



# PATHWAYS

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## Focus:

### Using eLearning to Advantage

More and more organizations today are considering the potential of eLearning as an alternative means of growing and maintaining the knowledge and skills of their employees, third-party vendors, customers, and product users.

***eLearning can be defined** briefly as the use of the Internet and/or proprietary intranets to deliver, administer, and measure the effectiveness of training, instruction, and information dissemination. It can be an alternative delivery system or supplemental support to more traditional instructional systems such as the classroom, computer-based training, print self-study, and the like.*

To ensure success, it is important that organizations understand both the capabilities and the limitations of eLearning. Because development budgets are limited it is equally important that eLearning planners and developers become acquainted with successful eLearning applications, rather than start blind and from scratch.

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## AT ISSUE:

### eLearning - Some Real Experiences and Lessons Learned

eLearning is one of many education/training delivery system alternatives to classroom instruction. The Internet has made it possible to develop knowledge and skills and to deliver information with a degree of efficiency not often possible with traditional classroom instruction. It can reduce or eliminate such constraints associated with classroom instruction as:

- class scheduling,
- instructor staffing,
- student travel and lodging,
- time away from the job
- training materials reproduction, distribution, and inventory maintenance

#### Trade-offs and Constraints of eLearning

Needless to say, like other delivery systems, eLearning has its constraints and trade-offs. Some of the key constraints to consider are:

##### ■ Level of Interactivity

Clearly, a higher level of interactivity is possible than the "page turning" so typical of early applications of eLearning. But, seldom is it possible to achieve a level of highly-adaptive interpersonal interactivity akin to that which can be provided by a live, classroom instructor/facilitator. Some interactivity options that work well with eLearning applications include:

- interactive question/answer sessions
- multiple choice quizzes and tests
- user-controlled branching options
- on-line demonstrations and presentations

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### ■ Face-to-face Interactivity

Some face-to-face interactivity is possible using eLearning facilities - for instance teleconferencing and on-line discussions. However, other connectivity issues often come to bear in such applications. Sessions must be scheduled in advance and are impacted by time-zone differences among participants.

### ■ Bandwidth

Simply stated, bandwidth refers to the rate at which the user's Internet connection can transmit (upload) and receive (download) information. In designing an eLearning application, the temptation is to exploit every "bell and whistle" possible. For example, "movies" are possible using a technique called streaming video. But, if the user does not have sufficient bandwidth, downloading and display can cause awkward pauses that may make the movie presentation jerky. Each eLearning method that developers contemplate should take into consideration the bandwidth connectivity available to their end users.

### ■ Infrastructure Support

Like any other delivery system, eLearning requires a certain investment in hardware, software, and support staff. While much of

the hardware/software investment may already have been committed as part of the organization's existing Internet or intranet facility, there remains the need for ongoing investments in support resources to develop and maintain eLearning components. Out-of-date or "buggy" eLearning materials are worse than none at all.

### ■ User Environment and Level of Technical Sophistication

In some organizations and situations, users may need to access eLearning components in a hotel, from within a customer intranet, or from home. They may also wish to study in their car, on an airplane, or in other locations where it is difficult or impossible to be connected to the Net.

In some organizations, eLearning may be an employee's first introduction to the Internet. If eLearning developers are not careful, they may find that the capability of the technology far exceeds the capability of most users to deal with it.

### Some Real eLearning Applications

With these typical constraints in mind, let's now look at how some organizations have adapted eLearning capability to address their unique business needs. We'll look at actual eLearning implementations for two large, multinational organizations.

### Corporate Sales Training/Marketing/ Kit

An international manufacturer faced the need to create and maintain a consistent product knowledge base among its internal and business partner staff worldwide. Salespeople were frustrated by the lack of current product data or easy-to-use, accessible marketing tools. Sales management wanted a rapid, consistent method of relating new product capabilities and sales techniques to the sales force.

The organization created an Internet-/intranet-based solution which takes the form of a corporate sales training/marketing kit. Some interesting features of the kit include:

- Streaming video of executive presentations about the new products
  - On-line graphic presentations of functions, features, and benefits
- These presentations have dual use - for user learning and subsequently for customer presentations.
- Interactive self-check quizzes to confirm understanding
  - Talk-track scripts tied directly to phases of the sales cycle
  - On-line demos which the sales staff can customize for individual clients
  - Return-on-investment estimators
  - Hyperlinks to available technical support documents and websites

- Download/printout capabilities for all key sales kit components

The developers took into consideration the bandwidth limitations many of their users faced by providing three download compression options for streaming video.

**User Response:** In the past, the sales organization faced resistance to classroom and self-study delivery methods. They typically objected to time out of the field, untimeliness in the availability of support tools, and, often, the inaccessibility of up-to-date data. Acceptance of the eLearning marketing/sales kit has been almost universally positive.

### ***Employee Knowledge/Skill Support Program***

A global business organization faced a growing problem: due to the far-flung nature of its employees, its wide range of service offerings, and the constant growth and change throughout the organization, it was becoming increasingly difficult to:

- Keep key employees abreast of changes within the organization
- Efficiently share new, more effective tools and methods
- Make training and tools available "just in time" ... just when staff needed such support.

The organization turned to eLearning capabilities to address these problems. They implemented three on-line facilities:

- **An annual information update** that permits (and requires) key employees to check in annually, but within the constraints of their personal work schedules, to learn:

- What's new
- What's changed
- What's mission-critical

The employees are expected to complete this short offering annually as part of a requirement for staying current within their job category.

Presentation methods include brief video clips and text/graphics screens. The videos are used to introduce a topic and to provide overviews. For employees who are non-native English speakers, the script of the videos can be viewed as "crawl text" at the bottom of the screen. Text/graphics screens provide more detailed information.

- **A documents/tools repository** that provides Internet/intranet access to a worldwide knowledge management database. Employees access and share a worldwide repository of the most current methodologies, tools, and deliverables "shells."

- **An Employee Knowledge/Skills Library** that permits employees to access support when they need it. The library contains:

- On-line job support tools such as task checklists
- On-line training directly related to each assigned task

### **Employee Response:**

Employees throughout the organization have found these eLearning facilities an effective response to their past requests for better sharing of methodologies and tools. They appreciate the ability to 1) learn a task, 2) practice the task, and then 3) apply this just-in-time instruction to immediate job needs.

The developers took into consideration the bandwidth limitations faced by employees in various countries by resorting to a dual track for distributing many of the tools and presentations. Users with adequate bandwidth can access them on-line, while those with limited bandwidth can order them on CD-ROMs or download local copies to their own systems.

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To make most effective use of eLearning, education/training developers and administrators need to recognize and accept the trade-offs of eLearning as well as its advantages.

In this issue of Pathways we look at several successful eLearning applications. Our intent is to show how and why some organizations have made good use of eLearning capabilities.



John C. Wills  
President/CEO

**At Issue** from page 3**In summary - Lessons Learned**

Successful eLearning implementers are those who follow the tried and true approaches:

- Understand user needs,
- Establish goals and objectives,
- Identify constraints, then
- Design to fit.

In each of the examples we presented, the organization analyzed their unique needs, goals, and constraints - then took advantage of Internet/ intranet capabilities to integrate eLearning with job performance support tool delivery. By doing so they reinforce the close relationship that should optimally exist between just-in-time training and its real world application.



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*To ensure success, it is important that organizations understand both the capabilities and limitations of eLearning.*

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