to augment traditional classroom training.

Docent's Web-based front end supports the development and delivery of online courses, and it provides a wide range of functions to manage planning, scheduling, logistics, enrollment, record keeping, curricula and content. Centra simulates a classroom environment so that users get the classroom experience via the Web while using their computers. Centra also enables students to interact with instructors and other students through a variety of communication and collaboration tools.

Entergy was able to move from idea to implementation in less than five months. A kickoff workshop brought together e-learning experts and Entergy executives. It was a critical meeting: The organization reached consensus quickly on key aspects of the work, so the program began with everyone headed in the same direction.

Designers came out of the workshop with an agreement on the integrated e-learning infrastructure and applications and on how to manage a phased approach to the work. It was

also decided that there should be a minimum of upfront customization. The company's decision to buy a solution rather than continue trying to enhance a homegrown approach was essential to the ultimate timeliness and cost-effectiveness of Entergy's e-learning program.

### 3. The war for talent

The desire of organizations to find and retain the best people has created renewed interest in the motivational aspects of workforce performance (see "Stemming the tide," *Outlook*, January 2001). E-learning finally has driven home the idea that the motivational benefits of technology-delivered learning are not in the technology itself (the latest Nintendo generations can hardly be impressed by the look and feel of even the most sophisticated e-learning applications). The motivation comes from the indirect benefits of e-learning.

One of the things noted—and appreciated—by participants in Entergy's new programs is the simple fact that they can spend less time away from home. Traditional training often involves travel and significant amounts of time away, which can be disruptive. Entergy expects additional benefits from its e-learning program, including greater employee willingness to engage in training, an increased sense of employee control over learning experiences, an overall increase in competence and fresher content.

### Secret to success

Is there anything that can slow the e-learning juggernaut? We'll begin to see over time, when the cost-cutting phase has run its course. At that point companies will need to look long and hard at how effective their new e-learning systems actually are. However, foresighted executives should start thinking about that now.

Here's the secret to effective e-learning: Be willing to give up control. Corporate control—by designers, instructors, training departments—has been a major feature of every prior generation of technology-enabled learning. CBT marketing materials and CBT designers gave the impression that the learners were in control because they could "branch" in a multitude of ways throughout the experience (like a much freer version of the programmed learning text). But the control still remained with those who created the content; yes, you could branch, but only where you were allowed.

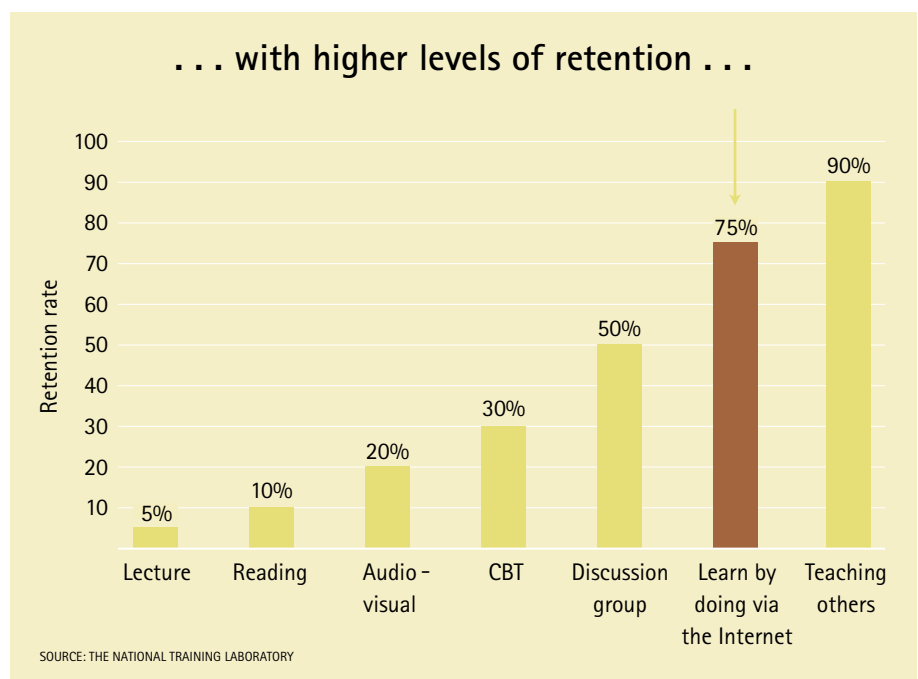
The notion that companies can anticipate all the learning needs of their employees is an anachronism. Back in the days when people learned a skill and then used it with scant variation for decades, companies could accurately predict their employees' learning requirements. But today it is impossible to anticipate all the skills a knowledge worker needs. In many cases customers will have access to more and better information than em-

ployees. (Furthermore, if you can anticipate the performance needs of a particular job, chances are it can be done better through automation!)

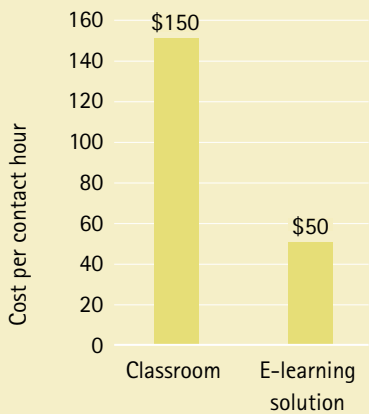
### New balance of power

Today's economy has witnessed an undeniable and irreversible shift in power, from service provider to consumer, from the company to the customer. In the field of learning, that shift is away from the controlling intents of instructors and designers toward the controlling needs of the learners and performers.

Executives who fail to understand this radical shift in power away from the designer and toward the learner likely will make the mistake of simply taking their old training content (which may once have been pretty effective) and trying to deliver it over the Web. That approach has a certain seductive appeal; it feels like a quick win and allows managers to check the box: "Yes, we're doing e-learning." But in reality it spells unfulfilled learning potential and worse—a subpar performance



## ... at a lower total cost.



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by the learner, which affects the entire enterprise.

Today's e-learning environment requires an entirely different approach, one with two components.

First, the training department and learning designers must focus on enabling rapid access to a variety of learning opportunities. Then they must get out of the way instead of overengineering the experience.

Traditionally designers acted like athletic coaches who show game films and teach during practices, then send their players out to perform. Today learning has to happen while the game is being played. The best your company can do is to create a rich, multidimensional environment with clear performance expectations. The rest is up to the learner.

Second, e-learning will emphasize collaboration and networking as much as content and courses. In effect, this brings Socrates from the gymnasiums of Athens to the corporate training center. For Socrates, dialogue and conversation

were the vehicles for true learning. And like today's most advanced e-learning approaches, the Socratic learning experience was largely driven by the active engagement of the individual.

### Talk show

Knowledge is something that results from natural curiosity in the service of clear goals. It is acquired through exploration and experience, as well as through imitation, experimentation, dialogue, collaboration and reflection. Through various e-learning Web technologies, learners are able to interact with the content, practice their skills and "talk" with a multitude of people, thereby stimulating high levels of motivation and ability to learn.

As Entergy moves closer to the broader implementation of its initial e-learning solution, it is experimenting with creative ways of presenting information. One approach, called the Radio Show, was developed by Accenture to deliver information or training in lively ways to distributed audiences. Building on the best aspects of a radio call-in program, the virtual seminar uses lively exchange and dialogue, user participation and additional audio elements to address the challenge of delivering content effectively without the visual stimulation and cues that are available in the classroom.

The power of e-learning is unleashed when we blend Web-enabled collaboration opportunities with other types of learning experiences, whether individual study or some form of virtual working/learning space. This creates the kind of richly interactive, spontaneously collaborative and engaging environment (both within and beyond the four walls of your organization) rarely achieved with traditional delivery models.

Companies embarking on e-learning initiatives must be clear about the link between individual and team performance and overall business performance. Success here requires a clear strategy, advanced learning designs and flexible delivery approaches appropriate to the job performance requirements.

If it's done well, e-learning offers an obvious, immediate payoff in cost reduction. Those companies that capitalize on it as an enabler of workforce and enterprise performance will have certain first-mover advantages.

But there are also more subtle benefits that will come only to those willing to embrace the philosophy of individual control and responsibility implicit in true e-learning. These companies will be able to unleash the individual and collective talent of their workforces and have the opportunity to become genuinely great places to work. ■

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Reinhard Ziegler heads e-learning and knowledge management in the Accenture Human Performance service line. An internationally recognized thought leader in the area of optimizing workforce performance, Dr. Ziegler specializes in learning design and advanced learning technologies, including goal-based designs, technology-delivered learning and business simulations. In addition to serving clients, he currently leads several of Accenture's research programs in the areas of learning, complexity and innovation. Dr. Ziegler is based in Dallas.

[reinhard.ziegler@accenture.com](mailto:reinhard.ziegler@accenture.com)