

How to fail at e-learning  
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Angst. Sweaty palms. Furrowed brows. E-learning engenders fear of failure. Implementing e-learning is not for the faint of heart. Cisco, one of the e-learning bright lights took five years and many false starts. With this backdrop, it is not surprising that e-learning actors are strutting carefully across their stage. They are trying to get the audience on their side. New training technology has not delivered the goods in the past. Audio cassettes never had a great market. Video-based training did not set the world on fire. And programmed instruction became the pet rock of the training world.

In the New Economy, today's jewels become tomorrow's jetsam. But e-learning can endure. The Internet makes the difference. Internet users realize that the world's libraries are now at our finger tips. Also, the Net's peer to peer communication possibilities are enormous. And huge amounts of bits and bytes can be moved around the world instantaneously. Napster proved that. But you can still fail with e-learning. For HR managers, training directors and consultants who are intent on failing here are a few tips. Of course ♦ if you would rather succeed. . . .

Think training: not business. The lack of a clear business focus can help you to fail. When the business reason is not clear then you will not have clear targets to shoot for when you develop materials. An example of a clear business objective could be to provide knowledge and skills to new sales reps so they make their first sale in four weeks not six, as it is now.

Promise the moon. This is a good way to help e-learning fail. E-learning is not a walk in the park. It requires people to learn in a new way, to teach in a new way, even to develop training in a new way. Making all these changes is complex. Consequently, there will be challenges. Setting expectations high, for example to plan to cut training costs by 50% immediately while maintaining training effectiveness, is a good way to undermine success.

Outsource everything. Hiring consultants or some sort of service provider to handle all of your e-learning needs is a splendid way to foster failure. Of course, these hired guns can provide substantial help and I can almost guarantee that you will benefit from outside help somewhere along the way. But you need to remain involved at every turn in the road. You need to be eternally vigilant about the offerings of consultants and service providers.

Let learners sort it out for themselves. You might be tempted to 'give e-learning a try'. Make it available and see if employees use it. Not a good idea! Because chance are folks won't use it. Sorry. That's the experience of organizations trying this laissez-faire

approach. It's clear, to implement e-learning successfully, you need a change management strategy. (It's true, you can't really 'manage' change, but you can smooth transitions.) You need to select your target groups, identify what they should be told about e-learning, figure out the most effective way to communicate with them and break the news.

Force e-learning on resisters. People who don't support e-learning will complicate your existence. You might be tempted to press on. Steam roll the bumps out of the road, as the saying goes. It might work at first. But a better, long-term strategy is to find out why people could push back. Seek ways to accommodate them. Help them to adjust to e-learning. It might be as simple as pairing up resisters with champions. If you fail to plan for resistance you are planning to fail.

Don't evaluate. Evaluation is never fun. First you have to plan it. And to plan an evaluation you need to know up front what you are trying to accomplish. More rigorous thinking! It's much easier to let it go. . . . People will tell you if e-learning has failed. N'est-ce pas? Do you really want your project to be evaluated by someone else's criteria? The point here is that if you do a serious evaluation you will know if you succeeded. You will be able to proclaim your success. Better yet, a good evaluation will give you hints for improving your e-learning program.

I hope I haven't given you a bad case of e-learning stage fright. Successful HR managers, training directors and consultants who guide e-learning know where they are going and how to get there. They succeed. They have fun. They put events and their personal actions in perspective. For, as Jacques tells us in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts." Find your roles. Play them well. Stay nimble. Enjoy. Bask in the limelight.

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