

talking point

Giving them what they want:

Information vs learning

by Alan Nelson



I recently asked a group of Road Hauliers whether they would be interested in learning about how the Internet could help to develop their business. I didn't get much enthusiasm. Then I asked them whether they knew about a website that could give them up to date information about how long the queue at the Dartford Tunnel was, or a site that told them the price of Diesel at service stations across Europe. This time I had some volunteers!

Online learning

The Internet has created an exciting new environment for learning. It changes the rules in all sorts of ways: it puts learners in charge and makes them believe they can find the solution to their problem.

But for many HR and self-development professionals this is a pretty scary idea. An unstructured environment that puts the learners in charge sounds a lot like anarchy. Which of course is pretty much what the web is.

If online learning is going to work, it must reflect everything that is best about the Internet. Clearly there is a need for structure but not at the expense of the new found freedom that people have so much enjoyed on the web.

Satisfying the demand

We all know that people are learning at a faster pace than ever before – taking on new ideas and skills at an amazing rate – but when was the last time you heard someone say, "Today I'd like to do some learning"?

The use of the Internet and of computers in general is making us focus on shorter and shorter pieces of information and giving us the idea that maybe we can control things:

Why should I go on a course if I can find out what I need on my own?

I don't need to learn; there's just some stuff that I don't know yet.

Let's go back to the road hauliers I mentioned. They had given me an idea. An idea that maybe in order to get people to focus on learning, I had to find a new way of presenting it to them. What we have since discovered by developing online learning resources and watching people use them, is that by doing away with the distinction between

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information and learning, we can use people's thirst for easily accessible knowledge to drive their learning.

If you don't believe me ask John Faulkner, Chairman of the Kent Transport and Distribution Sector Group and MD of Intercity Trucks Ltd: "The identification of websites which are a source of further advice and information is a revelation which still affects the way we do business."

Or Mike Creasey, the Deputy Director of Multimedia at South Nottingham College, who said of our learning

resource for photographers, "In summary, excellent. The links are good and there was just enough information to inform, but not to frighten."

Doesn't everyone want to know something different?

Absolutely. So it's important to help them find the thing they are looking for as quickly as possible. If you waste their time on things they already know or that aren't relevant, they may not stay around long enough to reach the good stuff.

Ask people what they want to find out about and let them start there – in an online programme everyone can move at their own pace and you avoid the old chestnut in stand up training of 50% of the people either being ahead of you or behind.

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You will also have to deal with people looking for real detail in one area while not wanting to be confused by the same amount of detail in another. It's all about the way you structure and organise the material.

Will people learn if you give them this sort of freedom?

Good question. Only if they find what they are looking for and come to trust that they will again.

Sometimes trainers focus on the fact that if you don't have the learners in a classroom together, you can't control whether they keep at it – you can't stop them leaving the virtual room. Learning developers have put all their energies into clever ways of controlling people online.

But this kicks against the wonderfully anarchistic nature of the Internet. If you ask people to do A then B then C online, you can be sure that a good proportion will do C first just to see what happens and just because they can! The best online learning programmes make a virtue of this. They don't control people and stop them doing things, but persuade them to stay involved by making the experience engaging and interactive and making it feel personal. Don't just assume either that things need to be linear. For many topics, a non-linear approach can be an ideal way of personalising the experience.

But can people learn just by being given access to information?

Not really no. Or at least some can but only a few. That is why it is so important to balance the provision of information with the development of really interactive learning resources. We do it by building two parallel websites and linking them: a sort of yin and yang of development.

Lead with highly relevant information to draw the learner in and give them some easy wins, and then back it up with effective developmental activities.

We describe the experience as walking through a library built specially for you with an expert or coach talking to you, pointing things out that they think might be of interest.



So what next?

There are some amazing success stories in online learning – large groups of people taking on new ideas and new ways of thinking at a very low cost per learner. But there are also plenty of examples of poor practice. If you want to get this right you will have to work through it systematically. Here are some useful rules that we have set ourselves:

Define your market

You need to be clear about who you are developing an online resource for. Identify constituencies of learners that have something in common. It could be the same job function – marketing managers or financial controllers – or members of the same team. They may be geographically in the same place. There are many different things that tie a group together, but the better you define this the more able you will be to research sources of information that will excite them and draw them in.

Get to know the learners

You need to know what makes this group tick. It was clear when we worked with Road Hauliers that they cared a lot about the price of diesel; with photographers it was the decline of the reprint business that worried them. In both cases when we showed them ways in which they could get information about these issues, we got them on our side. We were lucky to get the chance to work with focus groups; without their contribution we would never have succeeded so well.

Structure the information

You need to have a very clear structure to the information part of your resource, otherwise people will be confused and turn off before they find anything to interest them. Prepare a structure diagram and be ready both to apply the rules that govern it and to change them as you unearth new sources of information.

Balance learning and information

You need to strike the right balance. Too much information and you end up with nothing more than a reference work; too much learning and people will turn away – remember, they never said they wanted to learn. Use the separation of the two resources to balance depth of content with simplicity of structure.

If you get this right, the results will be powerful. The excitement of the Internet coupled with the structure of the classroom.

Remember, you can be their coach, walking with them through the library they had always hoped to find.

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