

Xerox takes a strategic approach to e-learning

Communication is the key to success

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“It is not possible to tell people too much or too often about e-learning. It is still a new approach to training and takes time before it's regarded like any other type of training”.

So says Ian Sellars, manager of Xerox Education support services, whose ambitious target is to provide 50 percent of training via technology to Xerox Europe's workforce of 15,000 in Europe.

The company, which also has personnel in more than 400 franchise operations across Europe, set out on creating the Xerox virtual-learning environment (XVLE) in the mid-1990s. At the end of 2000, Xerox met with a difficult financial climate and the decision was made to centralize the different training and development teams across Europe. As a result, a team of around 70 is now based in the UK, near Reading, and is responsible for all training initiatives, including e-learning.

In the early days of e-learning there was much debate about whether it would revolutionize traditional training, and whether the future would consist only of virtual and online training rather than classroom-based sessions. The Xerox team discussed this in depth. The company view is that e-learning is important, but it will not and should not replace traditional training options. Residential programs still have a place in Xerox, as do a number of learning centers that staff use as and when they wish.

Planning and design

A small in-house team of four IT experts is central to the planning, delivery and design processes of e-learning. In addition, Xerox Europe has developed long-term relationships with external suppliers such as Skillssoft for e-learning, locally-based Icon Fonts Ltd for hosting services, and Kingston Inmedia for Xerox Television (XTV).

Ian Sellars said: “Being able to rely on suppliers is important. We work with a small, select number of suppliers who offer additional qualities and expertise that add to what we can do in-house”.

Suppliers are described as “strategic partners”, an unusual approach with regard to both e-learning and general training provision. It is an approach that others might also find valuable. The pressure on suppliers has increased over the past few years and creates a one-sided relationship. The Xerox approach of respecting suppliers' contribution creates a different, more productive, environment – one of mutual respect and value.

This relationship with suppliers has helped to ensure that a first-class product is offered in terms of both content and presentation. This is a matter of professional pride for the company's brand image generally. Closer to home, Ian Sellars explained: “Staff also expect us to offer a first-class product. Anything less usually means people never come back to e-learning”.

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Investment and resource implications

Staff must be prepared to invest their time to use what is available. One key to help this process in Xerox has been to look at the gap between words and actions, the difference between espoused company values and actual behavior. Most managers are generally supportive of training, but in terms of immediate productivity, spending time at the PC using a learning guide can compare badly to being out on the road selling to customers.

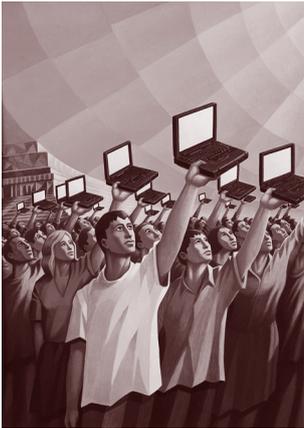
Ian Sellars said: "Some managers are better than others at recognizing the need for training. One way we have addressed this is with an education and learning policy. This sets out the roles of the company, the individual and his or her line manager".

Promoting and marketing e-learning

Xerox is ahead of most in terms of producing learning materials. However, this has not meant that the need to promote e-learning disappears. Presentations recently made to senior managers in different European countries are an example of how e-learning continues to be promoted. Experience indicates that as e-learning content grows, so too does the importance of promoting interest at senior levels. As Ian Sellars pointed out: "Managers are extremely busy, so our task as training experts is to understand what the business needs are and how training can address these needs".

A company framework linking appraisals and personal-development plans with online-training provision has also helped to promote e-learning. Ian Sellars believes that using a "blended approach combining training input with online content" has also helped e-learning. This approach is, he believes, "the best way to learn".

Xerox's two UK learning centers, named Connexion@, have not been successfully adopted elsewhere in Europe. This may simply reflect smaller numbers of staff rather than national preferences about learning methods.



Barriers to e-learning

Barriers to e-learning at Xerox are mostly practical constraints arising from language and technology. First, technology has created a number of difficulties. The most advanced links exist in the US; the UK lags behind as do some parts of Europe compared to the UK. Poorer technology links may be one reason why European e-learning has developed at a slower pace than in north America.

The other barrier, "the biggest problem", according to Ian Sellars, is language. While the business language for staff in other countries where Xerox operates is English, learning is more complex and people would prefer to do this in their mother tongue. Until now there has been little non-English material available. As well as committing to provide content in the main European languages, Xerox Europe has just relaunched XVLE in French, Italian, German, Spanish and Dutch, so now learners can navigate to their chosen learning in their preferred language.

However, not all barriers are negative. Xerox deliberately created a learning-management system to ensure staff cannot book a place on a training program until the required online work is completed (Norwich Union Life and Mercer in the US also take this approach). Views differ as to whether a stick or carrot approach is best for e-learning. The answer is that probably both approaches have value, depending on circumstances and company culture. Xerox's experience indicates that making some part of e-learning compulsory may help to get people engaged.

"A blended approach, combining training input with online content, is the best way to learn."

“If e-learning is not delivering what the business wants, you will find it almost impossible to get people interested in it.”

The importance of communication

Ian Sellars believes that communication is paramount. He said: “It is the most important aspect of how you sell e-learning across the organization”.

The message itself is important but so are creative ways to get the message across. Posters translated into local languages, menu cards, pens, mouse mats, brochures, advertisements, e-mail auto-signatures and inserts in pay-slips have all been used at Xerox. The approach needs to be eye-catching and simple and this can do more than a sophisticated campaign. Ian Sellars acknowledges that his sales background explains his high regard for communication, but he says the Xerox experience supports this.

Another initiative that has helped to make e-learning more relevant to staff is involving senior managers. Close links, even to the fine detail of the senior business manager introducing e-learning online, are critical. Ian Sellars said: “If e-learning is not delivering what the business wants, you will find it almost to impossible to get people interested it”.

The Xerox virtual-learning environment has been designed closely with business needs. Not all e-learning projects employ this common-sense strategy. At Xerox, all virtual-learning content is designed in collaboration with senior managers. E-learning must be strategic; a fragmented series of training modules may be useful, but is unlikely to contribute so clearly to the bottom line.

Historically, European and US training and development have been separate at Xerox. However, in recent times a better Atlantic-European partnership is developing. Discussions are currently under way between Xerox Europe and the US “My learning” system, to ensure that staff in future log on to a seamless web site that combines what is offered by the two training teams. Content may differ, but design and presentation will be perfectly matched. The lesson for other major employers is to ensure that whichever country or area e-learners log on to, they find the same company design and presentation.

Ian Sellars concludes where he began. He said: “Don’t forget to promote e-learning to staff”.

Adapting a recent political phrase, he continued: “It is important to emphasize the value of e-learning through communication, communication and communication”.

Keywords:

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