

From e2i

Learning for the Information Age Business

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Age model**

eLearning has a bright future. Yet if you are considering investing in eLearning this year to train your staff, reach more students or inform your customers, you need to be wary of paying for Industrial Age technology when what you could actually be seeking is an Information Age solution.

The focus in eLearning to date has been misplaced. The 'e' is a euphemism for technology. The emphasis on the 'e' has limited its widespread acceptance and usage beyond its darling market of both the technology and education sectors who have to date been the largest beneficiaries of eLearning. This has led to technologies and media such as CD-ROM and satellite broadcasts of classroom lectures being described as eLearning. These are neither interactive, immediate nor individual and hence would not come under my stricter definition of eLearning. A new definition based on the future rather than the past is required.

The education and training sectors are still anchored in an Industrial Age model which focussed on just-in-case learning, one-size-fits-all

courses and teacher-knows-best instruction! eLearning has not fundamentally altered that model. An Information Age model would concentrate on just-in-time and personalised learning, and an environment where the student or customer can conceptualise and construct their own knowledge.

And the technology? Well, Michael Porter of Harvard Business School fame considers that one of the main business outcomes of using Internet technology to date has been "to shift the basis of competition away from quality, features and service and toward price."

Hence the Internet has been delivering success to mainly transaction-based companies selling CDs, books, tickets, courses, financial transactions and so on, cheaper and faster. So we have concentrated on the medium and not fundamentally changed the nature of the service. This may well be the natural order of things as we need to build tracks before rail services, and digital networks before integrated services.

However, as any good salesperson of complex products and services knows, there is far more value in listening than talking. So an e-commerce system can make the transaction but it can't make the sale. A learning management system can enrol a student but it can't teach or mentor. An online banking system can move money but it can't give personal financial advice. Hence we need to shift our system design from transaction to interaction and provide commodities of immediacy and individualization. Transactions are faceless, interactions are not.

Porter also states that organizations have no choice but to deploy Internet technology for their existence, since it provides "better opportunities for companies to establish distinctive strategic positioning than did previous generations of information technology". Transaction systems are necessary but they are simply foundations for the new wave of services which must come next to provide that strategic positioning. And already just web is not enough as the technology sector has a knack of reinventing itself and moving on to the 'next big thing', read wireless.

Many organisations will use strategies other than lowest cost for providing greater value to their customers, shareholders and public, strategies such as differentiation and/or increased focus. These are strategies that require more interaction as well as transaction. Yet to date they have not utilised the Internet as a means of doing this in great numbers. This is where eLearning can break free of its industrial roots and where its foundation in learning psychology and practice can be used for new services, possibly better utilised by the marketing department than the training department. But not in its current form.

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So if not the emphasis on the 'e' what then? Well just to stir the pot a little (and with my tongue only slightly in cheek) I am suggesting a new model of iLearning where the 'i' stands for individual,

interaction, immediacy, intelligence, information and any other relevant 'i' words which emphasise the action and effect of the learning as opposed to the delivery medium. I'm sure you can think of a few more.

The beauty about naming something is that it allows you to move on and build it as opposed to just imagining it. iLearning is an interventionist way of thinking designed to help build better outcomes for organisations via improving their people, products and practices. iLearning will not replace eLearning, rather it will supersede it.

eLearning is one of the best things to come out of the Industrial Age - a genuine bridge to a vision of 'anywhere, anytime learning'. To use Geoffrey Moore's words eLearning is still "crossing the chasm" from a limited audience of early adopters (who are

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t y p i c a l l y apologists for the technology) to the more cynical majority. Its method of crossing will define its future.

eLearning has

certainly lowered costs of delivering existing course-based education products. However iLearning will shift that initial focus of simply more convenience for existing practices to one of improved practices and new opportunities and hence gain wider acceptance.

eLearning in its present form will stagnate in a self-limiting market. To cross the chasm will require adding to the early adopter audience typified by advocates of technology who are tech savvy, formally educated and time poor, to an audience typified by an indifference to technology with little reliance on formal learning and a reluctance to invest time and money. This latter audience is found beyond universities, colleges and corporations, in shopping malls, on the beach, at the football, on the hospital ward, driving trucks, in the orchard and at home.

They are less interested in a Masters of e-Commerce than with understanding the daily financial and legal aspects of running a small business and balancing the household budget. They also want systems that aim to understand the business of the learner.

New technology, new business, new purpose

iLearning envisages an audience beyond the cliché of man/woman at desk, an audience who typically will not be introduced to the widespread use of information technology through an arcane and over-priced desktop computer. Computers are useful for digital content developers. They are less useful for digital content users on the move. In 2003 sales of laptop computers have overtaken desktop computers. How long before personal digital assistants (PDA) fully merged with telephony will dominate? They will be integrated into dashboards, point of sale terminals, airline seats, converged with television and yes even the fridge. Humans love to communicate. The irony is that the more transparent we can make the technology in that process the more successful that technology will be. These information age devices will not require knowledge of Microsoft anything! They will require true Information Age services, not re-badged Industrial Age eLearning courses or static web sites. iLearning will be a dominant medium for those services for a number of reasons.

- iLearning is integrated. iLearning will be seen as an integrated component of a work process as opposed to a discrete and separate element. Just enough and just-in-time information and learning are all you require in the workplace, supermarket and home when your goal is to get things done.
- iLearning is immediate. One of the goals of eLearning has been to shorten the distance and time between the learning event and the application of that learning yet they are still typically separate events. iLearning will focus on learning and application as a simultaneous

event – this is real time.

- iLearning is a coaching not a teaching tool. The learner should be in the driver's seat, the coach nearby. For example in using iLearning to evaluate a new investment opportunity you would provide and receive raw data, apply risk analysis metrics to it, evaluate the outcome against the 100 year market index and ask for a recommendation. Hence the application would work with you to reach an outcome today, as opposed to forcing you through an MBA and a glossary of mind numbing jargon.
- iLearning is individual. While one-size-fits-all lowers cost for a content developer it decreases compatibility for a learner or end user. The system should conform to your needs not the opposite. For example, iLearning would use data and codified knowledge to help you with your wellbeing - financial, physical and emotional if need be. However it would not only teach you about wellbeing, it may also attempt to coach you in the maintenance of your wellbeing, perhaps based on regular data from your financial advisor, doctor and shrink. So it would be more personal and less hit and miss.
- iLearning is a marketing tool. Relationship marketing is beginning to get truly personal after being only pseudo-personal for some time. iLearning would allow people to engage with and tune the marketing message to their needs
- iLearning is intelligent. Based upon semantic Web Services iLearning can be designed with built-in redundancy and methods for updating structured data so the content is always current. It is intelligent and dynamic not dumb and static.
- iLearning is incessant. That is new applications will themselves be designed to continually learn and adapt, to either the information being presented or the user

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requirements. These applications would use 'action learning' principles to continually assess and update the foundation knowledge.

- iLearning is lightweight. iLearning systems are a dynamic tool for gathering and presenting data, turning it into information and finally, in conjunction with a human being, building knowledge. It will utilise mobile wireless technologies more than heavy bandwidth office technologies. Hence it will increasingly be used by people on the move.
- iLearning is liquid. Big eLearning objects such as courses are often too large and too general to be of immediate use. iLearning is also based on learning objects, (self-contained lessons) but much smaller ones. The smaller a granule in any substance the easier that substance flows (think of sand vs boulders) and so iLearning can flow into and fill the nooks and crannies of knowledge faster, when and where it is needed.
- iLearning is about interaction. Interaction between people, people and systems and people supported by systems. That may take many forms. The current broadcast and publishing forms are not interactive and offer only half the story since they render the recipients passive and voiceless. As Pine and Gilmore pointed out in the "Experience Economy", people want to be involved in the experience, which means they want both interaction and control.
- iLearning is about interaction design. Instructional designers will need to radically readjust their methods, integrate them with

business systems and learn interaction design based on Alan Cooper's 'persona' – where you "define functionality to satisfy the goals of a real person or role, rather than an abstract notion of 'the user'."

Putting iLearning to work

So for what sectors and under what conditions is iLearning best suited? Before you commit your hard-earned cash to an online learning strategy the first question to ask is what shall the business strategy be - e and transaction-based or i and interaction-based. A low cost business strategy could suggest eLearning while a differentiation or focus strategy might suggest iLearning. Some may need both. As nurses for example take on a wider variety of duties they will need to continually and often immediately supplant their core knowledge and training with new knowledge and practices. Existing education systems would struggle to achieve this dynamic requirement in any sort of reliable and risk-free manner.

While the education sector has been quick to deploy eLearning the universities have still not delivered on the promise of shorter, more focussed and less expensive courses. Why not? Because this would impact too heavily on an already successful business model of full service courses and, in most parts of the world as higher education moves away from protectionist policy, full fees. Further the change from one-size-fits-all publishing and development would totally disrupt their current work practices. This ultimately limits their existing market and their ability to serve emerging markets leaving room for competition by private providers which further threatens them.

The corporate sector has been more inventive with eLearning with many success stories around the lowering of the cost of training. Yet the other strengths - rapid deployment of information, product promotion and education to staff and customers - have been less widespread. This is possibly due to organisational learning being seen as a Human Resources (HR) cost rather than a business wide marketing and

relationship investment, for staff, customers and shareholders. However a newer approach to relationship marketing, customer education and real-time learning will see more innovation. Hence the alignment of business objectives with either marketing or learning and development strategy is critical for any iLearning program's success.

The real home for iLearning may well lie in the commercial and retail sectors and for small to

medium enterprises which traditionally don't have formal education and information systems running through the organisation. These audiences have so far found themselves on the outer of the Internet revolution since they would have seen little return on technology investment in many parts of their business. They are however increasing their consumption of training and advisory services and are prepared to mix digital with analogue work practices. Any people-focussed business is the perfect environment to combine the power of online, just-in-time systems with the warmth and personalization of the employee who can apply a little Emotional Intelligence (EI) to the customer relationship supported by accurate and immediate data. Even the banks have let the machines take over the transactions and put the humans back to carry out the interactions.

Workplace training and eLearning have helped reduce the 'learning to application time' yet it is still often reactive as opposed to proactive. For example what if your organisation is not large enough for a dedicated training officer yet you are concerned about high staff turnover? Analysis may reveal a lack of proper induction training and follow up since most induction is one-off and out of context. This could be alleviated by the custom development of some quality online learning modules combined with an integrated online employee support forum that was continuously available to staff. An iLearning model would aim to enhance and provide information and

training in a continuous mode, just-in-time out to the fleet and store, to the franchisee or to the customer, via wired and wireless networks. This like many other learning opportunities can be embedded in the workflow rather than delivered in the traditional 'sheep-dip' methods. You need the intelligence attached, not left behind in the classroom.

In the commercial and retail sectors there is a shift from simply informing customers, partners and franchisees to

educating them about your products, services and other organisational initiatives. Educating customers increases their loyalty and brand allegiance which in turn lowers cost of sales and increases yield. Providing better presented and more relevant information at the point of sale increases competitive advantage over similar outlets and products with no such value-add.

Summary

The term iLearning is not some cute and pedantic semantic but a genuine attempt to shift the argument from the current technology focus back on to learning. eLearning will continue its current success as it serves the transaction model well. However iLearning will supersede eLearning as the dual factors of increased mobility and the desire for truly personalised services increases at all stages of the supply chain.

When we bear this in mind we can expand our current horizons and use iLearning principles for organisations who have customers rather than students, who provide personalized learning services rather than courses and who want to encourage an informed and loyal client base for their organisation through powerful marketing and communication strategies. This is where iLearning can really shine and deliver value.

iLearning can not be bought in a box. Its tools of trade are analysis, consultation and a design which keeps the business, purpose, technology and people

**Any people-focussed business
is the perfect environment
for iLearning**

Summary

needs in mind simultaneously. It is an integrated approach, utilising technology, not existing merely because of it.

iLearning is perhaps the best business tool to come along since the calculator. In the initial shift from the physical marketplace to

online technologies we gained enormous scale yet simultaneously lost personalization through the reduced ability to communicate with our staff and customers. iLearning is a means for us to restore those relationships. ☒

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Redbean Learning Solutions is an international learning and development organisation specialising in the design, development and implementation of online learning programs. Redbean can provide better business outcomes for your organisation through an independent and objective approach to helping improve your people, product and practices.

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