

Please Sir, can I have some more... e-learning, blended learning, wikis, forums, blogs? (Apr 09)

Learners are chomping at the bit to embrace more learning technologies, faster than training managers are planning on implementing them. Francis Marshall reveals some interesting findings from a European survey, which reveals that learners are not nearly so concerned about visual quality as they are about expert sources, that mobile learning and podcasts are far less popular than other delivery methods, and although the UK is leading the way when it comes to e-learning, for learners it still isn't being adopted fast enough.



Today's challenging economic climate is forcing most organisations to evaluate their training practices and policies. In the quest to make training more effective, now is the perfect time to evaluate what employees actually want and how learning can be optimised to ensure better engagement.

Cegos has done exactly this through an independent survey carried out in March 2009. The study compared viewpoints of 2,355 employees and 485 training managers and HR directors from companies employing more than 500 staff in the UK, France, Germany and Spain.



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Highlights of the survey include:

- Learners across Europe are keener than training and HR departments to embrace new technologies and learning practices like e-learning, blended learning and collaborative tools like blogs, forums and wikis
- The UK, along with Spain, continues to lead the way in e-learning, with work-based scenarios and self-assessment techniques being seen by employees as the most important tools for making e-learning more effective
- Despite the economic crisis, training budgets largely remain intact, but training functions are putting less emphasis on professional skills development compared to technical skills, even though they hold the key to helping companies win through the recession.

Learners want more technology-driven training

The survey found that half of employees across Europe want more e-learning and blended learning during the next three years, yet only about 40% of training and HR professionals plan to develop more programmes using these techniques. Learners are also keener to embrace collaborative tools like blogs, forums and wikis - 44% of employees want to see these techniques developed compared to under a third of training and HR professionals. Face-to-face learning is more popular among training and HR, with 42% of respondents wanting to see more classroom learning compared to 38% of employees.

There is clearly a gap between what the training function is planning and what users actually want from their learning experience. Today's learners are more willing to embrace new ways of learning than training and HR practitioners. Yet only when training providers and the training function listen to end-user feedback and put individuals' needs at the heart of every training initiative will we engage our learners more fully.

The rise of e-learning

The UK and Spain continue to lead the way in e-learning. 47% of UK employees use e-learning, against the European average of 40% and compared to just 24% of employees in France.

The biggest users of e-learning across Europe are managers and the under 35s. For managers with increasing workloads, e-learning offers the flexibility to schedule training around day-to-day demands. Generation Y has grown up with technology and the internet and e-learning is therefore a natural progression.

The good news is that today's e-learning and blended learning programmes are largely meeting the expectations of users. 89% of employees have said that blended learning has met their expectations 'well' or 'very well', and the same was found for 82% using e-learning.

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Making e-learning more effective

So how can e-learning be made more effective? The vast majority of employees (88%) rated work-based scenarios as a top tool for improving effectiveness. In second place, 82% rated self-assessment techniques and in third place, 73% rated help from a tutor or peer. The use of podcasts and e-learning on mobile phones were less popular features, with only 47% and 38%, respectively, of staff rating these among their top three methods for enhancing their learning experience.

When asked about criteria for evaluating the quality of e-learning for personal development, users were primarily concerned about the realism of the workplace situations portrayed (53% of responses), the credibility and experiences of professionals or expert reports (50%), interactivity (45%) as well as the use of video (43%). Ease of navigation, quality of technical content and visual quality of the courses were less important criteria.

Technical skills dominate over professional skills for all training techniques.

In many organisations, professional skills development is playing second fiddle to training designed to support the business rather than drive it forward.

Technical skills is typically the main focus of all training methods across Europe: 44% of employees have received training in this area, followed by IT skills training at 33%, and quality and security taken by 23% of staff. A further 18% and 16% of employees have undertaken sales and finance training, respectively, in the past year. In the UK, just 13% of employees have had sales training. More reassuring is the fact that the UK leads the way in providing leadership training, with 25% of employees benefiting from leadership programmes compared to just 6% in France.

Training and HR professionals across Europe need to be careful to provide a balance of training across job functions. It's going to be people who get us through the recession – individuals who can manage change and budgets effectively and maximise sales and commercial opportunities in these turbulent times. I believe that those organisations who invest in developing professional skills will be better placed to win through when the economy recovers.

Training budgets are stable - some are growing

Despite the recession, most organisations across Europe remain optimistic about their training budgets. The UK appears to be the most committed to sustaining training during the economic crisis - a third of

companies (33%) expect training spend to increase in the next 12 months; 54% expect budgets to remain the same; and only 13% plan to cut training. France is behind its neighbours with 26% of companies planning to decrease their budgets.

In the current economic climate, maximising training budgets is key and the best way to do this is to ensure that training is as effective as it can be. Listening to what users want today and in the future will go a long way towards achieving this.

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