



Lasting E-Learning Lessons

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E-learning is fast and efficient, which you worry may be the problem when it comes to retention. But concepts and skills presented online can last as long as any traditional classroom lesson—if you do it the right way.

For cable television and communications services provider Comcast Corporation, a multipronged approach to e-learning is the answer to retention. "We leverage all amounts of online support we can," says Director of Learning Jon Folkestad, noting the company's use of both self-paced modules, as well as live, virtual lectures. "We use many different pieces, and I think that's a key component of the retention factor."

But these various online delivery modes are focused to specific learner needs. This methodology, which Folkestad refers to as a "bull's-eye, targeted learning approach," is used to successfully introduce new hires to the company. Content is targeted to the skill level of each employee through e-learning provider Knowledge Factor's confidence-based assessment learning programs. This allows the company to avoid wasting time reteaching skills a learner may already be competent in from past work experience. "If you've worked in the service industry before, says Folkestad, "and you have a lot of great customer service skills, [we want] to leverage those." With no unnecessary repetition, retention becomes more likely. Since the material is focused exclusively on missing skills the worker needs to do his or her job, lessons gain greater relevancy, encouraging learner concentration.

When employees perceive the e-learning as relevant to their work, they become more engaged in the lessons, and retention increases, says Ellen Wagner, director of worldwide e-learning for Adobe Systems Inc. "It needs to be connected to work flow, and has to have some direct applicability," she stresses. "If an e-learning intervention simply is presented as a check box to make sure content has been shoved out to people, then it isn't going to be effective." To make sure that doesn't happen, Wagner says to think of e-learning as an ongoing effort rather than an isolated set of modules. Putting the coursework into context also may inspire employees to take the initiative, she says, "getting people to take responsibility for their own learning."

Engaging workers by showing them how the learning relates to their everyday work can be done through storytelling. Try wrapping the lesson around a simulation-based branching story that immerses employees in the material, says Jeff Snipes, CEO of e-learning provider Ninth House. "If you want to achieve retention, or even more important, behavioral change, you have to include a robust pedagogy in the e-learning process itself," he says. "In our case, we use a lot of storytelling, a lot of video-based simulations, so it's very lifelike." E-learning that paints a picture for learners, rather than reproducing PowerPoint slides, has a better chance of making employees internalize the lessons. "We find it drives a much higher level of retention when the learner can emotionally connect to the behaviors and modeling going on



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onscreen."

Alongside relevancy and engagement, giving workers the chance to have hands-on practice is essential to retention, says Folkestad. "Hands-on application labs" include work on Comcast's live customer service systems, and charting concepts out on construction paper to show employees literally get the picture. These techniques are supplemented with one-on-one coaching from peers.

Blending targeted, relevant e-learning content with hands-on practice gives training a greater chance for success in the long run, says John Zonneveld, product development manager for the Ready Solutions LMS at Latitude Consulting Group, Inc. The technology his firm supplies requires the employee to participate in all types of learning, not just the online portion. "We have the ability to chain any number of courses together in a series," says Zonneveld. "When you're looking in the course catalog, you may see a class that's phase three, but when you go to enroll in it, it forces you to enroll in all the phases of the course, and actually drives you through the phases in order, so you can't take phase two until you've taken phase one."

The final phase of the drive for retention at Comcast is Bringing It Together (BIT), a learning protocol the company uses to integrate all the lessons the employee completed on a specific subject. When teaching quality in customer service, for example, learners complete a mock call to demonstrate their skills. "Getting them in those experiences, where they have a chance to almost dissect a customer interaction," Folkestad explains, "helps the retention of those students."

Communities of Practice

At car company Subaru of America, Inc., the philosophy is e-learning most likely will be retained when it is made part of a larger program, so employees don't feel like they're just slogging through online lessons as a chore, says National Customer Relations and Loyalty Training Manager Darryl Draper. One way Subaru does this is through communities of practice that, among other activities, meet online using WebEx Training Center, a virtual meeting space. "I use a community of practice theory where people come together with a like interest," Draper says, pointing to her own division, customer loyalty, as an example. "From that, I insert some training content, very disguised. I don't want them to think of it as a training course, but more of a learning community."

During an 8-week program on customer loyalty, Draper takes employees through a series of online training activities, including live Webinars, interactive discussions and Q&A sessions, all within WebEx Training Center. In addition, follow-up training sessions are recorded and hosted on Training Center so that employees can access them whenever or wherever necessary. "I have them start practicing these skills in their workplace," she says, "and relate back, through threaded discussions or structured activities, their experiences." From the discussions between students in the online community, best practices on attaining customer loyalty are agreed on, and documented in a virtual library.

Indeed, a key long-term benefit of e-learning is the ability to easily create reference materials. For online lessons that can be readily tapped into weeks, or even years, later, design tightly structured modules, says Robb Powell, president of e-learning provider Gradepoint, Inc. "One of the things we believe in very



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strongly is when you have an online learning session, it should be tightly managed in the 15- to 20-minute time segment," he points out. "If you've been careful about your design of the online classes, then the individual learner can say, 'I'm about to go in to do XYZ for my customer, I remember it was in this class, let me log on quickly to the session, index in, and here are the three slides that describe the process I didn't quite remember.'"

In addition to an easy-to-access archive of on-demand knowledge, e-learning has a greater chance of sticking if you get employees to draw up a post-program action plan. In the last two weeks of Draper's class, employees do just that. They go to a Website, where they view completed customer surveys showing how the customers rated their service skills. Each worker draws up a plan to improve in the specific skills he or she received low scores on. Long-term retention of the concepts covered in Draper's class is aided by the ability to monitor how customers perceive the employees. It holds workers accountable for improving their weak spots, putting teeth in the action plan. "Even though I can't see them perform that behavior," she says, "I can see, through the customer's eyes, that they have done it, and that's what counts."

Using online learning to strengthen skills so they'll last for years, and accomplish your company's goals, can be supported by assessments built into the e-learning program itself. Such is the case with Knowledge Factor's solution. By measuring not only knowledge, but how confident the learner is about using that knowledge, the system aims to make lasting behavioral changes, says Vice President of Business Development Brian Webster. "If their level of confidence is not in alignment with the knowledge, the system will help them develop a higher level of confidence in it," he explains. "They literally cannot attain a state of mastery in the system until they have both confidence and knowledge, and the knowledge is correct. This has the effect of ensuring people are able to act on the knowledge they acquire."

Online updates that follow up on the original program also can boost the action plan for long-term learning, says Latitude Consulting's Zonneveld. If a new product or marketing campaign is being rolled out, and you need training that will cover much of the same material taught to many of the same learners a year ago, why not build on the knowledge they've already attained? "If you took an 8-hour course a couple years ago, and since then the subject matter has changed slightly, with maybe 20 percent of the content changed, you can take an e-learning course that updates you on whatever those changes are, with it tied to the original course," he says. "You also can use it as a refresher to drive retention."

Updates on original learning content also can occur naturally through continued interaction with peers. After the 8-week learning period at Subaru, learners are placed in another, more informal community of practice for peer-to-peer networking and ongoing discussion on how to best reach customer loyalty goals. Draper can't emphasize enough the long-term learning value of ongoing discussion of concepts between employees. "The message is being given by their peers," she says. "Now they're learning from their peers, whom they probably respect more than me. Somebody who has experience doing the exact same thing they're doing has said, 'Yes, I had success using this skill this way.'"

Sidebar: Quick Tips



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- Take a multifaceted approach that makes use of both self-paced online modules, as well as live, virtual lectures.
- Use pre-course assessments to target learning to fill individual knowledge gaps as precisely as possible. That will avoid needless repetition that leads to learner boredom and concentration loss.
- Engage learners by connecting each lesson to the larger picture of their individual work goals to inspire them to want to learn more for the sake of their own performance improvement.
- Illustrate the on-the-job connection to the learning through pedagogical devices such as storytelling that make use of video-rich simulations.
- Include hands-on practice, such as role play or mock customer service calls, as part of an overall blended approach.
- Ensure that learners can't progress unless they complete all phases of the learning in proper order.
- Organize communities of practice in which content is presented as part of a threaded online discussion. A second, long-term community of practice can be established for ongoing reinforcement of skills after the class.
- Use update courses to refresh concepts, and build on what learners already know.