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Motivating Online Learners

By Jennifer Hofmann

This article is Part 2 in a [series](#) outlining factors that influence the success of online learners.

Everyone understands how to learn in a traditional classroom environment. We've been doing it all of our lives.

Online learning has introduced a new learning culture—one that takes time with which to become familiar. Organizations use a great deal of resources planning for and investing in technologies, but often forget about the culture change involved with this new learning environment.

In order for online learning to be successful, developers need to create environments in which people can effectively learn. Participants need to be open to learning in this new way, and confident that their time invested in professional development is well-spent.

Why do we need to be more concerned about motivating online learners than traditional learners? Because often, online learning comes with a stigma that's totally unmotivating. Learners often feel that they're being cheated out of an instructor, that online learning isn't real learning, and that having to learn at their desk is more trouble than it's worth. While going to a traditional class may have interrupted the week, at least it gave us a change of environment—and usually there were snacks.

These demotivators are fairly obvious. Indeed, negative factors always seem to be the most recognizable when individuals are faced with a change. Our challenge as e-learning professionals is to find ways to motivate learners so the demotivators become less of an issue.

Sources of motivation

So, how do we motivate our online participants? Keep this list in mind when designing your online courses and interacting with your learners and you may be amazed at what a difference a little motivation makes.

Publish requirements and set expectations ahead of time.

Getting more work than you bargained for or taking a class that isn't appropriate isn't only demotivating, it can be downright aggravating. To ensure that learners are able to meet expectations, publish them ahead of time.

Create a Webpage containing a detailed course description, learning objectives, work assignments, and an estimate of the time it will take to complete all of the work. Explain the technology mix and any prerequisite requirements. Armed with

About the Author

Jennifer Hofmann is with InSync Training;
Jennifer@insynctraining.co

enough information, learners can make an informed choice about the appropriateness of the course for them. And if the course is required, at least individuals can try to balance their schedules to accommodate the workload.

Establish relevance. Many organizations have libraries with hundreds of off-the-shelf online learning programs. That's great, if the learners need the content. Before requiring someone to take a course (off-the-shelf or home grown), communicate the reasons why the content is important to the individual and the organization. If the learners don't understand the relevance, they will tend to the minimal amount necessary in order to complete the program.

Provide continuous encouragement. Email and other communications are great, cheap, and easy ways to encourage your online learners. Post a Frequently Asked Questions list on a discussion board, email reminders and offers of assistance, or personally call learners that aren't logging on. Knowing that a real person is watching over things helps to humanize the online environment, and motivates learners to stay engaged.

Use assessments. Surprisingly, assessment has been identified as a key motivator for online learners. Participants learn what they know will be assessed. Building in tests, requiring participation in discussion boards, or inviting supervisors to observe synchronous classes are all very effective techniques that are easy to implement. Publish the course requirements and assessment techniques, and let potential learners know that if they fail to meet the minimum requirements at the end of the course, they will need to take the class again.

Get supervisor and peer support. One of the most difficult parts about learning at your desks is the constant interruptions by those working around you. There's a perception that online learning can be interrupted, without much consequence. However, the reality is that once a learner is interrupted several times, retention falls and the number of learners who will complete the program dramatically lowers. Similarly, if a participant feels they need to work after-hours in order to complete a program, they'll grow to resent the medium. Learners should plan time to complete programs, inform their supervisors and peers, and should feel confident that the required time will be respected.

Market internally, market continuously. In a networked world, word gets around fast. Make sure the word about online learning is positive, and constantly reinforced by people that matter. An initial marketing burst without a continuing campaign will make your initiative appear to be another passing fad. But regular news about what courses are coming up and their importance to the organization will help employees understand that online learning is an integral part of the organization's learning culture. If online learning is "in", employees will want to be part of the crowd.

Make learning a management mandate. It's critical to have upper-level management support the idea that online learning is a vehicle for professional development in your organization. Get management involved by inviting them to record short presentations to welcome learners and encourage them to participate in the online initiative. If potential participants know that management is behind the initiative, they'll be more inclined to sign-up.

Offer rewards and recognition. It feels great to answer a question correctly, and to receive feedback from instructors and peers. Learners often don't expect positive reinforcement from online courses. Find ways to build in opportunity for tangible rewards and recognition--even for asynchronous programs. Provide completion certificates and publish a regular report containing the names of people who successfully finished courses. You can also link online learning programs to the performance management process, making it clear to participants that the time

they spend participating in online programs is recognized as contributing to their professional development.

Publicize success stories. Early technology adaptors will try anything, the rest of us need a little coaxing. Finding and publishing success stories about online learning in your organization is a great way to reassure tentative new learners that they can be successful learning online. Use the success stories to supplement your marketing effort.

Ensure personal success. Give learners the opportunity to be successful and they will come back! Do your best to create effective online learning environments, strong support systems, and well-designed programs right from the beginning. More important, provide early successes and ground-roots support for the organizational initiative.

To be sure, the latest technologies and best designs won't mean a thing if you can't answer that question, What's In It For Me? Conversely, introducing motivational components to your design isn't enough to create an effective online learning environment. Next month we'll take a close look at critical success factor #2 - creating opportunities for learners to collaborate and interact.

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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

