



HR MANAGEMENT: IDEAS & TRENDS NEWSLETTER

*Interview: Matt Levin and Stephen Abram
on the Disappointment and Promise of e-Learning*

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Matt Levin is Chief Business Development Officer with NewMindsets. Stephen Abram is Vice President of Corporate Development for Micromedia ProQuest. David Creelman got them together to get their perspective on why there is so much dissatisfaction with e-learning, what organizations have learned from the painful first experiences, and what the future holds for e-learning.

DC: There is a lot of disaffection with e-learning. How has it gone wrong?

SA: One mistake was delivering too much e-learning. Companies dumped 1,000 courses into a portal and then expected people to swim in there and find a relevant course. This left the user without the context in which to make an effective decision. They didn't know what level a course is aimed at. They didn't know which of the thousand courses is best for them. People wasted a lot of time trying to choose the right course and got frustrated.

It is more effective when HR and Education and Development departments choose the right courses just as effective libraries choose the right books.

DC: Matt, how do you see the problem?

ML: The way I view it is that traditional learning processes have been around for hundreds and hundreds of years; e-learning is still a work in progress. The reason e-learning has not reached its potential so far is that expectations were not managed appropriately when it was first introduced. We are learning as we go along; expectations for effectiveness were too high given that the initial offerings of e-learning were largely portals and streaming of books and text on to the computer screen.

E-learning was promised to increase productivity, lower costs, and increase the distribution of training opportunities. However, since the early offerings didn't meet the real needs of e-learners people didn't use these systems. Now, when we talk to potential buyers of second generation e-learning, they often say, "I have already invested in e-learning and it hasn't met my organization's needs."



DC: Have a lot of people made this mistake?

SA: Yes, and the problem is exacerbated because companies often have ten different courses from ten different learning paradigms. So when you go from course to course you have a whole learning curve on how to effectively use software.

DC: So even if HR had made a good selection of courses they could still run into a problem because the paradigms differ so much?

SA: Yes, for example one course might be reading-based—just a series of PowerPoint slides. A second might be activity-based where people are doing things as they go along. Yet another course might have mediators to help you understand the material. It's like being a ball in a pinball machine, you are constantly changing direction.

If you use the same learning paradigm throughout, people can focus on learning the content without having to adapt to the learning system over and over again.

DC: With traditional training each vendor would no doubt have their own way of providing instruction, yet that didn't seem to be a problem.

ML: What you say is true but we know that traditional methods didn't work well either. People would be flown around the world to attend courses at great expense and only retain 5-10% of what was taught.

There is also a difference between e-learning and classroom learning: in classroom learning the instructor can see the students and can tell if they are understanding the material. So, they can moderate their behavior, repeat things if necessary, and help ensure the student develops understanding. In an e-learning environment, that isn't possible.

DC: We have identified two areas where e-learning fails. What are the other reasons it has been a disappointment?

ML: To me it goes back to appreciating the momentum built up when e-learning was first introduced. We all saw the incredible statistics showing the amount of money business was spending on training and development. People promoting e-learning were saying we can slash training costs in half or more. They were saying we can bring high quality education to an entire work force. Those are bold statements. You had a massive splash and the expectations have not been met.



The other mistake was the assumption that you could drop a system on a company and magic would happen. Many providers thought you could take the people out of the equation. We have learned that for e-learning to really be magical it must be done in conjunction with person-to-person training, in conjunction with a coaching program, in conjunction with mentoring, in conjunction with formal classroom training, etc. For a variety of reasons this has not happened yet and that is why e-learning is not yet transforming organizations.

SA: I agree. Also, while many e-learning systems were designed to meet specific content needs they were not designed to deal with the barriers to learning, such as different learning styles, multiple intelligences, various web browsers and so on. Those sorts of things have to be handled seamlessly or they become a barrier for the learner.

DC: Is it fair to say e-learning has failed?

ML: I wouldn't say that there is failure. E-learning is still in the early adoption stage where the innovators are figuring out how to design the systems. People make value judgments as to whether something has succeeded or failed in the late adoption stage, where you are looking for references and successful case studies. E-learning is not at that stage yet.

DC: Where is e-learning succeeding?

SA: E-learning is especially good in two areas, IT skills and soft skills. IT skills training is well established because that market is more flexible in dealing with standard barriers to learning and technological literacy. For soft skills, there are new and better paradigms for skills delivery and content integration, such as NewMindsets.

ML: I agree that technical skills training has been highly effective, things like learning to use Microsoft Excel or gaining your network certificate. In terms of business skills, we have mixed results. In some areas it has been highly successful such as putting together a profit and loss statement, determining key ratios in finance, or determining credit standards in banking. In other areas it is not effective at all: business skills, organizing my department, dealing with conflict, giving feedback, polling employees and other management skills.



DC: You've explained that e-learning is still in its very early days and we need to draw on the lessons from our first experiences. Looking at e-learning, what is going to work well in the coming years?

ML: To be successful the place to start is to set your professional development and education strategy...

SA: ...in the context of the overall enterprise strategy.

ML: Absolutely. Then you need to match the medium of instruction with the need. With executive coaching, for example, e-learning can supplement but cannot replace a coach. There are certain content areas where e-learning is highly successful; there are other areas where it is not successful. You need to create a strategy for blended learning using multiple mediums to achieve organizational objectives.

SA: The critical thing that has been learned in the industry to date is that you can't move all your training to e-learning or distance education. Companies that try that are headed for disaster. The same thing happened in research; people thought they could move all their research to the Internet and that doesn't work either.

You need to have mentoring systems. You need to have classroom training. You need to reinforce your classroom with e-learning. You need to reinforce your e-learning with coaching and on the job advice. That kind of blended strategy will work very effectively and you will get the value of the investment you make in e-learning.

DC: What else will we see in terms of how e-learning is delivered?

SA: In the short term you are going to see a consultative approach between a company and one or more e-learning providers in how e-learning is organized and delivered.

The partnership will be a technology partnership, a learning strategy partnership, and a content partnership so some of your e-learning providers will be providing content that specifically matches your needs. Ten or twenty years from now you will be able to get some effective off-the-shelf programs, but for now you will not get the full value out of an e-learning strategy off the shelf. The value of e-learning for an enterprise is going to be in customization and thoughtful implementation. Eighty percent of your costs are in the implementation not on the content or the actual acquisition of the service, so you need to be careful to implement in the right way.



An organization that effectively understands its own people is better prepared to effectively adapt this technology. They will be far more successful because they understand the learning needs and can understand the gaps that exist in their organization.

DC: Do you have any closing remarks?

ML: I think that e-learning will ultimately meet the expectations that were set when e-learning started to explode a couple of years ago. It is going to take a lot more time and a lot more effort than originally anticipated. I don't think that e-learning is going to be a "killer app" in the next five to ten years. In the long term it has that potential but a lot of transformations need to play out before we are there.

Moreover, I think that buyers of e-learning services need to have more experience using different types of solutions and developing long-term strategies that integrate e-learning into their organizational development plans. They need to find the right space within those plans where you put e-learning to highly effective use.

Finally, there has been a lot of consolidation recently but we are a long way off from an effective or fully developed e-learning industry. There needs to be a lot more collaboration between the system houses, portals, and the content providers. I think that ultimately the content providers are going to be the ones who will drive the industry and the solutions to clients, rather than the pure systems players.

SA: I would add that we are at the point in the maturity of the industry that people have to get involved. If you are not involved with e-learning now you are not going to be prepared to deal with what comes next. This is a similar situation to when companies were trying to adopt PCs in 1978, or the Web in 1995, or e-mail in the early 1980's. Those who adopted early ended up going through the learning curve and knew how to make the right decisions when it was time.

Partnering with a couple of good e-learning firms and then moving up the learning curve will give companies that competitive advantage. We are developing a new technological information ecology that merges issues like learning management, content management, intranet, and knowledge management. These are the building blocks that you are going to need for competitive advantage and success in the future. Those who wait for it to happen are going to be passed-by by those who adopted early and learned.

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