

5 things to watch in e-learning

As functionality improves, massive changes still to come

BY GEORGE SIEMENS

Over the last decade, technology has helped e-learning explode into the corporate scene. Encompassing techniques and approaches such as performance support, informal learning, mobile learning, online learning and hybrid learning, the development of e-learning has made significant improvements in corporations.

But all the changes will pale in comparison to what's looming on the horizon. Five important future trends in e-learning are:

- mobile technologies
- distributed workforces
- collaborative technologies
- virtual worlds, games, simulations
- multimedia.

Mobile technologies

Mobile technologies are growing in influence in training and development. The release of smart phones, such as the BlackBerry and iPhone, present many new opportunities. In November 2007, Reuters reported more than 50 per cent of the world had access to mobile phones. The prominence of mobile devices raises the value of their use in learning. Short videos, instant messaging, podcasts and e-mail are features available on smart phones.

Why are mobile phones so significant for learning? These personal devices form a central part of the communication habits of virtually all elements of society. Their prevalence and familiarity make phones a useful learning tool. Obviously certain types of learning are not well suited to mobile use but, even five years ago, the prospect of using a phone to watch videos or as a mini-GPS device would have seemed ridiculous. Today, both of these are common uses.

The future will bring continued innovation in the functionality and features of mobile computing. As functionality increases, options for training and development will increase as well.

Distributed workforces

Workforces are increasingly distributed. The growth of global workforces requires greater attention to training and development that builds the skills and capacities of employees so they can participate in collaborative work with individuals from around the world. Expertise is no longer centred in one geographical location.

Global workforces add an additional layer of complexity to learning. Instead of focusing on the content of learning, the focus is now on the skill sets of working in a distributed manner. In many cases, employees work from home as the Internet has freed knowledge workers from the physical office space. How do HR and training depart-

ments meet the needs of these professionals? How are training needs defined? How is performance measured? Delivering training to distributed workforces is a critical challenge facing organizations.

Collaborative technologies

Collaborative technologies are linked to the growth of distributed workforces. Through the use of blogs, wikis, social network services and almost

daily new offerings in this field, training departments are faced with numerous challenges. Collaboration is critical in any type of work. Yet collaboration raises concerns of privacy and security. Should employees participate in public social networking sites, such as LinkedIn or Facebook? Or should employees connect internally with profiles only available to other corporate employees?

The same network used for

collaborating around work-related projects can also serve as a network for training and development. Corporations, however, with existing policies that reflect a more traditional approach to training will find the first critical task is to clarify participation in collaborative technologies.

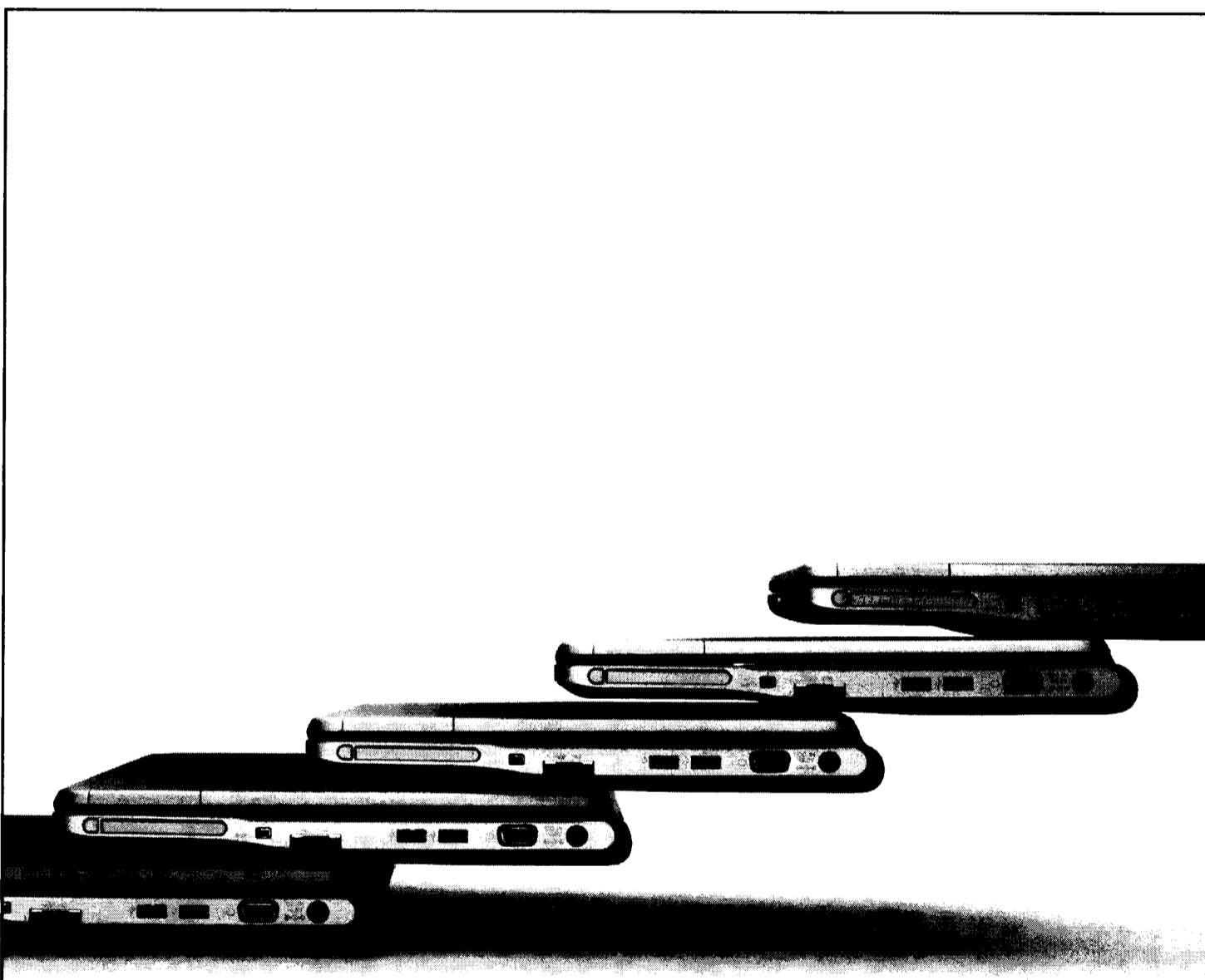
The opportunities for collaboration with employees, suppliers and peers are enormous. The growth of collaboration in the workforce will have a significant

and transformative impact on organizations, says Don Tapscott, in his book *Wikinomics*. Training departments need to be aware of the issues surrounding collaboration as well as tools and options.

Virtual worlds, games and simulations

The initial rush to create a corporate presence in virtual worlds such as Second Life has slowed. TechCrunch, a blog about Web 2.0 products and companies, has reported a large-scale exodus from Second Life by many corporations that had initially embraced the site enthusiastically. This correc-

See Page 35 / SUSTAINED



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Sustained trends

Continued from Page 29

tion in hype overlooks the more substantial and sustained use of games and simulations for training and development.

Case-based or problem-based learning approaches are well documented by MBA schools. The value of simulation-based training can't be disputed in pilot training or military procedures. Increasingly research is suggesting games boost "scientific habits of the mind" in players. And, as the next generation of learners enters the workforce — a generation with significant experience with games and simulations — expectations for engaging methods of learning will likely rise.

Multimedia

Over the last five years, the Internet has shifted from text to multimedia. Podcasts, videos and online games mean training offerings are no longer confined to text. Interactive applications, teleconferences and video-based training are only a small subset of the many different media tools HR and training departments need to be aware of.

Some of the initial confusion of new technologies has given way to sustained trends.

The "click and advance" e-learning courses of early 2000 are now far more engaging and interactive. In the process, development costs have sometimes increased, but so has the effectiveness and impact of the learning experience.

Seemingly endless advances in technology have left many overwhelmed. Professionals in the field of e-learning are certainly no different. The last several years of social media tools, multimedia options and distributed workforce needs have created a climate of perpetual catch up. The skills required by employees are continually changing and the potential exists for deeper levels of learning than previously achieved in classroom models.

For training professionals, it's an exciting time. Some of the initial confusion of new technologies has given way to sustained trends, such as the five presented here. Based on these trends, an emerging image of the future of e-learning can be seen — a future defined by innovation, opportunity and effective learning.

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Some trade-offs

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recognize certain graphics.

"There's the odd little blip but generally we're past the technology issues," says O'Neill, and the newer tools and techniques make for a more interesting and enhanced experience. "When it started out, it was pretty boring."

Not for everyone

In the old days, e-learning was not particularly successful because it wasn't well-designed, people missed the interaction and many didn't finish, says Fahy. Now an interactive loop is

"Completion rates are every bit as good as, if not better, than on-campus rates."

important in making sure people feel connected and heard.

"Completion rates are every bit as good as, if not better, than on-campus rates," says Fahy.

But online education may not be for everyone, so many schools provide an online self-test that looks at issues such as a person's study behaviour, self-discipline, need for feedback, professional and personal schedule and comfort with technology.

"People don't automatically know how to study at a distance, how to be autonomous, self-directed, so we take it seriously, you have to show people," says Fahy.

Distance education appeals to a certain kind of learner and learning lifestyle, says O'Neill, and there's always a trade-off, so it's a question of a person's

needs and priorities.

"There is always going to be a learner for whom the ideal is more traditional."

Set your own pace

Kovacikova can attend class in person, which she prefers for accounting courses so she can receive immediate answers, but if she has questions during a web-based course, an online tutor quickly responds. And class discussions are posted daily, for her review or input.

She can also pick her schedule, from paced courses, which have set deadlines, and non-paced courses. There is greater freedom with the non-paced approach. During one course, a personal issue meant Kovacikova had to put her studies on hold but when she returned, she was able to submit six assignments in six weeks.

"It was very convenient," she says.

And the non-paced courses allow her to complete courses faster, as a paced class is usually three-and-a-half months while a non-paced version can take only two months.

"In one semester, I can get three done, which would be impossible if I'm in class and working full time."

In Revenue Canada, Kovacikova is fortunate to have a supportive employer that provides subsidies and flexible hours for her studies.

"(Distance education) is good for people who have the experience and who are self-disciplined; otherwise you won't be able to do it," says Kovacikova. "This is very suitable for people who've been in the workforce for a couple of years. It depends, some people can do it, some people are disciplined enough to do it, some people are not."

Report on Training & development crossword solution

Were you stumped by the crossword puzzle on page 33? Here's the solution:

P		P	L	A	N	N	I	N	G		C	B
E	M	E	N	T	O	R		S	C	H	O	O
C	R	B	O		W	E	B		V	S	C	H
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R	E		A	P	P	R	E	N	T	I	C	E
T	C		S		C		E	G	G	B		
I	N	T	E	R	N		S	A		C	O	
F	E		M	E	M	O	R	I	A	L		A
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S	I		I					D	E	S	I	G
S	V		C		E			S	I	M		E
T	E		O		N		A	S	K		S	I
U	R		A		C		O		K		E	C
D	I	S	T	A	N	C	E	E	D	U	C	A
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N	Y							S	A	L	E	S
G			P	E	D	A	G	O	G	Y		D

HR 101

HR-related distance education programs

An expanding pool of colleges and universities offer a range of HR-related studies through distance education. Here is a sampling of undergraduate and postgraduate courses and programs:

- Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alta.**
Bachelor of human resources and labour relations
Bachelor of management in human resource management
- Cape Breton University, Sydney, N.S.**
Human resource management
- Concordia University, Montreal**
Certificate in human resource management
- Dalhousie University, Halifax**
Certificate in human resource management
Certified employee benefit specialist
- Guelph University, Guelph, Ont.**
Organizational psychology
Psychology in HR management
- McMaster University, Hamilton**
Human resource management
Organizational behaviour
- Memorial University, St. John's, Nfld.**
Introduction to personnel and human resource management
Organizational behaviour
Organizational strategy
- Nipissing University, North Bay, Ont.**
Management of human resources
- Ryerson University, Toronto**
Organizational behaviour and interpersonal skills
Training needs assessment and evaluation
Occupational health and safety law
- St. Mary's University, Halifax**
Personnel training and development
Human resource management
Wage and salary
- Telug, Quebec, Montreal**
Certificat en gestion des ressources humaines
Certificat en relations du travail
- Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, B.C.**
Bachelor of commerce in human resource management
- University of Manitoba, Winnipeg**
Human resource management certificate
- University of New Brunswick, Fredericton**
Introduction to human resource management

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