

Are You Ready for E-Learning?

By Samantha Chapnick

An e-learning needs assessment is designed to answer these questions: Can we do this? If we can do this, how the heck are we going to? What are the outcomes and how do we measure them? Here's a model that can help with one part of the assessment process--determining your e-learning readiness.

Many training and development professionals receive negative responses from clients and managers upon hearing the term needs assessment. Many others, including myself, have noticed that such terminology substitutions as "organizational diagnosis" or "determining goals" make the "maybe we should step back and see what's really going on here before we implement the solution" discussion go much more smoothly.

It would be a mistake to assume this backlash is merely a jargon battle. A traditional needs assessment, which is defined as a process for determining the gap between what learners know and what they need to know, may result in the creation of excellent training. However, in today's dynamic workplace, and given the proliferation of new high-tech education tools (you know, e-learning), focusing exclusively on creating excellent training is missing the mark.

What's so different about e-learning?

Imagine you're a pilot who flies two planes--a commuter plane and a 747. Neither aircraft is better or more important than the other, but each is suited to a different purpose, and the best use for each is in conjunction with the other. The commuter plane is appropriate when the destination is close, there are few passengers, precision maneuvering may be required, or landing space is minimal. The 747 is appropriate in the opposite situation--when large numbers of people need to be transported great distances and there's ample space for maneuvering.

Similarly, e-learning comes in different configurations that dictate the depth of a needs assessment. The simple e-learning implementations, such as those following an application service provider (ASP) model, won't necessarily look any different from a resource requirement perspective than traditional classroom training. That's "commuter plane" e-learning.

On the other hand, e-learning can be an enormous undertaking and, like the 747, require significantly more preparation due to its increased scope, higher interdependence, and visibility. These factors--described below--are the reason a needs assessment for an e-learning initiative looks different from one for a traditional classroom program.

- **Scope.** Developing an e-learning initiative is a typically much larger endeavor than that of an instructor-led training (ILT) program. Consider the increased expenses, number of people involved, development time, technological requirements, and delivery options.
- **Interdependence.** It's possible, even common, for an ILT program to be conducted without the knowledge of anyone but the participants, their immediate managers, and the training provider. In contrast, even the smallest e-learning program requires a wider group of people. Ranging from (at a minimum) representatives from the IT and HR departments to (more commonly) an organization-wide task force, the scope of the project often dictates that there are more decision makers, more stakeholders, and more links between previously unrelated departments.
- **Visibility.** When a traditional training program goes bad, a participant's dissatisfaction is usually voiced by word of mouth. And the people who express dissatisfaction, in most cases, are the participants and, maybe later, the people directly affected by their work. Again, due to the scope of the undertaking (especially the high budget and number of resources required), the efficacy of an e-learning program will be delivered to a larger group of people and through a wider variety of channels than an ILT program. Typically, a CEO can tap into a training database and view participants' course comments, exam results, and the courses taken. It's easier to determine whether an e-learning program is unpopular or ineffective than to rely on word of mouth about a questionable ILT program.

In order for a needs assessment to have a successful outcome, it must accomplish many things--improving performance being just one. It must also

- determine how to achieve the high-level goals of the organization (such as increasing sales and fostering innovation)
- determine what system obstacles (other than training) need to be removed
- point to an intervention that will balance the conflicting needs of different stakeholders (IT versus HR, participants versus managers, budget versus vendor costs, and so on)
- pave the way for a new program.

Organizations implementing e-learning programs need to expand the usual needs assessment process by creating a high-level requirements document that includes

- objectives (macro organizational objectives and micro target learner population objectives)
- an e-learning readiness score
- a list of advantages and potential obstacles to e-learning adoption
- a list of possible e-learning configurations.

Let's take a look at one part of this process: measuring an organization's e-learning readiness.

The readiness model

An e-learning needs assessment is designed to answer these questions:

1. Can we do this?
2. If we can do this, how the @!\$% are we going to do it?
3. What are the outcomes and how do we measure them?

My readiness model is designed to simplify the process of getting the basic information necessary to answer the questions. Grouping together a wide variety of factors into eight categories allows practitioners to use the same process to assess the vastly different stakeholders in the system. The factors are

- **Psychological readiness.** This factor considers the individual's state of mind as it impacts the outcome of the e-learning initiative.
- **Sociological readiness.** This factor considers the interpersonal aspects of the environment in which the program will be implemented.
- **Environmental readiness.** This factor considers the large-scale forces operating on the stakeholders both inside and outside the organization.
- **Human resource readiness.** This factor considers the availability and design of the human-support system.
- **Financial readiness.** This factor considers the budget size and allocation process.
- **Technological skill (aptitude) readiness.** This factor considers observable and measurable technical competencies.
- **Equipment readiness.** This factor considers the question of the proper equipment possession.
- **Content readiness.** This factor considers the subject matter and goals of the instruction.

For each stakeholder group, a different combination of factors is examined. However, this model provides a simplified way of determining whether e-learning can be implemented successfully--and if so, what forces are on your side. If not, what obstacles must be heeded and addressed?