

 WHITE PAPER

# Getting Started with eLearning: Eight Questions to Consider



**By Dorman Woodall**

Learning Consultant,  
Professional Services

## Executive Summary

The face of corporate learning has truly changed. It is no longer possible to develop your human capital with a single approach. Today's corporate environment calls for out-of-the-box thinking, incorporating the advantages of many types of learning to benefit your company's single biggest investment: **your people**.

The use of eLearning has dramatically changed the way we deliver, design, access and think about learning. Modern technology has resulted in the marriage of the best of traditional classroom training and self-directed development. Today's eLearning offerings are much more sophisticated than the remedial modules of the industry's early years, and now is the time to implement this cost-saving, practical measure to support your organization today and in the future.

This paper will help you navigate the growing number of learning solutions and offer eight essential questions to consider as you develop your eLearning program.

## Workplace Learning Has Changed

All organizations are looking for ways to maximize the effectiveness of eLearning by aligning outcomes with strategic business initiatives. Examples of initiatives include: increased sales, improved customer service, completed industry certifications and the development of quality programs. Additional initiatives include: the adherence to compliance requirements, success with digital transformation, strategic career development and strong leadership.

Many training departments consist of a single person. While doing more with less can be a challenge, a well-run L&D department with fewer people can still make a significant contribution to an organization using eLearning. To assist you in ensuring your efforts are effective, consider the following:

- **Keep a business perspective:** Maintain your credibility by conducting programs that focus on delivering increased performance. Adding value is essential and training alone doesn't increase performance.
- **Market for visibility:** Let sponsors, management and your target audience know what you have planned and how it will assist them to accomplish their goals. Look for champions and encourage their active support.
- **Partner with the best:** You need a supplier(s) who will act in partnership to increase your organization's performance. Your joint focus should be on the transfer of learning to performance, not just design, development and delivery of content.
- **Measure what matters:** Agree on what matters and track the outcomes accordingly.

By framing your questions in the context of your current workplace situation and business needs, you can quickly determine your learning strategy—a strategy that will be essential for selecting your internal and external partners.

The following eight questions will start you on your way toward improved learning and performance within your organization.

## Question #1: What is eLearning?

A good definition of eLearning is the use of technology (electronic devices such as laptops, smartphone, tablets, etc.) to deliver instructional and informational content in learning and training to self-directed learners, when and where they wish. This ubiquitous capability enables self-directed learning that allows individuals to expand their performance, knowledge and skills at specific points of need.<sup>1</sup>

eLearning is a combination of multi-modal courses, expert videos, authoritative content and micro-learning modules, delivered anywhere needed and can include the following: social interaction between learners, chats, portals, quizzes, job aids, articles, recordings, online presentations, learning management systems and similar online resources.

eLearning content can be either ready-to-use (off-the-shelf) or custom developed. eLearning content is:

- **Rich:** An enormous collection of rich and varied web-accessible learning resources that support a multitude of job roles, learning styles/modalities and wide range of organizational imperatives or personal requirements.
- **Ready:** Available anytime, anyplace or anywhere a learner and web-linked device happen to be, making all forms of electronically-developed instructional and informational content readily accessible closer to the point of need.
- **Everywhere:** Delivered either synchronously (at the same time) or asynchronously (accessible at various times). For example, an individual can access a broad view of eLearning that includes a course, book chapter, complex simulation, case study, assessment, video and/or attend a virtual meeting.
- **Scalable:** The size of your audience can range from a single individual to a thousand globally diverse learners. You remove physical constraints of the traditional classroom and your program delivery moves from bricks to clicks. Technology removes the travel, lost time and other costs associated with classroom delivery.
- **Flexible:** Works just as well in a formal, informal or workplace settings. Studies have shown that workplace learning happens in an informal environment. Unlike classroom-based training, eLearning can support the just-enough, just-in-time, self-guided learning that workers employ while doing their regular work.

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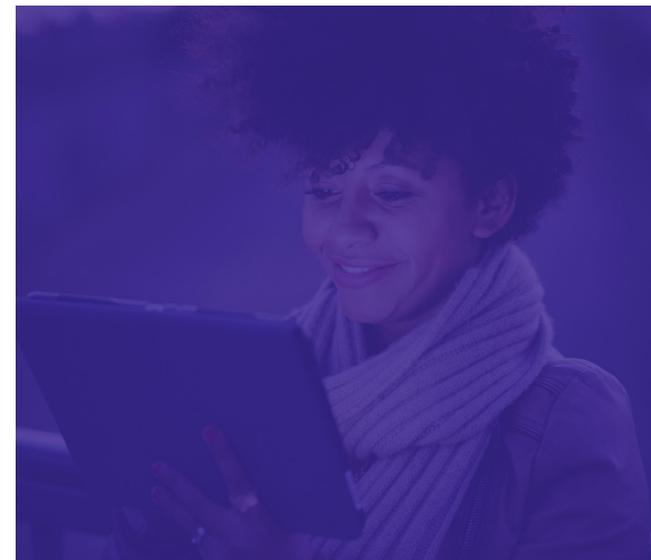
<sup>1</sup> "What is e-Learning." *The Economic Times*.

## Question #2: Does eLearning Teach? Is it Instructionally Sound?

Various industry studies show there are no significant differences in instructional outcomes between eLearning and instructor-led delivery. However, there are significant differences when eLearning and instructor-led programs are blended: using a well-designed program of blended informal, formal and application content and exercises leads to increased performance.<sup>2</sup>

Some advantages include:

- **Scrap learning rates are lower:** The blended mix encourages more efficient transfer of skills into the workplace and decreasing scrap learning rates. “Scrap” is the cost of not transferring learning into the workplace, and this training that isn’t applied is costly in terms of time, money, resources and lost opportunities. Scrap learning rates can be as high as 45% to 85% of all learning delivered.<sup>3</sup>
- **Informal learning is made possible in workflow:** In an agile organization, it’s no surprise that informal learning occurs more often than formal learning. According to 70:20:10, “In the twenty-first century, informal learning is an inevitable and intelligent by-product of continued team improvement and renewal. By supporting informal and formal learning using 70:20:10 HRD is more closely associated with the organization’s strategic priorities, making it the natural business partner for management in cooperation with other support departments.”<sup>4</sup>
- **Time savings with content curation:** Informal learning implies a search for the right piece of information or the clearest set of instructions. Research shows that knowledge workers spend 15% to 30% of their time gathering information and these searches are less than successful 50% of the time.<sup>5</sup> That is why it is essential to provide for people’s on-going needs to gather information efficiently and to learn through formal, informal and social means.



<sup>2</sup> “A Combination of Traditional Learning and eLearning Can be More Effective....”. Ali Slajegheh, Albborz Jahngirir, Elliot Dolan-Evans and Saher Pakneshan, BMC Medical Education, February 2016.

<sup>3</sup> “How Much is Scrap Learning Costing Your Organization?” Ken Phillips, ATD, August 10, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> “Informal learning is more important than formal learning – moving forward with 70:20:10.” Jos Arets, 70:20:10 Institute, October 3, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> “The High Cost of Not Finding Information.” Mark Feldman, KM World, March 2004.

When eLearning is easily available in the workplace, the application of new skills increases. This distinction allows the seamless integration of formal, informal and social learning to the daily work efforts.

We found at Skillsoft, upon analyzing our end users, 80% of eLearning users were able to apply what they learned within six weeks of the training. These learners felt that eLearning was able to influence the critical areas of business performance, help them close their skill gaps and build confidence that is essential to performance. eLearning provides just-in-time access and personalized learning that maps to the learner's schedule rather than the instructor's availability.

### Question #3: How Can eLearning Provide Savings?

Because of its global reach, eLearning offers a wide-range of benefits to individuals and organizations. Chief among these are the saving of time and money, as well as the improved transfer of learned skills and applied knowledge in the workplace.

- **Delivery of learning:** By decreasing the need to travel for learning and allowing content to be shared across any organization, large or small, eLearning makes it easy for individuals to tap into micro or macro-learning at their convenience. Additionally, blending eLearning with traditional classroom methods results in higher learner retention and a better investment overall. This is because the learning is self-directed and included in workflow—a characteristic that proves to be very effective in the transfer of learning into the workplace.
- **Transfer of learning to performance:** The purpose of using eLearning is to shape the knowledge, skills and attitudes of employees to make an organization more productive. eLearning has an extremely low scrap rate compared to training delivered via traditional methods (classroom). The increased application of learned skills and content associated with eLearning makes a better contender for investment by your L&D department compared to more traditional routes of learning.

- **The quantitative (hard) savings:** The reduction in expenses, either actual or forecasted, can easily offset the initial costs involved in bringing eLearning into an organization. Ernst & Young, IBM, Cisco, and Dow Chemical all reduced training costs by 30% by implementing eLearning solutions.<sup>6</sup>

#### Question #4: How Do I Select the “Right” eLearning Content?

Aside from the vast array of learning styles that make up your audience, learners most often seek information in an informal, casual manner. To address the needs of a wide range of formal, informal and social learning needs, employees need a rich array of learning resources that encompass a full set of business needs.

When selecting the right eLearning content, be sure the following are included in your prospective program’s offerings:

- **Instructional content:** The most effective eLearning content (courses) supports both formal and informal learning efforts. The course content must be instructionally sound, current and well-designed. Take the time to evaluate how well the course supports the transfer of new skills directly into the workplace. The best instructional content uses adult learning principles to emphasize problem solving, critical thinking, learner initiative, self-management and experiential learning. The course must emphasize user-focused performance objectives and learning activities, along with assessments to measure the learner’s achievement of those objectives.
- **Informational content:** The most common forms of informational content you’ll want access to include eBooks, webpages, reports, manuals, videos and other audio-visuals tools. Since most workplace learning occurs informally, organizations must have easy and searchable access to a wide range of informational content online to provide just-in-time support.
- **Certification:** Every organization has professionals, e.g. IT technicians, engineers, HR specialists, accountants, security and project managers, etc., who need to stay up to date with industry certification requirements. These knowledge workers need fast access to information on a routine basis and seek the same rapid response to policy, procedural or leadership questions. Critical content needs to be accessible quickly and precisely when and where it is required to support learner iteration on the job.

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<sup>6</sup> “How eLearning Dramatically Reduces the Corporate Training Costs.” Christopher Pappas, *eLearning Industry*, July 10, 2014.

- **Modalities:** Different people learn in different ways and eLearning programs need to allow for this. The best learning programs include modalities and formats that speak to all individuals, regardless of preferred learning style, age or ability.

## Question #5: Should I Buy or Build eLearning Content?

Obtaining high-quality eLearning content is critical to your success. There are three basic ways to do this:

1. Buy or lease content from a supplier.
2. Employ custom developers to create content for your organization.
3. Build your own content using internal resources and their subject matter expertise.

As a rule of thumb, half of all learning within any organization is generic, meaning that the same general content and learning objectives apply across the industry. Every organization needs leadership, management and supervisory, communication, legal compliance, IT, desktop, project management skills and so forth. This list of common topics can be very long, so consider using ready-to-use content, rather than building customized content wherever possible.

The other half tends to be distinct to the personality and unique challenges of an organization and benefits from being custom-developed or enhanced, internally or externally. Creating brand new eLearning assets can be very expensive and time-consuming. Instead, select existing content that meets at least 85-90% of your needs. If you feel the ready-to-use course still needs some customization, expect the supplier to be able to guide you to a tool that allows you to make these changes or simply find a way to fill the gap with your own content.

## Question #6: What is Blended Learning?

The cornerstone of effective learning development is the availability of high-quality learning content covering a wide range of enterprise needs in various formats. The ideal blended learning model is one that integrates functions that empower learners to participate in several formal, informal and social learning activities.



One misunderstanding about eLearning is that it replaces the need for a classroom (virtual or physical) and an instructor. The truth is that combining several learning modalities results in a more comprehensive and effective way to expand and enhance any learner's knowledge and mastery of a skill.<sup>7</sup>

High-quality blended learning is so effective because it allows an individual to meet their learning objectives in the style of learning that is best suited for them. It allows learners to select how they want to learn and affords them the flexibility and convenience as to when to do so.

A true blended solution includes online courses, virtual access to reference materials (books, white papers, job aids, etc.), instructor-led training, mentoring by seasoned experts, and other information resources. These resources should be readily available and include a powerful search function to quickly access content at the moment of need.

- **Learn to blend and reinforce content:** Blending includes a combination of formal, informal and social (collaborative) approaches that improve the effectiveness and efficiency of learning. The blend must also include practical reinforcement activities. By reinforcing learning, you increase the individual retention, which in turn, leads to increased transfer of skills into the workplace.

## Question #7: eLearning Content—Where to Start?

Well-designed eLearning content does a good job of addressing the formal and informal needs of a wide range of business, technical, productivity, collaboration, legal compliance and safety topics. Begin by setting your learning goals based on your organization's strategic goals so you can ensure that what you begin with will benefit your company. You should make a conscious effort to find content that applies to all levels and all functions to ensure that your learning investment correlates to desired business outcomes.

It's important to consider what skills are necessary both today and tomorrow. Give serious thought to what your organizational needs are in the here and now, but also how these will shift in the coming years.

To help garner support for new or improved eLearning efforts, you should include applicable, informal learning content for key stakeholders right off the bat. In this way, it's critical to choose an eLearning partner who has the

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<sup>7</sup> "Major Misconceptions about e-Learning." Tim Slade, ATD, July 11, 2018.

resources to meet varied learning needs and corporate goals of your organization. The following topics will begin closing skill gaps right away in most organizations:

- **Management or leadership skills:** Blending new eLearning assets into your existing program helps to build support for eLearning for the rest of the organization, increasing the skills and attitudes of your leaders.
- **General business skills:** Have courses, books, simulations, videos and other eLearning content readily available for your professional people and knowledge workers.
- **Productivity & collaboration tools:** Offering training on today's most widely used tools and programs like Microsoft Office, Trello, SharePoint, and more will help to close any skills gap dealing with personal technology. Training your team on these fundamental digital skills cuts down on the time-consuming and often problematic activity of asking someone else. Ensure your learners receive the best training and correct information the first time by selecting an eLearning provider who offers a robust productivity and collaboration tools content offering.
- **Professional certifications:** There are several people who need specialized support to achieve or maintain their professional standing. Subject areas can include technical such as IT systems engineers, project managers, and HR professionals. Support your organization's skilled-workers by making content and certifications available through your L&D offerings.
- **Legal compliance:** Your organization must communicate legal and behavioral expectations to your employees and keep them updated as laws and regulations change. Topics include sexual harassment, safety, hazardous situations and many more compliance subjects that reduce your risk. Foster a culture of compliance in your organization with eLearning content that keeps everyone up-to-date.

## Question #8: How Do I Ensure the Success of my eLearning Program?

How well your organization uses eLearning to improve performance and strengthen your business defines the degree of success you enjoy. Getting your people to use and include eLearning into their work life takes time and effort. You will need someone to collaborate with who has the content, services and experience to ensure your success. Many aspects of the learning program need to be managed and implemented to increase the success rate of your initiative.

The success of your eLearning program depends on the sustained growth of multiple factors, these include:

- **Promotion and marketing:** Relying on “if you build it, they will come” doesn’t work without advertising. It is not enough to just provide eLearning content and make these assets available to your workforce. You need to promote the use of eLearning to your audience on a regular basis. Do so by stressing the personal and professional growth which comes from eLearning, and offer positive affirmation for those who take advantage of offerings.
- **Learner adoption:** Usage of eLearning content is a basic metric to determine how well your promotional efforts are working. Generally, learning starts out slow and begins to climb as you increase promotion and reinforce new methods such as blending. At first you push the learning out and as learners become more comfortable and management support builds, the “push” from you will change into “pull” from the learners.
- **Learning evaluation:** Basic metrics include usage (uptake), assessment scores (Kirkpatrick Level 2) and behavior changes within the workplace (Kirkpatrick Level 3). After the initial implementation has been handled, conduct targeted ROI studies and develop executive dashboards that provide regular updates to your management team. The best eLearning providers offer analytics tools to gauge learner progress toward organizational and individual outcomes.

## Summary of eLearning Benefits

	Hard (quantitative)	Soft (quantitative)	Fuzzy (difficult to measure)
For the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase sales</li> <li>• Increase customer service</li> <li>• Increase quality</li> <li>• Increase output</li> <li>• Reduce travel time &amp; costs</li> <li>• Reduce employee turnover</li> <li>• Reduce lawsuits</li> <li>• Reduce time away from work</li> <li>• Reduce scrap learning rate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase transfer to productivity</li> <li>• Increase agility &amp; flexibility</li> <li>• Increase content deployment</li> <li>• Increase availability</li> <li>• Shorten development cycles</li> <li>• Increase on-boarding content</li> <li>• Recruit better employees</li> <li>• Retain high-potential employees</li> <li>• Ease of remedial training</li> <li>• Observation of OJT transfer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase global capability</li> <li>• Increase employee loyalty</li> <li>• Increase scalable content</li> <li>• Increase deployment</li> <li>• Increase market share</li> <li>• Increase 'Green' technology</li> <li>• Consistent, accurate content</li> <li>• Support innovation</li> <li>• Support the disabled employee</li> <li>• Maximize current systems</li> <li>• Nurture learning efforts for high potential employees</li> </ul>
For the learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce travel time &amp; costs</li> <li>• Reduce learning time</li> <li>• Increase learner retention</li> <li>• Increase engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase career opportunity</li> <li>• Improve content mastery</li> <li>• Flexible and available</li> <li>• Just-in-time training</li> <li>• Repeated practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase collaboration</li> <li>• Self-directed learning</li> <li>• Increase personal freedom</li> <li>• Wide selection of assets</li> <li>• Personalized learning</li> <li>• Safe environment for learning</li> </ul>
For the trainer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce travel time &amp; costs</li> <li>• Reduce training backlog</li> <li>• Track training progress</li> <li>• Measure learning transfer</li> <li>• Create blended programs</li> <li>• Evaluate learning gains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce overall costs</li> <li>• Platform independence</li> <li>• Leverage existing technology</li> <li>• Training for disabled persons</li> <li>• Greater storage capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Track learning by usage</li> <li>• Align to business objectives</li> <li>• Revitalize classroom training</li> <li>• Multiple learning styles</li> <li>• Enhance L&amp;D's image</li> <li>• Obtain proof of certification</li> <li>• Ease of making updates</li> <li>• Increase ways to teach</li> <li>• Reach neglected employees</li> </ul>
For the manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce travel-related costs</li> <li>• Less time in training</li> <li>• Increase outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase team skills/knowledge</li> <li>• Increase unit performance</li> <li>• Engage employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase moral</li> <li>• Increase career advancement opportunities</li> </ul>

## Summary

Getting started with eLearning can have many benefits to your organization, from a cost, time and learning perspective. It gives you the opportunity to design and implement learning that is scalable, available and diverse in a way not possible with just the use of instructor-led training. This in turn allows you to influence and tailor informal learning to meet the needs of your biggest assets—your people and your customers.

For more information on how SumTotal can help, [learn how Growth Edition](#), part of the SumTotal Learning Management solution, supports small and medium-sized businesses.

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## Meet The Author

Dorman Woodall is a Solution Services Consultant who works in a partnership with our clients to understand their current learning needs, and to establish strategies that achieve outstanding and measurable business results.

Dorman has over 20 years of experience as a Learning and Development Program Manager in corporate learning and consulting. He has developed and led several online programs for a wide-range of industries and government agencies. His strengths lie in his ability to understand key organizational needs and apply his expertise to design and implement innovative performance improvement initiatives aligned to business needs.

Dorman has shared his practical experience by authoring several white papers and contributing to several industry magazines. He's used his wide range of skills and expertise to address complex client needs involving skills development, performance improvement and change management initiatives. He has extensive experience as an L&D Manager, Executive Coach, Learning Consultant, Instructional Designer, Instructor, Author, Course Designer/Developer and Facilitator.



### Dorman Woodall

Learning Consultant,  
Professional Services



[linkedin.com/in/dorman-woodall-658a533/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/dorman-woodall-658a533/)



## About SumTotal

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