

A day in the life of a New Economy training director

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5:15 After tossing and turning all night, I drop into deep REM.

5:30 Clock radio rudely interrupts my rest. "And now a few words from Bob Dylan." In my current state it's almost impossible to distinguish Dylan's whining from his wailing harmonica sounds.

6:00 Yes! A refreshing shower. And my first e-learning thought of the day. Maybe we don't need a learning management system. We could save over a million bucks. But we've already spent several thousand dollars on LMS studies and consultants to help us make our selection. We've convinced senior management that we need an LMS. No turning back now! Besides, we are focused on reaping the benefits of e-learning. An LMS will allow us to distribute all the learning materials in all pockets of our organization to all employees. An LMS will make it possible to track who takes what, when and how much.

I'm Ellen. One of my Irish colleagues with a broad accent calls me Ellen the eloquent e-learning leader. I'm not sure whether Paddy is poking fun at my complete immersion in e-learning, or if he is envious, or maybe he's just showing off his lovely lilt. I've always been attracted to the idea of using computers in learning. Makes sense to me. I've tried e-learning and it worked well for me. But that does not mean that it's everyone's cup of tea.

In the 80s' I was an instructional designer on CBT programs. In the 90's I helped developed several Web sites. And nine months ago, our organization asked me to accept the challenge of moving 20,000 employees into e-learning. It's complicated, confusing and sometimes frustrating. But I love the challenge. Most days it is my sense of humor that keeps me going. Here's a story of a typical day, telescoped; massaged and embellished a wee bit, to illustrate my points. Feel free to laugh at my jokes. They will help ease your anxiety about training in the New Economy. You say you're not anxious. If that's the case, keep this piece nearby. You might need it one day. But then again you might not if you manage carefully.

8:00 My email in-box bursts with e-learning news and other interesting New Economy information. Elliott Masie, Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, Fast Company newsletters, Learning Circuits, Online Learning and several vendors have

sent me their insight into the world of e-learning. College students get a reading week. Why not me? One week every two months should do the trick!

8:30 Piley, as I affectionately call my in-basket, is out of control. One company must have sent 10 conference announcements over the last month-for the same conference! Magazines. New magazines and advertising material seem to germinate in my in-basket, like alfalfa sprouts. I wish I had taken that speed-reading course when I had time! But what would be the advantage of reading faster? I'd simply fill my head with more marketing drivel. That's not completely fair, there's gold in my in-basket-but you need to prospect for it. And that takes time. A commodity that's in short supply in the New Economy.

8:45 My calendar is wall to wall meetings about-you guessed it! It started a year ago when someone let the e-learning genie out of the bottle. Will he be sucked back into his glass cage? What will the next trend be? W-learning, using wireless technology? S-learning, based on shareable learning objects. Or could it simply be 'learning' as we focus on the real issue of how to prepare people to function in the New Economy-or any economy.

9:30 Meeting about moving forward with e-learning. Flushed faces, piercing stares and thorny questions give me the sense that we are losing the support of the IT group-as if we ever had it. (And they are sitting at the far end of the table.) One minute they seem to prefer an ASP arrangement hosted on the service provider's server. The next minute it seems that a new in-house server would be the solution. The word bandwidth keeps popping up. Makes me think of a 70's band that has made a revival in a more corpulent form.

In contrast to our friends from the IT world, managers at our meeting are eager to move ahead with e-learning. One figures it will speed up the product development and sales cycle by providing her team with just-in-time information about new technologies. She wants to set up a Web site for a new product and get the information to all team members. A training manager wants to use e-learning to reduce cycle time. It now takes nine months to develop and roll out a new classroom-based course. By putting the material on the Web with streaming video, the learning materials can be developed and distributed in a matter of days.

One participant, a free agent learner, speaks enthusiastically of his experience with e-learning in another company. E-learning enabled him to learn a number of job skills that make him a valuable employee. I use IT and e-learning terms and concepts freely but sometimes I wonder if I really grasp them. After all, an Arts degree is not a great preparation for techie-talk. Words like bandwidth, firewall, and SCORM roll of my tongue, but am I using them correctly? Firewall makes me think of Dalmatians, LMS evokes thoughts of LSMFT and SCORM sounds like Desert Storm.

12:00 I need a break from e-learning and go for a long walk in the park. Sea lions, monkeys and artists provide a nice diversion and bring smiles to my face. Balance. That's what I need. How can I get it? My friend Terry has a solution. Calls it whole life coaching. Her coach keeps her focused on her dreams, professional and personal. Terry also gets plenty of healthy exercise and finds relaxation through message, yoga and meditation. Extreme self-care, she calls it.

1:30 Policy meeting to discuss the framework around e-learning. The implications are broad. What type of e-learning should our organization use: instructor led, self-paced, informal learning or electronic support tools? How do we decide which one to opt for? And blending? How is that done? How do you select the right blend of different types of e-learning? Even more challenging, what's the magic formula for blending conventional learning and e-learning? How to decide which existing courses are converted to e-learning? How to decide whether to make, buy or lease? When an employee decides to take a course, how is a selection made? Who pays? How? What are the hallmarks of success? How do you evaluate e-learning? Low dropout rates? Management. Project management. Change management, risk management. Who can I trust? Can I trust the research about e-learning that has been conducted in hi-tech firms, telling us that e-learning work? After all, many of them are vendors of product and services that support e-learning and they stand to benefit from an explosion in the use of e-learning?

None of these questions were on the radar screen a year ago. They are all hard to answer. We've decided to look for answers at conferences, in major reports and to bring in an independent consultant who has experience in this area. E-learning has merit, but it sure raises plenty of questions.

4:00 Meeting with Dawn, a lead instructor who has an aversion to e-learning. She can't understand how it will ever work. Dawn is fixated on the findings of the Forrester Report of August 2000 saying that some organizations reported dropout rates as high as 80%. I tell her that the high drop out rates don't matter. Maybe students got what they wanted and went back to their work to apply what they learned. They did not finish the e-learning course because they did not need the remaining information. And besides, we don't even know whether the courses were any good. Maybe students dropped out because of poor design, unclear content, and incompetent online instructors-if there were any. I tell Dawn that well designed courses will reduce dropping out. Sure hope I'm right. . .

Dawn needs some nurturing-but I prescribe books instead of TLC. (I don't have time to nurture.) Marc Rosenberg's book (e-Learning, Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age) contains a comprehensive overview of knowledge management and e-learning. Bill Horton's (Designing Web-based Training) examines a broad number of design issues. Gilly Salmon (E-Moderating, the Key to Online Teaching and Learning) gives solid advice about moderating online discussion. The Brandon Hall benchmarking study (e-Learning across the Enterprise, the Benchmarking Study of Best

Practices)" provides insight into lessons learned by early adopters. Dawn agrees to skim the books and reports, but I think that it is only a matter of time before she leaves our e-learning group. That's probably as it should be. There will always be a job for Dawn and other accomplished stand-up trainers, I'm thinking. There will always be conventional courses. Currently, over 70% of learning events rely on classroom instructors like Dawn.

4:30 Checking phone messages. All five deal with e-learning. One's from another LMS vendor. If I grant a meeting, this will make 12 vendors who have strutted their stuff. My boss has called. Needs a status report for senior management the day after tomorrow. (Senior management is hot to trot.) A colleague has called from Europe. The competition is using e-learning for client education. Do I have any ideas what we can do to catch up? Could I come to a meeting in Geneva next month to discuss? A freelance writer has called for an interview about rapid prototyping, the ISD death announcements and e-learning. A college classmate has asked for advice about how to get into e-learning.

6:00 I wind my way home. It's been a long day. Tomorrow promises to be just as tiring. Just as challenging. Just as frantic. Just as stimulating.

As cars whiz by I think of my grandfather's tales of the early automotive industry and a parallel with the e-learning sector. Carriage manufacturers launched car companies. There were car manufacturers with names like Chevrolet, Buick, Cord, Dort, Durant, McLaughlan, Moon, Nash, Olds, Pierce Arrow, Star, and Stanley Steamer. (Yes there were steam driven cars, just as there are e-learning technologies that don't survive.) William Durant organized many of these start-up manufacturers into General Motors.

I wonder whether the e-learning industry will take a page out of the car manufacturing industry? It could be easier for consumers if a large learning corporation, possibly called General Learning, grew out of the likes of Brainbench, Element K, eMind, ePath, gForce, Isopia, Mentergy, MindIQ, Peer3, Knowledge Quest, Knowledge Alliance, Knowledge Max, KnowledgeNet, KnowledgePlanet, Knowledge. Learn University, Learn2.com, Learnability, LearnEze, Learnframe, Learning Pays, Learning-Edge, LearningAction, LearningWare, Learnsoft, LearnStream, MindIQ, MindLeaders, MindLever, NETg, SkillSoft, SmartForce and ThinQ.

11:00 Lights out. I reach to set my clock radio. A flash back to a before-dawn encounter with the daunting Dylan diction. The Times they are a Changing. Maybe Dylan is right when he sings. "If your time to you is worth saving; Then you'd better start swimming or you'll sink like a stone; For the times, they are a changing."

Are you training professional, swimming in the New Economy? Concerned about your swimming ability, waves, the undertow, and sharks? Looking for a little help to ensure you don't drown? Here are the do and don'ts that

you may have learned about water safety when you started to swim. They also apply to your forays into e-learning.

Don't dive into deep, unknown water

When swimming in the ocean, check whether the tide is going in or out

Don't venture too far from shore

Consult others who have been in the same waters

Swim with a buddy just in case you run into problems

Above all, never swim alone

Being a training leader in the New Economy-like swimming-requires knowledge, skill, planning, teamwork and caution. Keep your wits about you and you will keep your head above water.

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