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## Building Success for E-Learners

By Jennifer Hofmann

*Over the next six months, Learning Circuits will explore how to successfully implement five success factors that create success for e-learners. This month, we'll look at each characteristic at a high, definitional level.*

We all know that the use of online learning has gone beyond a trend to become an accepted and permanent part of the learning mix. It's hard to find a subject that isn't, in some form and at some level, taught online. Whether it's astronomy or zoology, Arabic or Zulu, addition or...well...you see where I'm going with this. Besides being plentiful, programs are often low-priced or, sometimes, free!

Organizations and training suppliers are very motivated to place content online. Ease of distribution and relatively low production costs (compared to a comparable traditional program) are making online and blended solutions a part of nearly every organization's training plan.

This begs the question: If content is readily available, why don't people seem to be learning more? And why are so many people being forced to learn online at a metaphorical gunpoint?

I think the answer is easy to identify. Although organizations are spending money on technology and programming, they're rarely investing in resources that create effective learning environments. We're treating e-learning implementations as technology initiatives rather than change initiatives.

We need to find ways to make participants feel that the investment is worthwhile. But how do we accomplish that? Training research reminds us that the following characteristics must be present in learning environment for programs to be successful:

- adequate motivation
- opportunities for learners to collaborate and interact
- a variety of delivery methods
- user-friendly technology
- active and participative instructors.

When implementing, designing, and delivering online programs, education and training professionals should strive to incorporate these success factors at the planning stages of the program.

### Student motivation

The success of learners in any learning environment is largely dependent on their personal motivation. The motivation of learners in non-traditional programs seems

### About the Author

Jennifer Hofmann is with InSync Training;  
[Jennifer@insynctraining.co](mailto:Jennifer@insynctraining.co)

to be fundamentally based on personal convenience and lifestyle. We attempt to attract participants who have a need (or desire) to learn without being constrained by distance or time. A defined audience exists that wants to take advantage of continued education but for a variety of reasons can't conform to traditional norms. The result is a mixed bag of participants that can enhance the learning process because of the differences between them. Participants often thrive among such diversity.

However, motivated participants often have other characteristics that help them to be successful. Generally, motivated participants are self-disciplined, organized, and can plan well. Because of that, the more exceptionally motivated participants excel in spite of barriers inherent in their programs. Indeed, poor instructional or technological design doesn't stand in the way of highly motivated participants.

In addition, assessment techniques play an important role in motivating geographically-dispersed participants to complete assignments and participate in group activities. If participants know they will be assessed in some fashion, they tend to be more motivated to learn the content and to participate. This phenomenon is witnessed in the use of discussion boards in Internet classes. If participation in Internet-based discussion lists isn't required or assessed, the lists are rarely used.

In the next installment of this series, "Motivating Online Participants" (August 2003), we'll explore ways to exploit the kernels of motivation that already exist among learners and discuss ways to encourage unmotivated participants.

## Collaboration and interaction

Early CBT programs were represented by instructional design that focused on independent study. Partnered with the evolution of Internet technologies, computer-based programs started to use more collaborative interaction, including the experiences and feedback of other participants in various asynchronous (self-directed) and synchronous (live and online) exercises.

How can online education be collaborative? By finding ways to bring participants together in some kind of social interaction or get groups to work together to solve problems you have collaboration. Participants in online programs feel more involved in the process, and therefore learn more effectively, when involved in these types of interactive collaborations. Though the solution sounds simple, implementing fostering real collaboration remains a hurdle for most e-learning initiatives.

The third installment of this series, "Creating Collaborative Online Exercises" (September 2003), will provide techniques to ensure that online programs, whether asynchronous or synchronous, are interactive and collaborative in nature.

## Delivery methodology

Currently, there are three general categories of online training: synchronous, asynchronous, and self-directed. Each methodology has its representative tools. Synchronous delivery systems include such real-time interactive tools as chat, whiteboarding, two-way voice, and application sharing. Asynchronous delivery systems include facilitated collaborative tools that participants can use at their convenience, including discussion boards and email. Self-directed methodology is non-collaborative and relies on the participant completing coursework without feedback or interaction. (Self-directed is considered a sub-category of asynchronous training.)

Blending technologies is important for several reasons. First, consider the learning

styles of your participants. Some may need time to process information and review content independently before responding. These participants may enjoy learning in the asynchronous mode. Others may prefer a live approach, in which ideas and feedback can be exchanged and distributed quickly. For this group, some kind of synchronous technology may be the most effective. Creating a program that's 100 percent entrenched in one technology or the other can easily disenfranchise some of your participants. Therefore, your online programs should include both asynchronous and synchronous interactions in order to be most effective.

Blended programs are often difficult to design and facilitate. Part four in this series, "Managing a Blend of Delivery Technologies" (October 2003), will focus on making your blends successful.

## Technology

The proper implementation and management of technology is critical to the success of all online learning initiatives. Though technology advances are one of the reasons online learning is going through such a growth spurt, it creates roadblocks that divert participants from success.

Accessibility to appropriate technology is the first roadblock. It may seem to some that robust hardware and bandwidth are ubiquitous, but that's not the case. While many online programs claim to work on low-bandwidth connections, it's almost always true that a participant's experience is enhanced proportionate with the increase in bandwidth. Hardware and software requirements also can cause problems. For example, many organizations don't supply sound cards or allow certain plug-ins through their firewalls.

The next roadblock is the participant's ability to use the technology available to them. If a participant isn't confident that they can use the internet software or the required hardware, they may be deterred from attempting to participate. Facilitators should provide a list of technology prerequisites and a learning path to ensure that learners can meet them. An orientation to the technology should also be provided in order to further ensure participants' success. Easy access to knowledgeable technology support, before and throughout the learning process, is also critical to the usability aspect of the technology.

Another roadblock deals with the use of technology in program design. With all of the options available to trainers, which technologies should they employ? Many online programs tend to focus on the bells and whistles of the technology. Another technology design issue is wrapped up in the concept of instructional design—should classroom-based exercises be replicated as closely as possible or redesigned for the new technology?

These roadblocks will be addressed in more detail in the series' fifth installment, "Managing and Designing for Online Technologies" (November 2003).

## The role of the online instructor

Whether delivering learning using a traditional, synchronous, asynchronous, or blended approach, participants need to feel as though they have developed a personal rapport with the instructor. This seems even more true for online environments. The online instructor acts as an anchor, reassuring participants that support, reinforcement, and assessment is readily available.

The role of the instructor in an online environment is still evolving, but it's clear that online instructors are taking on more of a facilitative role than that of their lecture-oriented traditional classroom counterparts. The more the instructor gets involved,

the more involved the participant is likely to be.

The final installment of this series (December 2003) will explore the role of the online instructor in terms of online participant success—or lack thereof!

### Bringing it all together

Creating a successful online learning program means more than using the latest gizmos. It means more than applying successful instructional design techniques. You need to create a solid environment in which your participants can learn. To do that you need to incorporate the success factors critical to creating that environment. Over the rest of this series we'll investigate these techniques in more detail.

Until then, we'll see you online.

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1640 King Street, Box 1443 Alexandria, Virginia, 22313-2043 USA  
Phone: 703.683.8100 - 800.628.2783 - Fax: 703.683.1523

