



## White Paper

# Evaluating e-Learning Solutions: Choosing the Right Business Solution for Your Organization

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### Executive Summary

e-Learning has brought about a revolution of learning via technology allowing organizations to deliver a wide range of personalized training content and greater access to community-based collaboration never before possible. By evaluating the growing e-learning solutions you are sure to obtain the full benefits from the outstanding advantages that e-learning brings to your training agenda.

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## Hitting the e-learning target

The power of e-learning has brought about a new context for learning in the training industry. The exciting universe of e-learning balances the traditional classroom approach (ILT) and the constantly evolving technology-based learning (TBT). This balance has tremendous potential for building increased performance in your organization.

Knowing how to evaluate and determine whom you should partner for your e-learning solution is an important and critical question. Hopefully, the definitions, discussion, analysis, and subsequent checklist of questions in this paper will assist you in determining the questions you should ask an e-learning supplier so that you can best accomplish your targeted training needs.

## What is e-learning?

Some people call it “enterprise” learning, because the entire organization profits from it. Others call it “electronic” learning, because of its convenient method of delivery. Still others see it as “everywhere” learning, because it reaches more people in more locations than has ever been possible before. And some call it “excellent” learning, because it is designed to accommodate the individual learner.

We like to think of e-learning in terms of its outcome, so we refer to it as “experience” learning. That is what Elliott Masie, a well-known industry expert, calls it too. Elliott defines e-learning as “the use of technology to design, deliver, select, administer, support, and extend learning.” We believe that the foundation of e-learning is based on adult learners’ active participation in problem-solving and critical (or discovery) thinking regarding a learning activity that the learner finds both relevant and engaging.

## Characteristics of e-learning

Several characteristics make up an up-to-date view of e-learning. First of all e-learning is dynamic and contains the right content. Training and related expertise about any

subject must be current and relevant, not old news or ‘shelfware’. This means that e-learning must provide a wide range of learning resources from on-line experts, the best sources, collaboration, search capabilities and fast, targeted solutions in both formal and informal skills emergencies.

The context of e-learning is to operate in real time, making the best use of the technology, since both the content and the expert advice have to be there when you need it. Collaboration is used to leverage the explicit and tacit knowledge of colleagues, experts and professional peers. The job of e-learning is to bring resources together, from both inside and outside your organization.

The power of e-learning via the Internet brings increased personalized services and an individualized approach to the learner. Every learner must be able to select activities from a personal menu of learning opportunities that pertain to their background, job and career at that very moment.

Finally, e-learning provides blended learning events from many sources, enabling the learner to select a favorite format or learning method. The full context of e-learning means that the learner is allowed to actively construct their own learning experience without having to rely on direction from a teacher.

## Internet functions

Because the Internet was originally built around the need for secure global communication, data storage, and retrieval, it is information based in its design. However, having access to information alone is not enough for most of us to build the experience of learning.

We must have the capability of engaging and interacting with the learner with current content that builds on their skills. The Internet has moved well beyond its original mission and has given us a wide range of capabilities we can apply to corporate training and academic education.

Some of the major Internet functions we can use to build a viable e-learning experience include:

- Global access by learners
- E-mail
- Greater learner control
- Improved Interaction
- Threaded discussions
- Streaming technologies
- Wide access to resources
- Inexpensive distribution
- Cross-platform capability
- Chat rooms
- Plug-in and Java enabled
- File transfer and download
- Web seminars
- Easy-to-use browsers
- Secure e-commerce sites

## The top ten e-learning features

The quality of any e-learning program is based on how well the e-learning environment presents the key features of e-learning to the prospective e-learner. Key features include:

1. Teaching a wide variety of technical and business skills through the Internet.
2. Treating learners as problem-solving adults.
3. Presenting simulated, real-life situations, making the learning engaging and interactive.
4. Making meaningful assessment and testing (pre and post) available to the learner.
5. Providing expert instruction (mentoring) in an informal and supportive manner.
6. Allowing learners to collaborate as an aid in business problem solving.
7. Tracking learner progress and their accomplishments.
8. Building a personalized learning path based upon the learner's goals.
9. Maintaining links to current articles and readings for the community.
10. Providing a variety of content delivery or learning modes to the learner.

## Defining two Internet domains

*Synchronous* communication and *Asynchronous* communication via the Internet provides modern training and learning with two very powerful domains.

The *synchronous* domain is the more traditional instructional approach to online training and has the instructor (or mentor) and learner available at the *same time*. Usually they are in the *same place*, but, with the Internet, it is possible for them to be in *different places* at the same time. *Synchronous* training via the Internet is very helpful for the learners that are willing to adjust their learning style away from the traditional classroom or lab.

Being *asynchronous* means that the instructor (or in most cases, computer-based courseware) and the learner are available at *different times*, a bonus for the self-directed learner who likes to learn at their own pace and their own time. An e-learning solution should place equal emphasis on both of these important learning domains.

## A brand new focus on the learner

The power of the Internet, along with the balanced use of synchronous and asynchronous learning, has brought about a new focus on the adult learner never before encountered in history.

Now the learner can construct their learning using either a self-directed and/or collaborative approach. They have been freed to access a wide range of resources whenever and wherever they wish.

Up until now, most teaching experiences have been solely *teacher-centric*, using only behavioral and cognitive training methods. Because of the shift to expand the experience of the adult learner and the freedom that the Internet gives the individual, learning makes the learning even more *learner-centric* by allowing the learner to construct much of their

learning without an instructor.

*This new focus allows the individual to expand their responsibility for their own learning, both formal and informal, thereby increasing their motivation. The additional flexibility of using the Internet for e-learning provides the learner with current resources and enables them to determine their own learning activities. By providing e-learning in a positive and non-threatening environment, learners can encourage others, contributing to each other's personal growth.*

## Designing for e-learning

The instructional design of e-learning is focused on the adult learner's need to apply skills to solve business problems. In other words, their business skills and personal experience are expanded using e-learning. Without this view, a significant degree of motivation for e-learning would be lost. The design of e-learning allows learners more control to construct their learning than in traditional training.

Key requirements include:

- Balancing teacher-centric and learner-centric instruction
- Providing meaningful simulations in a risk-free environment
- Creating a positive atmosphere where learning is encouraged
- Using learning objects in both formal and informal settings.

## Balancing teacher-centric and learner-centric instruction

Maintaining a healthy balance between the traditional teacher-centric (*Objective*) and learner-centric (*Constructive*) is the overall instructional goal of e-learning. With e-learning we are no longer left in an either/or learning situation. We can use both to increase the learning potential of the individual.

Traditionally, *objective-based training* places the learner in a passive role while putting the instructor in total charge of defining the objectives, building the practices, and developing the test. Behavioral training and cognitive training are based on this learning theory. The teacher knows all and you are expected to follow the lesson plan. You know the drill.

On the other hand, *constructive learning* provides an experience that allows the learner to proceed at their own pace, determine how they will learn, and how they will apply their knowledge. It focuses on preparing the learner to solve problems in ambiguous situations. This theory is based upon the premise that we all construct our perception of the world based on our experience. Given the right resources, the individual will develop learning habits and attitudes.

The Internet has given us a highly flexible and constructive learning environment that sets the stage for the proper balance between objective-based training and constructive-based learning. As trainers, we should allow ourselves to “think out of the box” (the Skinner box, that is), and use both of these important methods of instruction, because they provide sound instructional theories that are essential for e-learning.

## Providing meaningful simulations

*Simulation* of real-life situations greatly increases the learning and engages the learner in adult size problem-solving activities. To be effective, the simulation must be *task-based* (goal-oriented) and must allow the learner the freedom to practice alternative solutions.

A lower level approach to simulation is the *step-based* approach that requires the learner to perform a guided step, one at a time. In this simulated interaction method, the learner is directed to take a single action to move them forward to the next screen. It keeps the learner busy but they are never given the chance to try out their new-found skills

in the total context of the situation.

Generally, it is preferred to provide a *task-based* cognitive approach for the learner that allows the learner to practice the entire series of steps in sequence.

## Creating a positive atmosphere for learning

Several methods of e-learning are available to show the learner how to solve problems using a wide range of resources. These methods include *information, training, people* and *performance support*. Since the Internet provides a wealth of materials and interfaces, the learner can personalize their own learning requirements so they can use the Internet effectively.

Letting the learner manage their own learning and make choices greatly facilitates their learning process. They can share a problem with another learner on a collaborative basis, cruise the Internet or have a mentor support them through a learning situation. Either way, they increase their own learning and problem-solving ability.

Another way to increase the acceptance of e-learning is to blend it with classroom training, making these two powerful mediums of training delivery work in partnership. By having both work toward the same learning goals, these methods can work in harmony and produce a rewarding learning experience.

## Five key questions to ask yourself

1. **Are you ready for e-learning?** Do the attributes of e-learning fit your needs? The overall implementation of e-learning will work better if you are ready for it. If not, then you will need to prepare your organization in advance of implementing e-learning.
2. **Does the supplier have the e-learning materials?** Does the supplier have the instructional sound content you need? Is it high-quality content and well designed? If

not, consider looking for another supplier because without the right type of content, nothing will work for you.

3. **How can the supplier assist you?** Does the supplier really know about e-learning environments or are they new to the industry? It will pay to check them out. The supplier must have the expertise and commitment to assist you in your initial installation plus follow through to provide on-going support. You should ask them to show you how their products and/or services will solve your business problem, not to just explain their product features.
4. **How will you know if e-learning is working?** The implementation of e-learning should result in a spurt of creative learning and increased business performance. How will you know? You need a reliable system that records and posts learner progress.
5. **Will it be worth it?** The primary drivers for e-learning include several strategic and tactical business targets. Most of these objectives focus on lowering the cost of training while increasing the performance of the individual. Which goals are you seeking?

## Why ask questions?

That's a good question. Questions can provide you with needed information about an important topic. Since many of you are too busy to build your own list of questions, the following lists can be used to start you on your way to getting the information that is essential for your decision. Please feel free to modify or add to this set of questions to suit your purposes.

The sequence of the questions should be in the order of most importance to you. The most important ones are dealt with first, because you don't have time to waste. There are a lot of players in the e-learning business; your job is to sort out the

one(s) that best suit your needs. By framing your questions in the context of your needs, you can determine quickly if a supplier has the best approach for your organization or not.

Good luck on making the right choice.



## The e-learning Readiness Scale

Once you have completed the rating for your organization, connect the scores with a line. A pattern will emerge. If the line goes mostly down the right side, then your organization is well prepared for an e-learning project. If the line is skewed mostly on the left, then you are less ready for the venture. In this case, you may wish to work on some of the factors prior to or at the same time you implement an e-learning project.

The e-learning Readiness Scale		1=low, 5=high				
Criteria		1	2	3	4	5
1	You have a large population of learners					
2	Learners are dispersed in different geographical locations					
3	Most of the learners have access to the Internet or an Intranet					
4	A wide range of business, technical and professional skills is needed					
5	Training requirements are generally consistent for most of the audience (e.g. Microsoft, Project Management, Leadership, etc.)					
6	Training being done now using either CBT, CD-ROM or LAN					
7	You are not strongly rooted to in a 'classroom only' tradition					
8	An established, recognized training function already exists					
9	There is a strong belief in learning design for individuals					
10	There is a long-term commitment to technology					
11	Your company Intranet is in place and working					
12	Some on-line learning or information tools are in place					
13	Your IT group is supportive, has equipment or will allow external Internet hosting					
14	Your organization sees an increase in individual skills (human capital) as a key to their business growth in the market					
15	Management sees a return on investment or clear strategic advantage for training function					
16	Adequate resources (people, equipment and funding) are available to man the age an e-learning program					
17	Your culture is open to e-learning (commitment to lifelong learning), using the Internet, understanding technology					
18	The e-learning implementation team has a clear vision					
19	Your organization is economically sound and has the budget needed to see the program through for next 3 to 4 years					



## Section A — e-Learning design questions

Rationale: The training delivered by the supplier's courseware must do a good job of teaching the subject-matter content. Navigation and other course features are important, but, once the course interface is understood, the learner is ready for the delivery of the training content in a way that speeds their understanding and skills. You are looking for a positive answer from all of the following questions.

1. Are the practice simulations well constructed allowing the learner to achieve a stated goal in different ways? *Simulations are needed to increase the learner's engagement with the material. Task- or goal-based simulation increase the learning dramatically.*
2. Does the course provide a simple, easy to use course map? *Course maps focus the learner on the material that is less familiar to them.*
3. Is the instruction built using a strong instructional design methodology (Gagne, Bloom, Mager and others)? *References to known learning experts are helpful in determining the quality of the training materials.*
4. Does the instruction provide certification exam preparation along with a curriculum, related course, and unit tests? *Embedded preparation for exams saves the learner time.*
5. Are the graphics used within the instruction extensive, meaningful and within context? *Graphics increase the quality of the learning and are extremely useful in conveying the context of the material.*
6. Are pre and post-test available? *The learner will shorten their training with a pre-test and validate their learning with a post-test.*
7. Is there a final assessment to prove mastery? *A final assessment ensures that the learner has completed the training.*
8. Does the content contain social stereotypes or prejudices? *If the course does, then it should be rejected.*
9. Are the graphics and vocabulary representative of the target audience? *Graphics increase the quality of the learning and are extremely useful in conveying the context of the material. Without the best presentation, the message may be missed.*
10. Can the content be played via the Internet and also be downloaded for off-line use? *Since the learner can take the materials from a workplace or home location, both methods are important.*
11. Does the instruction contain basic navigation features as bookmark, step back, online notes, Web links, index, or glossary? *The user interface should be friendly and powerful allowing the learner to control the pace of the learning.*
12. Does the instruction provide certification exam preparation along with curriculum, course, and unit tests? *Embedded preparation for exams saves the learner time.*

## Section B — Instructional content questions

Rationale: Without the right content, the training is useless. You should know if the content would be the best material suited for your training requirements. You are looking for a positive answer from all of the following questions.

1. Is the content highly rated by subject matter experts? *Content is king when it comes to learning, so it is a good idea to have the course content reviewed by your own subject-matter experts.*
2. Does the content match the requirements of your training program? *Obviously the content can be excellent, but does it give you what you need for your training program?*
3. What is the range of course topics covered in the supplier's catalog? *You should expect a wide range of course topic within the supplier's catalog. This includes technical, desktop and business skills.*
4. If you have global learners, is the course content localized into multiple languages? *Your training requirements may span over many cultures. Having the same course content available to these audiences will be valuable.*
5. Is the content jointly developed with the aid of the software providers? *This should mean that the course content is current and up-to-date. Sample list of software providers: Adobe, Cisco, CompTIA, IBM, Java, Lotus, Macromedia, Microsoft, Novell, Oracle, Project Management Institute, Sun, Unix.*
6. Do the software providers use these courses internally for their own staff? *If the providers use the course materials themselves, it is a very good indication that they see the quality of the content.*
7. Do the courses map to key certification or professional exams? *If your learners need the best instruction to become technically or professional certified, then this determination is essential.*
8. Does the content use realistic, business-like scenarios? *This ensures that the learner can quickly use the skills in a real-life business situation.*
9. Is the content 'chunked' into small enough units to allow the learner to learn quickly? *If the content is broken up into small units, the learner can take the course in a shorter period of time.*
10. Can learners preview courses from the supplier's web sites without being charged? *One of the best ways to preview a course is to try it directly from the supplier's Web site.*
11. Is the content accurate and up-to-date? *Obviously you need to verify the currency of the content.*

## Section C — e-Learning features questions

Rationale: The balance e-learning brings to training includes the personalized, collaborative and mentoring elements. It is with these elements that the learner moves beyond the asynchronous environment to a rich synchronous one that allows them to communicate with peers, instructors and experts. This support gives the learners the opportunity to enrich and construct their own learning. You are seeking for a positive answer from all of the following questions, except where noted.

1. Does the e-learning interface provide personalized content for the individual learner? *Personalization connects to learner to the learning. It makes it unique for the learner and this increases the learner's motivation to learn.*
2. Is the learner given the capability to build a prescribed learning path based upon a pre-assessment test? *Building the personal plan eliminates topics the learner already knows or wishes to skip over, thereby reducing time.*
3. Is exam preparation software available for industry certification programs? *Having the ability to prepare for the exam in advance will increase the likelihood of passing it.*
4. Does the learning include lab exercises? Learning is mastered by doing the tasks. *Doing them in labs is a good way to support the learner.*
5. Is there an up-to-date course catalog? *Since the learner's need grow, resources should be made available.*
6. Does the interface provide links from the course to technical documents, white papers, articles, case studies, etc.? *Having access to current information about the subject is essential to the learner staying current.*
7. Is there an available library (non-marketing) of news, features, articles, and books on IT and business skills content? *Resources like these will keep the learner aware of their career and industry trends.*
8. Are there job aids or other tools that assist the learner in transferring skills into the workplace? *Having an array of learning support and content will assist learners to apply their skills as soon as possible.*
9. Can the learner easily search, locate and access all of the learning assets? *It is important to help the learner get what they need, when they need.*

## Section D — Mentoring services questions

Rationale: Mentoring provides the learner with both expert advice and support. In many cases, the learner will benefit from the supportive environment created by the mentor, in much the same way as having an instructor. You are looking for a positive answer from all of the following questions.

1. Does the supplier provide proactive mentoring (e.g. daily e-mails from learning advisors)? *As in a classroom environment, proactive support by the instructor can motivate the learner to stay on track with their learning plan.*
2. Does the supplier provide reactive mentoring (e.g. learning advisor chats)? *This method of using chat rooms can provide the learner with just-in-time information or expertise.*
3. Is the mentoring learning advisors certified in the subjects they mentor? *Obviously the best mentors are the ones with experience and commitment. Certification is a primary way to confirm their skills and experience.*
4. How available are the learning advisors? *Having the mentor available when your learner need them is essential for their support. Check into the hours of availability - the more the better.*
5. What topic areas do the learning advisors cover? *Their topics must cover your needs.*
6. Is the mentoring developed with the supplier's courseware? *If they do, this is the best match for your learners.*
7. Is the supplier's courseware actually used by the learning advisors? *The mentoring is best if it is blended with the use of the supplier's courses, so check that this is being done.*
8. What are the guaranteed and actual response times? *You should expect a quick turnaround for the service you are buying.*

## Section E — Supplier support questions

Rationale: Implementing an e-learning environment will require support from the supplier. In a true partnership, the supplier will work with your organization to make your e-learning program a success. You are looking for a positive answer from all of the following questions, except where noted.

1. What is the size of the supplier's support organization (technical and learning)? *The larger the better. Compare the staff size and experience levels with the nearest competitive supplier.*
2. Will the supplier provide on-site support to assist you with your e-learning program? *Being there is a big assist for your organization. Be sure to confirm that they will be available throughout your program.*
3. Is there a professional services group to assist with custom integration and development? *Customizing your program may be necessary so having consulting support from the same supplier can save time and money.*
4. How responsive is their toll-free technical and e-mail support? *It is best if their support is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. One way to check them out is to call up the service at a very early time in the morning, say 4:00 AM.*

## Section F — Deployment system questions

Rationale: Tracking the learner's progress is essential to the success of the e-learning program. This oversight function is not being done to show 'big brother' control but to determine if the program is truly effective and whether it is bringing about the business results. You are looking for a positive answer from all of the following questions, except where noted.

1. Does the supplier provide an LMS (learning management system) to launch and track the learners' progress? *All e-learning suppliers must provide a system that does this since there is no other choice when launching and tracking training events.*
2. Does the LMS work equally as well on the Internet and your Intranet? *This is an important feature, since the learner may be accessing training materials for different locations.*
3. Is the LMS rich in functions and easy to use? For example, can you add and modify courses, events, and curricula for individuals or groups? Are you allowed to export or import data to and from the LMS? Is the LMS rich in functions and easy to use? *The richer the platform is the better it is for you and your organization. There are several key functions that you should review in detail.*
4. Can individual and group reports (usage, scores, downloads) be obtained? *The ability to obtain usage information is essential to the LMS.*
5. Does the supplier provide a qualified, hosted provider? *Be sure to ask for references about the quality of technical and people resources at the host site.*
6. What is the service history for the provider in terms of transactions and uptime? *Ask for a service history for customers similar to those with your requirements.*
7. Can the LMS launch and track other supplier courses? *This capability means that the LMS is open and not restricted to one supplier.*
8. Is the supplier committed to open system standards (AICC, SCORM, LRN, IEEE, or IMS)? *Look for evidence of the supplier's participation in industry groups that are committed to building open standards, as it shows that they are concerned about the industry.*
9. What is the total installed size of the instruction on the hard drive? *Course size is important when downloading or when managing hard disk space. Look for those that are consistently less than 15 megabytes.*
10. How many learners are currently using their LMS? *Knowing that there are a large number of people using the system on a daily basis supports their claims of success.*

## Section G — Supplier credentials questions

Rationale: The financial and development qualities of the supplier are proof of their true commitment and vision to their customers and the training industry. You are looking for a positive answer from all of the following questions, except where noted.

1. Why we should select your company as our supplier? *Look for the strength of their financial position, leadership and vision.*
2. How many clients do you have currently? *The more customers the better. This shows that you can get a reference check on the supplier. Also look into the loyalty of their customer base and if any left the supplier but later came back.*
3. Can you describe your principal product in terms that my boss would understand? *Look for a simple statement of what they supply. A business-like statement about how they will save you money is a good answer.*
4. Does your company supply a full e-learning solution (content, technology and service)? *Knowing that the supplier has the full range of expertise to be an e-learning partner is key. All of these components are needed to supply you will a full range of e-learning solutions.*
5. Who do you consider your major competitors? *They should give you two or more names and strictly avoid any negative selling comments about their competition.*
6. In which part of the country or the world do you do business? *The more locations the best, particularly if your organization has global learners.*
7. How much (as an amount or percentage) does the supplier re-invest into their Product Development? *A good measure of their commitment is how much they spend here, be sure to compare with their nearest competitor.*
8. Is the supplier's product development staff residing in-house or are they out-sourced? *In-house is good since there should be consistent quality and content development. Out-sourced courses tend to vary in quality and content depth. The larger the staff, the better. Be sure to compare to the supplier's closest competitor.*
9. Has the supplier shown sustained revenue, profit, and growth in the training industry? *If the supplier has been in the training business for any length of time, they must show constant growth or there could be something wrong.*
10. How much (as an amount and percentage) does the supplier reinvest in product development? *A good rule of thumb is at least 15% of gross revenue. Without a significant investment, the supplier is taking the risk of not being prepared for future training needs. Spending this type of money usually confirms their commitment.*



11. Has the supplier won any awards for the quality of their learning products and services? *They don't need to win every award. Look at the types of awards they have won to determine whether others in the training industry believe their products to be of value too.*
12. Are there an established ways that the supplier obtains systematic customer feedback that ensures their market focus? *Look for established regular meetings with their customers on a regular basis, such as user conferences, forums advisory groups.*