Rapid E-Learning: Groundbreaking New Research (Published June 2004)

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The Need for Rapid Development

For decades, technology-based training has promised to give corporations, universities, government, and non-profit organizations the power to increase the scale and reach of training.

As companies have rushed into e-learning, however, many have found that the time and cost to build excellent content sometimes overcomes these advantages. The "traditional" approach takes many months to build and can cost tens of thousands of dollars per instructional hour.

89% of the organizations we surveyed need to develop e-learning in **three weeks or less.**

In our research we find that a revolutionary change is taking place. Many training problems come with urgent development timelines (e.g. get this program out in the next few weeks) and short shelf life (e.g. in three months this will be out-of-date). Often these programs have smaller budgets, smaller teams, and require the subject-matter experts to share their knowledge more directly with the learners.

There's a new training category emerging, which we call "Rapid E-Learning." It is a whole new approach to Internet-based training – one that changes the development model, leverages new tools, and dramatically changes the economics of content development.

The Greatest Challenges in E-Learning: Time and Resources

We have been watching this market for several years. In our most recent surveys to e-learning developers, we find that their biggest challenge is long development times and lack of resources (staff and/or funding).[1]

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[1] Spring 2004 survey of 228 e-learning developers, primarily in US.

E-Learning Challenges

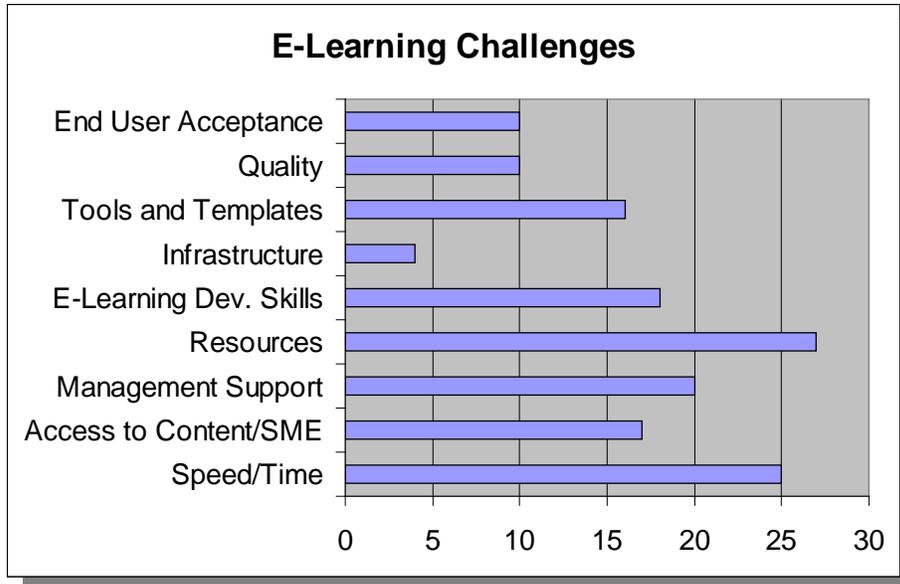| Challenge	Value
End User Acceptance	10
Quality	10
Tools and Templates	16
Infrastructure	4
E-Learning Dev. Skills	18
Resources	27
Management Support	20
Access to Content/SME	17
Speed/Time	25

Figure 1: Top E-Learning Developer Challenges

Why is this? In many organizations e-learning programs are being developed with similar techniques to those that are used for instructor-led training. A subject matter expert explains the content; an instructional designer creates a design document and project plan; a web-developer builds interactivities and HTML pages; a QA engineer tests the course; and then, a few months later, an online course is launched.

Although this approach is proven and works well, it breaks down for time-critical problems. It demands a team of skilled professionals and it can take months to complete. The results from our survey (Figure 1) show that this waterfall process simply takes too long and costs too much for many business situations.

Rapid E-Learning Defined

In our research, we talked to companies who are creating e-learning content using rapid methods. We found that most of these methods are a cross between knowledge management and e-learning. *Knowledge management* uses collaborative technologies to encourage subject matter experts to share their knowledge and *e-learning* delivers skills and knowledge in a streamlined and methodical way. The intersection between knowledge management and e-learning seems to hold the solution for creating more e-learning content in less time with fewer resources.

The Rapid E-Learning category is defined by the following criteria…

- Courseware which can be developed in less than three weeks
- Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) act as the primary development resource
- A well-known tool (e.g. PowerPoint) or user-friendly templates form the starting point for courseware
- Simple assessment, feedback and tracking are usually provided

- Media elements which enhance learning but do *not* create technology barriers may be included (e.g. voice)
- Learning modules can be taken in one hour or less, often in less than 30 minutes.
- Synchronous (scheduled or live) and asynchronous (self-paced) models may be utilized.

The two major elements in this definition are **short timeframes** and **ease of development**. The key to a successful Rapid E-Learning program is having a development process (including tools) that makes it easy and quick for a SME to develop a course.

When to Use Rapid E-Learning

One of the most crucial success factors in establishing a Rapid E-Learning program is defining when Rapid E-Learning should be used instead of more traditional content development methods. Consider using Rapid E-Learning for these types of content:

Examples of When to use Rapid E-Learning	
Delta	Teaching the difference between what was learned and what has changed
Disposable	Content that has a short shelf-life and will go out of date
Continuous	Topics that require frequent and regular updates
Urgent	Problems that must be addressed immediately
Introductory	Introductory topics that may preface an instructor-led class or more detailed blended learning program

Figure 2: When to Use Rapid E-Learning

Notice that within the list above, we *don't* include the mastery or certification of skills. We believe that Rapid E-Learning techniques are best used for teaching conceptual information. Rapid E-Learning courses can be blended with other forms of training to achieve higher level skills, or they may morph into a skills development program over time.

Bayer HealthCare Case Study

Bayer HealthCare provided us with a great example of using Rapid E-Learning to provide safety refresher courses and continuous product updates. Grant Cook, Manager, Process Re-engineering for the US Commercial Organization, has created a Rapid E-Learning program for use by the field sales and service staff.

- Sales representatives are responsible for selling Bayer's diagnostic systems. They need to be kept up-to-date with the latest advancements in the product and medical technologies. If the sales representatives don't have the latest information, they could end up conveying out-of-date research or wrong product information when making a sale.
- Service representatives maintain Bayer's high tech medical laboratory equipment, and work with lab samples, needles and other tools. For this audience, poor or non-existent training can result in injuries or illnesses. They need to be continuously updated on safety procedures to keep injury rates as low as possible.

Within Bayer's field sales and service organization, there are in-field trainers who are responsible for keeping the sales and service representatives up-to-date. For these highly specialized fields, the trainers need to provide timely training around the world, and Rapid E-Learning is the best solution. Although these professionals were very used to dealing with highly technical medical equipment, they were not particularly PC-savvy. Bayer HealthCare was using the Lectora product, but they found that with Lectora alone, it was difficult for non-PC savvy trainers to make the shift from on-the-job training to e-learning. The structure and detail required was difficult for the in-field trainers to master because it was very different from the face to face training they were used to doing.

The solution was to provide the in-field trainers with an easy-to-use product, called Articulate (http://www.articulateglobal.com) which converts PowerPoint presentations to Flash with audio narration, which can then be integrated into a Lectora course. According to Grant Cook,

> "We found that Lectora makes a great framework for our training. We now have the trainers create content in Articulate which creates Flash files that can be imported into Lectora templates. We then use Lectora for creating quizzes and packaging the final course."
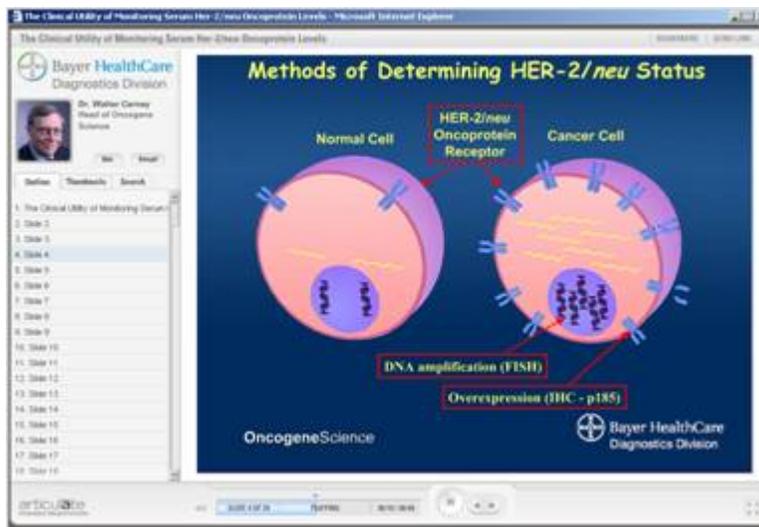

Figure 3: Bayer HealthCare course created with Articulate

One of the keys to this group's success with Rapid E-Learning is a SME training program that teaches in-field trainers how to create Articulate modules. Bayer HealthCare trains to a set of standards that includes templates, color scheme, fonts and course length.

Once a SME is trained, then Bayer HealthCare **can create and deploy a course in about three weeks**. If a high-quality PowerPoint presentation exists, then the turnaround time is ten business days.

Like many medical audiences, these professionals work long days and usually fit training in before their day starts or after it ends. The Bayer HealthCare standard is to create small training modules that focus on product training. They found that if a course is over an hour long, the complaints roll in and the course completion rate goes down significantly.

Another factor that helped the program succeed is that most of the SMEs were good communicators. Many of them are former sales and marketing professionals and trainers, so they had good presentation skills already.   If that weren't the case, it would be a lot tougher to create quality content fast.

Last year, the Bayer HealthCare team deployed 19 courses using the Rapid E-Learning methodology. This year the program is growing exponentially.

This article is an excerpt from a newly released industry study from Bersin & Associates entitled *Rapid E-Learning: What Works™; Tools, Techniques and Best Practices*. This study is available for purchase at http://store.bersinassociates.com/relstudy.html

Bio

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