



The best way to improve services cost-effectively is by providing staff with online training and development facilities, says **Alan Nelson**

As the government continues to push for more ambitious efficiency targets, what exactly are the 'opportunities' that Varney cites in his report, *Service Transformation: A Better Service for Citizens and Businesses, A Better Deal for Taxpayers*, and what role does training and development have to play?

There's no straightforward answer to that, but one thing is clear, training and development is going to be at the centre of many of these moves. What local government is being asked to deliver can't be achieved just through clever cost-cutting – this is about being smarter about the way we do things, making sure we are getting the most out of our people and doing things efficiently, all while ensuring an improved service is being provided

to the taxpayer.

There is no way this can be achieved without adding skills to our workforce and improving the ones they already have. We are asking our staff to work more efficiently and, in many cases, to become experts in a variety of areas, not just in their specialisation.

How can we achieve this without spending more money? The secret is to find a way of delivering training and development to these people that is not only better, but also costs less. How is this possible, I hear you cry! The answer is, without a doubt, e-learning. Not only is it better, but it is more cost effective. The perfect Varney solution!

So why is it better? We hear all sorts of reasons from our learners, but here are some of the advantages of e-learning that are most frequently voiced:

Flexible: e-learning provides a flexibility of delivery that traditional training just can't do. No longer do you have to wait for a 'quota' to run a training session. If you have an online programme it is available for the individual when they need it. Gone are the days of new hires waiting three months for their induction.

Accessible: you can't talk about e-learning without mentioning accessibility. And it is the changing face of our workforce that is driving the need for accessible training. A recent survey of professionals suggested that 42% would choose to do some or all of their learning online. The same survey showed that if you are a woman under 30, this increased to nearly 65%. Many, especially those who are not office-based, value the opportunity to fit learning around their work, their clients and their personal life. In many ways, that need

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“Training staff must be at the heart of improving services cost-effectively”

not be as disruptive as a face to face event. Anyone who wants to promote the work-life balance should think seriously about providing e-learning opportunities for their staff.

Inclusive: we’ve all heard it said that, with a face-to-face course, the trainer will at any one time have only 50% of the learners truly engaged. The rest are either way ahead and getting a little bored, or way behind and trying not to be noticed, for fear of being asked a question. That’s why online learning is the

ultimate ‘safe place to learn’. With e-learning, you can’t get left behind or be held back by your classmates – you go at your own pace. What’s more, if you want to comment,

you can share your ideas with colleagues and discuss them online. E-learning enables everyone to do this, and they will all be ‘heard’, not just those who have the loudest voices. **Up-to-date:** this isn’t necessarily true of all e-learning. You need to pick suppliers carefully, but if you do, e-learning can be designed in a way that makes it easy and cost-effective to update. For example, the IRRV’s Euclidian programmes are all updated as and when changes happen, they even invite users

to suggest changes and can act on those suggestions quickly. So, if you were to access your Euclidian Benefit Pro course on 1 April, all 30 modules would already have been updated to include the new rates. And because it’s online, you make one change centrally and know that everyone is now viewing the most up-to-date version. The same can’t be said about a manual or a CD-ROM course.

Measurement: it’s up to you how you use it, but e-learning provides an unparalleled opportunity to monitor learning centrally. One application of this is the new training needs analysis tools offered by the IRRV. Judith Johnson of Cherwell District Council has put all of her benefits officers through these assessments. “This has enabled us to identify areas (topics) where training is needed across the whole team as well as training just for specific officers,” writes Judith. A fantastic tool for development planning, all achieved through some simple web-based reports.

One often missed benefit of monitoring and measuring is that you can learn lots from it. You can see who is doing what and when and for how long. So, not only can you see which courses are popular, but which bits of courses are engaging people most. This information can help you hone your training so what you offer is really what is required.

And most importantly, you can get all these benefits at a lower cost than traditional training as well. Where you have a large audience to train on a particular topic, like health and safety or equality and diversity, it really is a no-brainer. The savings are immense. In a recent article in *People Management*, Tracy Connage, Deputy Director of HR and Diversity at Brent Council, talked of saving £116,000 by putting 2,500 staff through health and safety training online, as opposed to face-to-face.

Where you have people of different experience or knowledge, it can be more cost-effective to develop one course, but one which offers flexible routes through the content, than it is to develop several versions of the same course. Because it allows learners to personalise their learning, you can cater for a wide variety of levels and types of experience. The same cannot be said of traditional methods, which dictate that all learners learn the same stuff, at the same pace.

In short, if you source it carefully, e-learning can not only save you money but it can provide you with a better learning experience as well. So if you want to make sure your staff are ready for the challenges facing local authorities today, you should definitely consider the e-learning option. ■

Alan Nelson is co-founder and Managing Director of Nelson Croom. Nelson Croom develops online learning programmes for adult professional learners. Their programmes include the Euclidian suite of products developed in partnership with the IRRV