Is the tablet the whiteboard of the future for corporate training?

By Glenn Gillis   9 Jul 2013

No-one would dispute that corporate training is a necessary process for all organisations. Some might even say training is now more important than it has ever been.

Just take customer service training for example, which better deliver experiences in line with promises made via advertising, or inconsistencies will be exposed for all to see on social media platforms.

Yet training is often met with resistance from employees (and even their managers) who consider it to be boring, time-consuming, and maybe even unnecessary. Traditional class-room style training can even come across as condescending - taking the employee back to their school days when they were awarded less autonomy and more rules!

Logistics challenge

Another big challenge with corporate training is the logistics of planning and delivering a training program to a large number of employees at the same time. The practicality of getting everyone in one room is a mammoth task in itself, and this is especially the case with companies that have different branches across South Africa or Africa. For companies that are trying to reduce their carbon footprint, the environmental cost of transporting employees to their training destination is also a contentious issue.

These logistical challenges, along with the increasing prevalence of smart devices, have prompted many companies to integrate digital learning materials into their training programs. Instead of having everyone in one room, now training material can easily be sent directly to the employee's desktop, smart phone or tablet, so that they can go through the material at their convenience.

Across Africa, access to the internet is becoming ubiquitous in companies of any size, making digital training more and more of a realistic and beneficial alternative.

Generally, companies have already developed their training programs over the years, and have established the message and content they wish to deliver to their staff. With corporate training budgets also always being under pressure, companies are reluctant to do an overhaul of their established programs and are doubtful of the return value. So let's accept for now, that the content itself exists in most companies, albeit in traditional forms (PowerPoint, lesson plans and so on).

Making use of emergent content delivery methods

Is it enough then for companies simply to tweak their training programs to take advantage of the emergent content delivery methods? We are really still at the beginning stages of the so-called e-learning revolution, with a lot of functionality and learning potential being overlooked or dismissed before its value is really felt.

Remember when the internet first became globally accessible? At first, companies keen to take advantage of this new platform would eagerly scan in their existing brochures, price lists and flyers and upload them onto a single web page. This method would be considered outrageous today - why would anyone use a website simply as a viewing mechanism for their paper flyers? It is missing the point entirely, oblivious to the advantages that we have come to take for granted on modern websites.

In the same way, companies should be careful not to simply push their current content onto new digital platforms. Uploading existing presentations, PowerPoint presentations and other training material could simply be a matter of "paper behind glass". Without context, and a trainer delivering them, much of the content could be meaningless and confusing.

Companies should not miss a significant opportunity to take full advantage of the capabilities that e-learning platforms and smart devices provide. Imagine having your best trainer at work all the time, delivering the best learning experience consistently? Using all the skills that great trainers have, e-learning material should be story-driven, visual, fun and interactive. Words we don't often associate with PowerPoint, unfortunately.

Understanding staff needs

Companies should also be making an effort to understand how their staff's demands are evolving, and adapting their training material to incorporate these changes. Understanding the audience and finding ways to engage them is vital. People are expecting bite-size pieces of information on-demand - why should training be different?

In an African context, differing cultures, literacy levels and language can be a barrier that can be overcome with clever designed e-learning content. For example animation, interactivity and games can cut across these divides to drive home key ideas and truly drive changes in staff behaviour.

Clearly people also learn at different rates, and have different inherent knowledge and experiences that traditional teaching has difficulty dealing with. Smart devices allow uniquely customised learning pathways for each staff member. People can go through modules that are problematic several times at their own pace without the pressure that comes from class-room style learning.

And gamification, or the application of game theory to how people learn, interact and explore materials, is a proven way to drive engagement and return on training investment.

So in summary - little will ever replace great face-to-face learning, customised to each persons unique needs. Increasingly though this has become expensive, time-consuming and isn't without an environmental impact. Simply trying to replicate traditional learning onto smart devices would miss a significant opportunity to create new and cost-effective training interactions.

ABOUT GLENN GILLIS

Glenn Gillis is the managing director of Sea Monster Entertainment, one of South Africa's pre-eminent animation, gaming and augmented reality companies. He has a Business Science degree from UCT and has been an entrepreneur, hired gun, and consultant with growing, knowledge-intensive businesses around the world for over 25 years.
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