

## Interactive Learning Techniques - Improving Events

→ Organisations which are geographically dispersed face greater challenges than most. The simplest tasks of both communication and information sharing, which a centralised organisation takes for granted, can become enormous barriers to change and development for those spread across the country or internationally.

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It is commonly accepted that organisational change is continuously occurring at many levels within any organisation, both explicitly, through learning initiatives and changing work practices, and implicitly, through socialisation and culture. However when the departments, branches or individuals are scattered there is no way to implement smoothly, or measure the rate of this change across the realms. The organisation can quickly become out of sync.

To alleviate this dispersed organisations need to regularly bring people together either in

small groups or a company wide learning event, to re-sync and re-align values, vision and methods etc. It is an expensive hit and miss affair.

Consider a company with a number of different departments and branches, spread across various capital city and regional centres. To ensure consistency both in work practices and customer relations, it has been decided to bring everyone together for three days for a series of organised workshops and social events designed to re-sync the company vision. The secondary benefits of the meeting will be those of socialisation, camaraderie and renewed vigour and reinforcement of company culture.

The big weekend finally comes and staff fly in from all over the country to a centrally located resort for three days of work and play. The CEO is on hand, goals are set and everyone gets a say. A successful program the company has now repeated for three years. Finally everybody says their goodbyes and begins the journey home and back to the 'real' world.

Unfortunately the retention, goodwill and commitment to change generated by the learning event is in decline from the very day after it finishes. Within a week most of the emotion will have faded. Within a month

only some key messages will remain, but probably not the reasons for their importance. Within 3 months most people who collaborated, solved problems and created new models together will possibly not have spoken since the event and hence won't speak again until the next event. The result? Most of the value (and cost) of the learning event has been eroded to dust.

And there's the problem. How does the organisation not only sustain but actually increase the impetus to change and improvement which the physical learning event has set in train? How does it avoid annual cycles of learning, unlearning and re-learning which cost a small fortune? How does it implement a corporate communications strategy that will not end up as just more junk mail? This is where online and interactive

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learning techniques come to the fore. Most call it eLearning for short and while the use of information and communications technology to teach and stay in touch is not new, it is now a lot easier, far more cost effective and we have a much better idea of what does and doesn't work.

Simple eLearning techniques can be used to provide support to existing training and meetings or used for widespread distribution of new initiatives in such areas as sales training, changed work practices or compliance requirements etc. Using a combination of email, web and desktop applications new knowledge and skills can be quickly made available to all in the organisation. Even manual workers should be given easy and regular access to the company's 'knowledge'.

One very practical use of online technologies is to use them before, during and after a learning event to increase their effectiveness and improve the ROI.

This is achieved in several ways:

- Pre-event information and learning is provided to the work place via a web site and email. The participants turn up, turned on and tuned in to the event and the topics
- They could use more interactive learning tools rather than 'lecture and listen' in the event itself.
- They form an ongoing social and work related community who can communicate via email and web back in the workplace.

The flow for any learning event, whether the annual conference or a one off training class and workshop, can use this model to substantially increase its chances of success and retention of event objectives. Below is a sample design.

Step	Timing	Comments
Begin marketing to the target audience	4 weeks prior	Begin to 'sell' the event as early as possible to ensure buy-in from participants
Distribute learning materials	2 weeks prior	Allow time for the participants to be able to read and discuss the relevant materials
Administer the event	Ongoing	Use the web to handle all administrative tasks, registrations, travel etc.
The Event	The Event	Participants arrive primed and prepared for the event. Use technology to support the event.
Follow up plan starts	1 week after	Send list of attendees with contact info to all participants
Invite attendees to join a discussion group	2 weeks after	Distribute key findings, actions or follow up activities to group(s)
Continue to develop and add to the community	Ongoing	Track and support the community to develop purpose and camaraderie

## Summary

Online learning as both an alternative and support for learning events is a powerful cost-effective tool. It can greatly reduce the costs, enhance the quality and learning retention of these events as well as form the basis for a new information and knowledge sharing ethos in a dispersed organisation.

While the ROI of such an investment is usually focussed on the cost-savings these will diminish fairly quickly. True ROI is gained from an integrated approach with the tangible and intangible gains in knowledge, skills, and other factors contributing to profitability and a healthy balance sheet. **x**

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