



An E-Learning Primer

Online Training for Rehab Professionals and Staff

By Melissa S. Cohn, OTR/L

"E-learning," the electronic version of distance learning, is one of *the fastest* growing trends in higher education. Research has shown that 57 percent of U.S. companies already have Internet- or Intranet-based learning management systems in place¹, and that number is increasing.

One factor driving the growth of e-learning in healthcare is the necessity of compliance with new HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) requirements and privacy standards. HIPAA training is especially well suited for e-learning, because the content is standard, primarily informational, and can be distributed fast and efficiently.

For rehab providers, investing in *an* e-learning program can reduce the costs currently associated with employee education and training. Blended with traditional, hands-on training, e-learning can optimize employees' clinical competencies. A comprehensive e-learning system can allow physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists and other healthcare professionals to earn CEUs, and meet licensure and certification requirements, without taking time away from their work.

This overview of e-learning is intended to enable rehab providers to make informed decisions regarding the investment in and integration of an e-learning initiative for their organization.

What is E-Learning?

Known previously as "distance learning," "online learning," "Web-based," "Net-based" or "Internet-based" training, E-learning is defined as "structural content or learning experiences delivered or enabled by electronic technologies²." These include online courses, Intranet courses, LAN-based, streaming audio or streaming video, communication with online experts or mentors, "live" e-learning, and virtual environments. The context can be either synchronous (live, in real time), involving interactivity with an instructor, or asynchronous (self-paced, at any time), involving a self-study venue and electronic tutors within the courseware.

Your company's e-learning program can be as simple as posting a self-directed course on the Internet, or can combine various courses and electronic methods to ensure that employees can retrieve "just-in-time" information, whether critical knowledge, skills development, or mentoring and support.

E-learning also can allow businesses, institutions and professional associations to outsource teaching to specialized companies, without having to develop the needed training infrastructure on their own, yet without taking employees away from their work.

The Benefits of E-learning

For Employees: Online learners benefit from the flexibility and convenience of being able to access "self-service" online education from anywhere, at any time, without absences from work and family. E-learning can provide lively involvement with interactive course materials and fellow students, email access to instructors, and a user-friendly Internet environment. Students can interact with the course materials and take quizzes and exams at their own pace.

For Employers: The Boston Business Journal estimated that e-learning could save businesses more than 30 percent of the costs of traditional classroom training by eliminating employee travel expenses and reducing time away from work. Being able to study at any computer, 24 hours a day, seven days a week allows busy professionals to acquire knowledge and skills, earn CEUs and meet licensure requirements without having to take time off from the job. Moreover, your company can assure training in your policies and procedures by tailoring and updating your own proprietary information in easily modified online courses.

In the rehab industry, theoretically, savings could reach 50 to 75 percent. Every dollar spent on an employee's attending a classroom course incurs as much as three dollars in related costs for travel, hotel, meals, lost days, and hiring a replacement to ensure that patient treatment obligations are met. *In essence, your company pays for two therapists during the time that the therapist is gaining continuing education, with no additional revenues during that time period.* E-learning systems can track each

employee's completed courses, CEUs earned to date, and hours of online learning, realizing further savings in human resources monitoring and recording.

The Best E-Learner

"Self-starters" and students who are *able to* self-regulate will be more successful at e-learning, and are more likely to enjoy it. Generally, an estimated 70 percent of adult learning is self-directed, as people try to gain new knowledge and skills to improve their performance. E-learning, which requires self-discipline and the ability to study independently, is well suited for healthcare professionals, who tend to be self-motivated and to have superior analytical skills. Therapists and clinicians are trained to be self-motivated in their work with patients, tailoring programs to individuals' needs, managing their time, planning, processing, and evaluating progress—all largely self-regulated activities.

E-learning takes advantage of the fact that vast numbers of American adults are already skilled in using the Internet and email—88 percent of college graduates and 52 percent of high school graduates, according to a 2002 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. In some cases, e-learning can help employees develop computer skills that will help advance their careers. While senior employees may require some time to develop a level of comfort with e-learning, the younger generation of healthcare professionals feel very much at home on the Internet. Some students, in fact, find that they are less shy about speaking up in online chat rooms than in the traditional classroom.

Not all people prefer the self-directed option to more formal experiences such as teacher-directed courses. Some adults, lacking independence, confidence or resources, are incapable of engaging in self-directed learning.

What Are Your Organization's Education and Training Needs?

The plethora of different e-learning options that are available to you can seem bewildering. Before investing in an e-learning system, your company must develop an operationally and fiscally sound e-learning solution that will suit your goals, opportunities and resources. Be sure you have a good understanding of your

company's training needs. Large organizations with several field offices and diverse employees will have different requirements than small companies with one site said predictable staff development needs.

There are two major components to developing an e-learning program: a *Learning Management System (LMS)*—software to manage every aspect of the training experience—and the all-important *content*.

LMS's are the most popular in the e-learning market due to their broad functionality. These e-learning systems can launch courses, offer registration capabilities, provide automated course catalogues, automatic assessment components, provide resource management, as well as administrative features including tracking and reporting mechanisms. The majority of LMS application suppliers in this fiercely competitive market use the Microsoft Office suite of products to power their e-learning software, making it hard to distinguish different companies' wares from one another.

The content is the essence of the course and the multimedia support materials used to create a meaningful learning experience. Course content can be developed in a variety of ways to enhance desired learner outcomes and provide seamless delivery. Course architecture has become an art in and of itself, where designers use available materials to re-purpose into course modules, or develop new materials. The provision of clear and concise content is important, and will determine the quality of the online experience.

Some questions to consider for developing an e-learning program aligned with the needs of your company:

- Is e-learning, or training itself, the right solution for you? Sometimes training is expected to solve problems that are unrelated issues.
- What is the potential number of e-learners /system users per month? Will mat number grow over the next 12 months?
- How many online courses do you want to make available to your employees? How long and comprehensive will each course be?

- Will you need multimedia content and other technologies to enhance content delivery? Graphics, animation, music, sound, video, humor, game elements, live web-links, chat rooms and activities keep content engaging and interactive.
- Do you need a comprehensive, enterprise-wide Learning Management System (LMS)?
- Will you need a secure server and e-commerce connection?
- Will you have buy-in from top management to assure reinforcement and support of your e-learning program?
- Do you need to demonstrate the ROI of moving your training program online? An e-learning system can be expensive, even when less than traditional training. ROI can be hard to pinpoint in dollar calculations. The key questions will be: is it efficient, saving on travel and time? Is it effective? Do your employees like it?
- Are you comfortable with your chosen vendor? Does your contract include a "way out"?

What Investment Is Required To Initiate and Maintain Your E-Learning Program?

Organizations who are considering the integration of an e-learning initiative have an overwhelming array of products and vendors to choose from, as well as many decisions to make regarding its applicability and functionality related to the organization's needs. Depending upon the size and scope of your e-learning program, your investment can range from a few thousand dollars to hundreds of thousands. An important consideration: an experienced e-learning manager or consultant is essential to ensure the successful implementation of an E-learning initiative.

There are several ways to incorporate content in a LMS. Content can be developed in-house or purchased. Buying off-the-shelf courses costs the least, building courses of components slightly more, and costs are highest for building custom courses. A blended option, some purchased, some built may be appropriate to meet the needs.

These decisions must be made on the front end, prior to choosing an e-learning platform, to assure that content and delivery will function collaboratively.

Your preliminary costs may include:

- A contract with an Application Service Provider (ASP), a company that hosts applications on its own server and provides access to them over the Internet, for a fee. Using an ASP frees your company from the cost and effort of software installation and upgrades
- Software that allows you to create your own online courses. Most often this involves putting your content into an existing template through an intuitive interface.
- Management system software and tools may be required to maintain your e-learning program.
- Most online courses have essential hardware requirements for running them. Optimum computer requirements will include; a 266-MHz Pentium or equivalent processor; 32 Megabytes of free Ram; 200 Megabytes of free hard drive space; a 16-bit sound card; a cable modem, ISDN, or T1 connection to the Internet; and speakers or headphones. Optimal software requirements will be Microsoft Internet Explorer version 5.0 or higher, Mac OS 9.0 or higher; and Windows 98 or higher.

During the last few years, new content, technology and service solution providers have entered the market in droves, accompanied by expensive brochures and loads of support materials and information that can cause confusion in sorting out all the components and make it difficult to make well-informed choices. The buyer must beware, and gain as much knowledge as possible before moving ahead.

E -Learning Tips

Incorporating e-learning into a company's culture brings a major change. It may take some period of adjustment for your employees. But with the correct amount of introductory information, your people and your technology will be ready to implement self-directed training.

The swirl of hype and glamour currently associated with the novelty of e-learning can obscure some truths about this exciting new tool. E-learning won't solve all of your problems, but it is a potent addition to the arsenal. Some content does not move easily to e-learning, and hands-on experience may be essential to some courses. An effective and coherent e-learning strategy will also involve classroom learning, on-the-job training, peer assistance, and assessment of performance and skills.

References

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Executive consultant Melissa S. Cohn, OTR/L is founder and CEO of The Dynamic Group, comprising Dynamic Healthcare Solutions, Dynamic Seminars, and Dynamic Learning Online, Inc.

Melissa can be reached at 813.855.2876 or via email @ mcohn@tampabay.rr.com

Dynamic Learning Online assists healthcare organizations in establishing and implementing appropriate e-learning solutions for professionals and staff, offering a range of flexible options at www.dynamic-online.com