



OPTIMISING LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT WITH TECHNOLOGY – THE TIME IS NOW

ABSTRACT

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Technology based training is nothing new but the tools and techniques we now use are considerably evolved compared to decades ago. Since its early days in the 1970s technology based training has provided a flexible and cost-effective way of meeting people's re-skilling objectives. Under recent conditions, with most of the population working from home due to COVID-19, it has become an essential component in business continuity. Early on, technology based training was largely undertaken by computer to enable learning to take place by CD-Rom with the computer standing in for a teacher. As computers have evolved to link with video and communication technology, such as smart phones and tablets, learning opportunities have expanded. As a result today it's also possible to train via new channels such as social media at any time and on the move. Given this shift into a more expansive digital realm, we now talk today of 'e-learning.'

What is e-learning?

According to Clive Shepherd, the guru of e-learning, the term was first coined in October 1999 in a seminar run by a company called CBT Systems. The 'e' is, of course, 'electronic' but the term covers any training delivered online over the internet, whether by computer or another device.

e-Learning is a means of delivering self-paced lessons to individual learners and has a lot of potential benefits. It has yet to be fully optimised and is often unfairly disliked, as a result of being used in rather dull ways to deliver mandatory training, such as Anti-Money Laundering sessions. Reliance to some degree on self-study has also presented a challenge. Most of us like to get together with peers and experts to discuss things, which is why face-to-face training has long endured.

Evolution since 2008

While face-to-face training allows for this engagement, it is expensive, not just in terms of the fee paid to attend but the on-costs of travel and time out of the office. With the financial crisis in 2008 putting budgets under huge pressure, a training hybrid emerged: the webinar. This gave the practitioner an opportunity to learn over the internet synchronously with other like-minded people who could ask the presenter questions and receive live feedback. The participants were not 'alone' unless they chose to listen asynchronously to a recording.

Since 2010, a rise in the popularity of webinars has been marked by a similarly sized downturn in face-to-face training. There has also been an increase in the use of pre-recorded training and, as a result, a drop in social participation.

The impact of COVID-19

The pandemic has meant most practitioners are – or have been - working from home in self-isolation. Technology has provided the only real way to ensure business continuity. To attend team meetings as well as undertake client meetings, practitioners have had to get familiar with video streaming tools, for example, and make full use of social media to keep in touch and up to date. The silver lining for the training world is the more open minded approach that many now have towards virtual working and learning and a new willingness to embrace digital tools. This has the potential to benefit firms in a big way when it comes to optimising training spend.

For those of us who can see the potential in learning via technology this is a significant obstacle already overcome. It will allow greater flexibility for trainers, both in supporting learners to learn at their own pace in small chunks for those who like self-study and also having the joy of participating in discussions at intervals.

In other words, it has opened the door to broader acceptance of a blend of learning opportunities.

Blended learning

The best learning for a person or a firm is one that is efficient, effective and fits within the firm's culture. This means if a firm is now willing to engage over the internet and not just with a webinar then the blend can be designed to find the right balance to help people learn.

Technically, learning is what learners do after a training session – the trainer provides the tools to help the learner and the learner uses those tools and their experience at work - and generally - to learn and develop.

Blended learning design has a number of key advantages:

- **No geographic limits.** Blended learning means being able to learn and interact with those in other offices or locations across the country. Webinars can be attended by practitioners anywhere but you could have one just for your firm. A broader, blended

learning programme can bring together a cross office team or create content for specific individuals or management.

- **Scheduling flexibility.** This approach to learning offers a choice over when to engage with content – it does not all have to be undertaken at the same time or the same pace. This could be useful for new learners like trainees, for example, who might want to get up to speed quickly by undertaking a whole programme. It would also benefit a practitioner who just wants to revise one particular topic or module.
- **Accessibility.** Content can be viewed and reviewed multiple times and is accessible from multiple devices, including when on the move.
- **Versatile learning.** There are options to investigate the content in different ways, experiment and practice using the content to get the most from it.
- **Internal collaboration.** Blended learning enables reflection on, and discussion of, the content with others, opening the door to greater collaboration, which can be so helpful in a firm. For example, a senior practitioner can share specific cases as illustrations of how the current learning topic has been applied in practice.
- **Upskilling.** Blended learning provides an opportunity to upskill the firm's knowledge and understanding of specific subjects in a bespoke way.

Business objectives

Currently, operational and financial considerations are dominating many firm agendas. However, as restrictions are gradually eased, key business questions will once again become pressing, including the following:

- What does the business need to do to increase client loyalty?
- How do we improve both our service delivery and our efficiency?
- Do we have the right talent in place to take the firm forward?
- How do we ensure our firm is compliant?
- How can blended learning solutions help practitioners to do their jobs better?

At least part of the answer to many of these questions lies in high quality, firm-wide learning.

Working with a trainer like LawSkills

Partnering with a trainer adept in the use of technology for learning delivery ensures standards of quality, a comprehensive bespoke learning structure and measurable ROI. At LawSkills we would begin by analysing current learning requirements that are specific to the

firm. For example, the goal might be to upskill a team of practitioners in the run up to the retirement of the senior partner. With this objective in mind we would ask the following:

- What are the required outcomes of the learning? In the example, it might be to ensure the remaining team are still able to service the firm's clients to the same standard, or better, in the absence of the experienced practitioner.
- Who requires these outcomes? Here, we would identify all the stakeholders, from clients to partners and staff in the firm.
- Why are the outcomes important? Obvious answers include to avoid losing valued clients and maintain a robust reputation.
- When do the target audience need to have the capability? By the time the senior partner retires.
- Where will the target audience apply the outcome? E.g. with law in the UK being fragmented across the devolved jurisdictions the outcome may be required for England, Scotland, Wales or a combination of these.
- How will the stakeholders identify that outcomes have been achieved? This could entail, for example, client presentations delivered in-house by the target audience to demonstrate they are equipped to take over from the retiring senior partner, particularly if s/he endorses them.

After learning requirements have been analysed, at LawSkills we would then go on to design a learning strategy. This entails looking at different training methods and where each would be appropriate in the learning journey. For example, we might start by providing essential information or encouraging the learner to gather the information themselves based on their existing knowledge. We may look at how to expand knowledge from existing expertise to ancillary practice areas that may be useful but have been viewed as non-essential - this can be done by providing further opportunities for research or offering practical exercises that could be applied back at the desk. It may be necessary to examine how to apply the learning at the moment of need on a file and whether, in light of that experience, further resources may be needed to support the participant, such as work aids. A learning strategy will also include stages designed to encourage shared reflections of what has been learned and what was most useful, as well as a review of the methods used by enabling discussions between learners and managers with managers giving support in the workplace.

The last stage in this process is selecting the right media to support each of the chosen delivery methods. This will depend on preferences as well as resources available. For example:

- Webinars and word documents. These are particularly useful at the gathering information stage.
- Videos, a curated list of follow up articles, websites and podcasts. These can be used to expand on existing knowledge by designing different modules for different levels of learning.
- Virtual meetings. This type of media comes into play in the exercise or practice phase, enabling the sharing of experiences and working on case studies or exercises, helping to pull out problem areas and internal solutions.

The application of the learning to the tasks on the desk will be supervised by line managers and feedback given. A virtual meeting can then act as a place for facilitated discussion to identify what worked well and what did not work so well or where there are further needs.

Final review by the line manager will produce tools that can be shared, as well as identifying coaching needs and plans for the future. This can be done by a virtual one-on-one meeting or a telephone call or even instant messaging if a face-to-face meeting is not practical.

The way forward

e-learning provides opportunities to continue learning and development to keep teams competent and compliant, even when budgets are tight. This technology we've all suddenly become very familiar with in a time of crisis can be optimised to achieve learning and business objectives in calmer times too. From one-to-one coaching for team leaders via Skype, Zoom, Webex etc to enhancing trainee learning via media that younger generations identify with there are now many opportunities for progress. As artificial intelligence and virtual reality are integrated into this field it will expand even more, providing better options for containing costs and improving engagement, knowledge retention and outcomes. A blended learning approach can utilise all the relevant tools for the different parts of the learning journey for your team wherever the need is greatest, either over the short or long-term, in times of crisis or calm. It's an incredibly versatile tool that many firms are only just waking up to the benefits of.

Interested in finding out more?

If you would like to find out more about how LawSkills can help you optimise the learning needs for your team by using technology, please contact Gill.Steel@lawskills.co.uk.