

Time Matters and Profit Returns: Implementing the Right eLearning Platform

by Jay Cross, Internet Time Group

About Jay Cross

Jay Cross is a pioneer in technology-based learning, an innovative problem-solver and an imaginative information architect. He is founder of Internet Time Group. He is also CEO of eLearning Forum, the eLearning think tank and advocacy organization. He is webmaster at www.internettime.com, one of the most widely consulted eLearning sites on the web. Jay advised CBT Systems on its transformation into SmartForce, the eLearning Company. He helped Cisco bring its eLearning partners on stream. As EVP of Omega Performance, he helped more than a million customer-facing professionals learn to make sound decisions and sell financial services. He designed the first business curriculum for the University of Phoenix, a series of workshops and simulations to teach finance, marketing, international business, organizational behavior, and management science at the university level. Jay has managed software start-ups and sold mainframes. He holds a BA from Princeton University and an MBA from Harvard Business School.

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A professor who knows me as CEO of eLearning Forum recently asked which vendor offers the best eLearning. I responded by asking her, "Which is better, Harvard or MIT?" She told me that depended on whether one wanted to study philosophy or rocket science. I said you've got to look at eLearning in light of what you're trying to accomplish, too. One size does not fit all.

Some organizations need an enterprise-wide human capital management system that seamlessly interfaces with their ERP platform, maintains competency profiles on all personnel, and correlates career development with on-job performance. Others simply want to solve a business problem.

This paper looks at a can-do eLearning platform that gets the job done rapidly without superfluous bells, whistles and chrome. The X.HLP Adaptive Learning Platform was developed in Scandinavia to meet the learning needs of Royal Dutch Shell, Danisco, NetCom, and TDC (formerly Tele Danmark Corporation). X.HLP recently entered the U.S. market. Think of it as a stripped down racecar amid a field of family sedans.

Busting myths

All of my fellow eLearning gurus will tell you that learning is the important part of eLearning, not the "e." I say, "Balderdash!" (Not an exact quote.) What's really important is **doing**. If an organization's people perform proficiently, it matters not whether they learned how in a course, on a prior job, or by meditating in a cave.

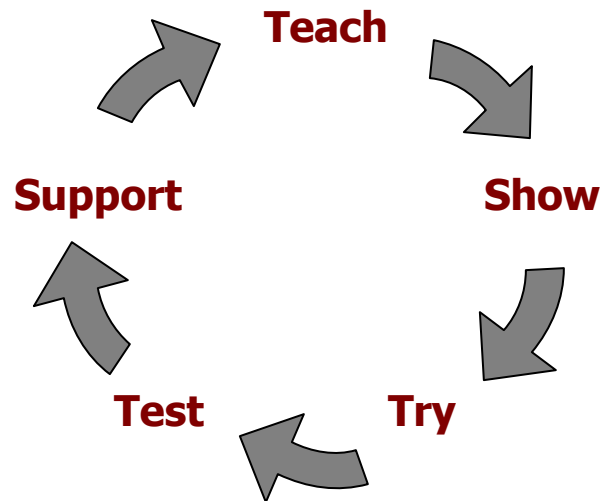
Some eLearning platforms are like Swiss Army knives. They come with tools to do almost anything imaginable. Don't get me wrong, I love my Swiss Army knife and keep it with me all the time. But if I want to cut lumber, I'm not going to use the 3" saw blade on my pocketknife. Better to use a tool designed for my purpose, for instance, my power saw. X.HLP is the power saw of software application skills training.

A long-time trainer told me, "This eLearning stuff is great for IT and hard skills but doesn't work for soft skills." Okay, believe what you will, but don't use it as a blanket indictment of eLearning. Instead, apply eLearning only to hard skills. That's still a major concern for most businesses today.

A stand-up instructor told me, "eLearning will never be as effective as the classroom," and I replied, "Thank God for that." Since most of us warmed the

seats of classrooms for sixteen or more formative years, we think class is how we got where we are rather than what was holding us back from becoming what we might have been. Truth be told, classroom learning is horribly ineffective, unless you're teaching unquestioning obedience and short-term memory skills.

People learn from engagement, not spoon-feeding and exposure. There are numerous effective process models of adult learning. The X.HLP model is as good as any and even better, their methodology is directly supported by their products and services:



The X.HLP Knowledge Transfer Methodology

While many vendors, X.HLP among them, have hopped on the bandwagon that celebrates the term “blended” I find the word useless. There’s nothing new here. Classroom teachers have always blended their methods – lecture, discussion, practice, reading, projects, and writing, for example. Blended is only a revelation to people who had been trying to do everything with just one tool – usually the computer. The rest of us have always tried to use the right tool for the job.

Time Matters

While training directors may have different objectives from CEOs, everyone in today’s business world shares one need: they want it all **now**. Benefits you don’t see for two years are hardly benefits at all. Given enough time, a million monkeys at a million terminals could develop your entire curriculum, with Flash animations and a repository of SCORM-compliant objects. Nobody’s got time to wait.

The appropriate time metric for most eLearning is time-to-proficiency. How long will it be until your people are performing competently? By competent, I mean able to meet or exceed the expectations of customers, be they internal or external to the organization.

Time-to-proficiency depends on a multitude of factors. Before the first learner enters the system comes prep time:

- Time to assess needs and specify solutions
- Time to hire or train development staff
- Time to create new lessons or repurpose existing ones
- Time to implement technical infrastructure
- Time to make sure all the parts work together
- Time to publish, often a combination of print, CD, and web

Then there's time spent learning.

- Time to access the lessons
- Time in self study
- Time in practice
- Time for proficiency testing
- Time for reinforcement

Timing is perpetually traded off with breadth and cost. A Fortune 100 company can justify investing years to develop its in-house corporate university. The typical X.HLP client is more impatient for results. (Although Shell chose X.HLP for its corporate university because it did not have the luxury of years to wait.)

Here are some of the ways I've seen X.HLP accelerate the delivery of results with its small-is-beautiful approach:

- X.HLP helps clients assess needs and focus on specific outcomes
- Existing staff can learn (and make full use of) the X.HLP drag-and-drop, user-friendly authoring component in 48 hours or less.
- Subject matter experts can create new lessons directly, without losing time and meaning in translation to instructional programmers.
- The X.HLP Adaptive Learning Platform integrates development and delivery of tutorials, performance checks, on-demand help, call center assistance, simulations, testing, and post-training support guidance. These components already work in harmony, obviating the need to jury-rig interfaces.
- The X.HLP object structure makes it easy to clone existing content rather than reinventing it continually.
- X.HLP lessons may be offered on the Web or on CD, optimizing the time required for a learner to participate in the program
- X.HLP builds in proficiency testing and on-job reinforcement, speeding up learning and cutting time-to-proficiency

eLearning is a business tool. Its appropriate metrics are business metrics. Business metrics always include a completion date. Astute corporations don't buy over-engineered solutions. Caveat emptor. Don't buy what's hip. Buy what you need to improve *your* business

Evaluate your investment in eLearning with metrics tied directly to *your* business strategy.

Metrics

Most people who discuss the ROI of eLearning are talking through their hats.

ROI is often a mask for uncertainty or an attempt to quantify cost/benefit with accounting principles that don't count people as assets. The business return on eLearning investment should be so obvious that you can figure it out on the back of a napkin.

Traditionally, training and HR managers are assumed to have little or no impact on revenue, so they measure benefits in terms of cost savings. This works against eLearning, where increases in top-line revenue generally exceed reduced expenses by a wide margin.

For example, I heard someone at a recent conference brag that, "eLearning for our sales force is going to save our company \$3 million in travel costs annually," to which I replied, "That's not the best part." Assume that it used to cost \$1500 per sales person to attend the annual sales training session, and an attendee's sales quota is \$2,000,000 a year. Any sales person will tell you that attending a conference wipes out at least three selling days – there's travel to and fro, the wasted time at the meeting, and the general disruption of getting ready and later dealing with the mountain of email and phone messages that piled up while away. Given that there are about 200 useful selling days in a year, each day out of the field is \$10,000 in lost revenue. The lost opportunity of three days of travel and waste is \$30,000 revenue. What's the margin on that? At least double the out-of-pocket travel savings.

ROI or cost/benefit analysis is relative, not some absolute value like the speed of light used to be. Where you stand depends upon where you sit. CEOs don't care about learning objects or LMS. Line managers focus on the performance of their unit, not the overall corporation. Training directors don't allocate resources to business transformation. Aren't the items on the next page the interests of various individuals in your organization?

<p>CEO</p> <p>Transform the business Recruit & keep the best people Reduce cycle time Remain nimble</p>	<p>Line Manager</p> <p>Make my numbers Make my numbers Stomp competition Boost customer loyalty</p>
<p>Training Director</p> <p>Get them trained Cut costs Satisfy the IT department Simplify administration Provide relevant training</p>	<p>Learner</p> <p>Earn more money Not waste time Improve my skills Stay sharp Avoid dull classes</p>

At Internet Time Group, we help eLearning vendors and their customers make sound decisions. Garbled objectives are the leading cause of failed eLearning efforts. The garble is frequently the result of scrambling one player's objectives with another. When you see an eLearning proposal with only one level of objectives, you're looking at the seeds of disaster.

Here's a case where small is beautiful. X.HLP positions itself as a business problem solver. Everything is focused on business results. Thirty days after implementation, they're back at their customer's site assessing the success of the program and recommending improvements for the next round. Simplicity is the greatest sophistication.

Jay Cross has been passionate about harnessing technology to improve adult learning since the sixties. Fresh out of college, he sold mainframes the size of Chevy Suburbans. Later, he designed the University of Phoenix's first business degree program.

Jay founded Internet Time Group to provide hands-on advice on implementing eLearning, developing information architecture, advising management, and accelerating sales. Five hundred people visit www.InternetTime.com for eLearning information every day. Jay serves as CEO of eLearning Forum, a 450-member think tank and advocacy group in Silicon Valley. He is a graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Business School.