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A Map for Implementing or Re-inventing eLearning Successfully

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Many companies still waste time and money on training techniques that are no longer efficient.

We have all met them, those stuck in the notion "face to face training is the only way people learn". Arguably, if this were the case it would only be so in rare circumstances. Organisations that adopt the 'face-to-face training only' approach run a very real risk of not adequately meeting their organisational training needs today let alone into the future.   Similarly, organisations that were early adopters of eLearning over 5 years ago in Australia and have remained with the same technology are in the same position. Still stuck with the same outdated and underperforming LMS. Outsourcing to media companies to build grandiose, expensive eLearning courses, that look more like a Nintendo game than a training course. They haven't reinvented and moved to a rapid eLearning approach, and joined the stampede!

In business, what worked yesterday can become obsolete quickly. It's easier for companies to expand globally, to keep up with the demand in a competitive environment. The ability to keep your geographically dispersed employees and sales channels up to speed and informed is becoming more of a challenge. The need to distribute knowledge and information quickly to the workforce is ever changing in the economy. New technologies change the way people think and do business. It is a powerful tool to communicate and transfer knowledge and information. To be successful, companies must get their information out quickly and efficiently. Time is crucial to compete in today's environment.
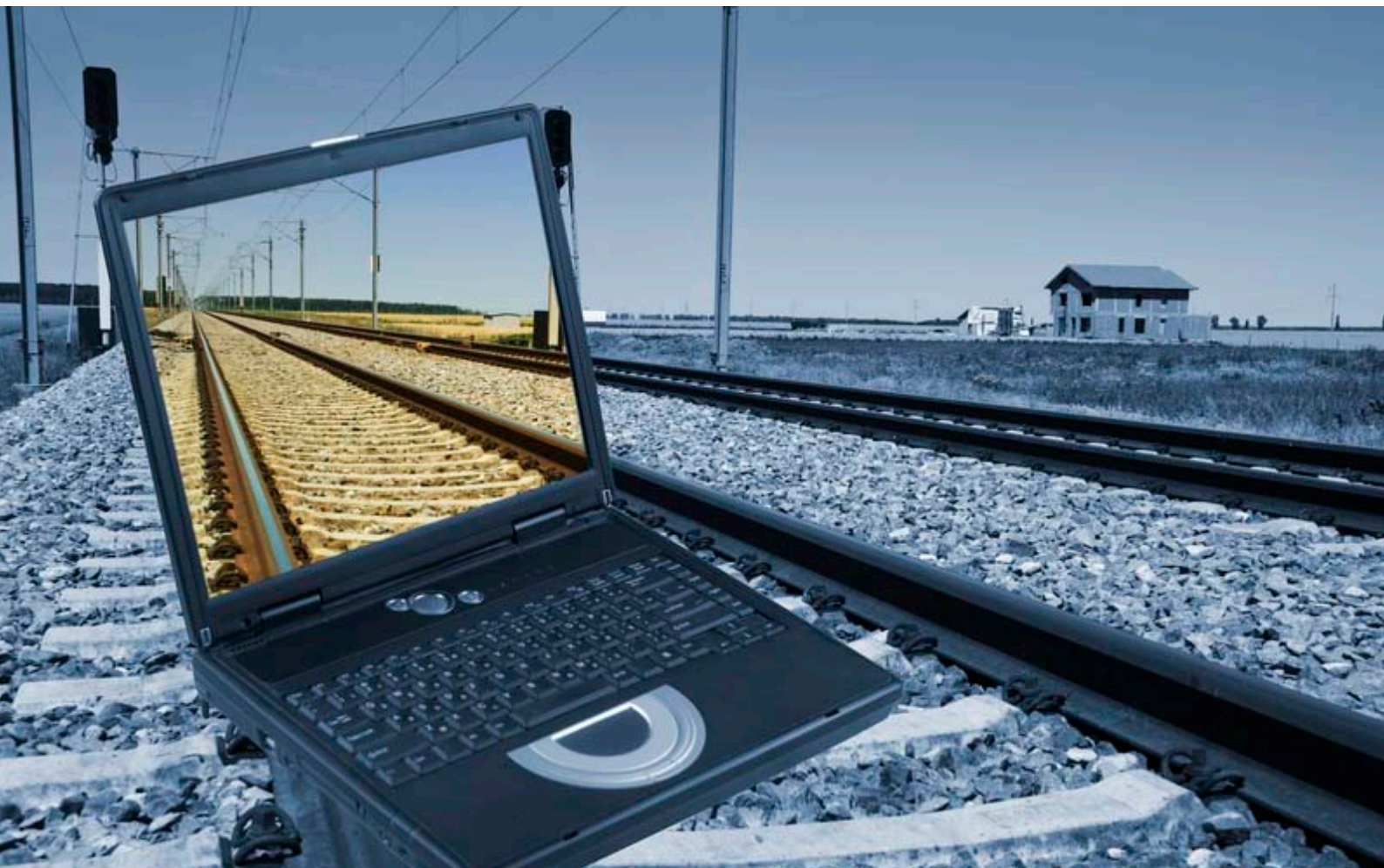
The implementation or reinvention of eLearning in any organisation involves large investments of time, money and resources. Reputations are at stake and a reluctance to adhere to change is prevalent. Good performance results are vital.

Hence, an implementation or reinvention map is required to ensure a smooth journey.

1. Strategy

eLearning solutions are often promoted and endorsed without a clear understanding of the strategic objectives they are intended to serve.

There are generally 4 reasons why an organisation is currently eLearning or implementing:
- to meet the service expectations of employees and stakeholders
- to enhance the quality of the employee learning experience
- to improve access and flexibility for employees
- to deliver training services more efficiently

The key challenge for managers with respect to strategy is to ensure that the organisation's strategy drives eLearning strategy. Often an organisation's eLearning strategy will be a solution-based plan that a committed group of enthusiasts some what detached from the broader strategic goals of the organisation has developed.

One of the key considerations is to determine where you want to be, but also take a close look at where you are in terms of eLearning and identify what you are doing well and what needs to change or improve. It's no use coming up with blue sky scenarios and ideas when you don't have the basics worked out.

To ensure its success, the eLearning strategy must be directly linked to key business drivers.
❶ Align eLearning with business goals of the organisation
❷ Identify the business impact of eLearning
❸ Develop the eLearning vision, mission and policy
❹ Identify and empower an eLearning driver or champion
❺ Form an eLearning champion team to develop a winning eLearning design and monitor its progress
❻ Form an eLearning unit for its implementation and production
❼ Obtain the continuous support from the management

Primary questions managers might ask under the Strategy area are:
- What are the medium and long-term strategic goals and objectives of the organisation?
- How does the Learning and Development Plan reflect these?
- How do the more specific plans for eLearning reflect these?
- Who makes the decisions about which courses and programmes will make use of eLearning and how they will do so?
- What problem will this technology solve or help us with?
- What is the priority?
- Will we suffer if we simply don't adopt it?
- Will it open up new markets (geographic, demographic, subject) for us?

2. Design

The design concept tells everybody who you are and what you intend to accomplish. It is developed by the team and brings together all their thoughts and ideas of how the eLearning should look. Two suggestions to develop the concept are:

- **Brainstorm a mindmap** – (and their next of kin, concept maps) are great tools to draw out ideas and demonstrate connections using common brainstorming methods (six hats, e-learning square). Check out this great website to help with mind mapping for eLearning http://theelearningcoach.com/elearning_design/designing-with-mind-maps/

> **No matter which format you choose, the following key elements should be included in your design**
> ❶ The type of learning: information, performance strengthening, knowledge building
> ❷ The approach: live, on demand, social networking or blended
> ❸ The content: off-the-shelf/custom developed, outsourced/in-house/mix
> ❹ The delivery: LMS/Website/Intranet/ CD/Mobile
> ❺ The assessment: Formal/informal, Online/Practical

- **Create a flowchart** – these are easy-to-understand diagrams that show how steps in a process fit together. It is also a useful tool for communicating how processes work, and for clearly documenting how the eLearning will be deployed. Furthermore, the act of mapping a process out in flow chart format helps you clarify your understanding, and helps you think about where it can be improved. Flowcharting can also be used to storyboard the content, but more on that later.

Today different design strategies can coexist happily together to meet learner and organisational needs. Rather than seeing the selection of design strategy as either/or propositions, see them as choices made to best meet learner and organisational needs. That is, you can use a combination of instruction and information, classroom, online, synchronous and asynchronous, and informal and rapid instructional design to improve training outcomes.
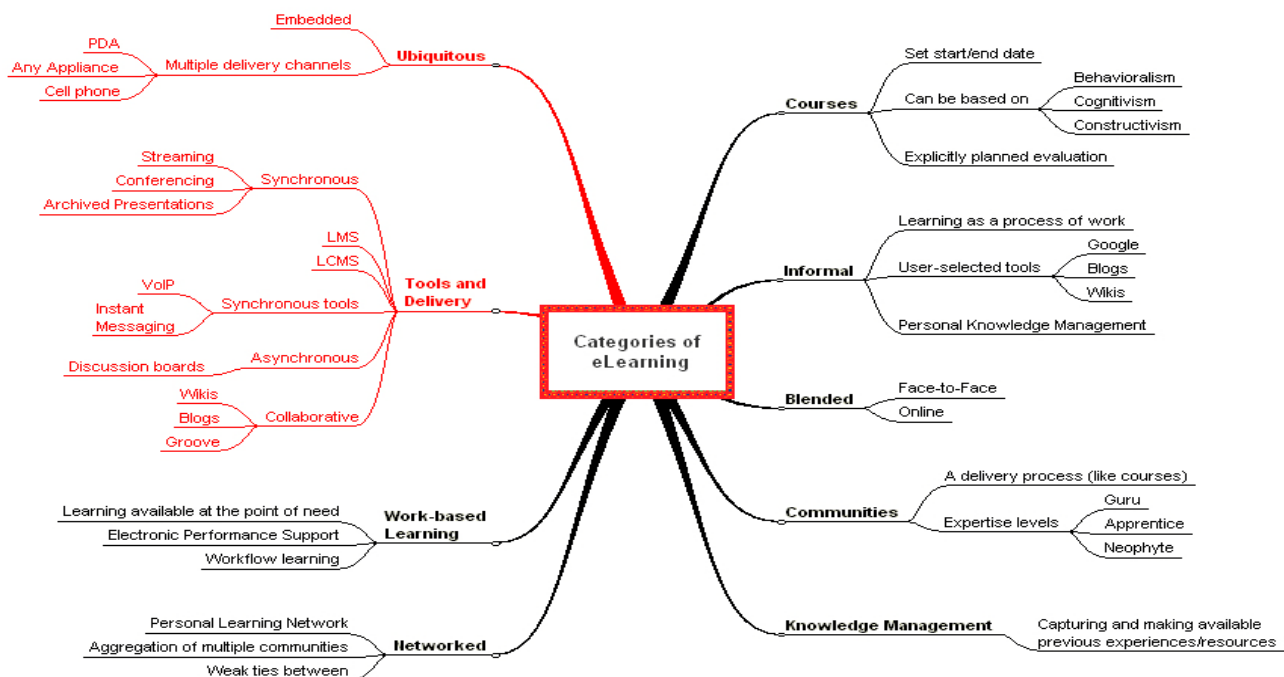

Diagram from http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/elearningcategories.htm

Primary questions to answer under the Design area are:

- How should you organise and manage the eLearning?
- Who should be responsible for what and how should their efforts be integrated and led?
- What type, approach, content ,delivery and assessment methods will we use?
- How do we measure employee performance against learning outcomes?

3. Resourcing

There are many steps in the eLearning development process. Even an organisation with an existing, experienced, development team may need to consider outsourcing from time to time. You need to identify and evaluate the pros and cons carefully and think through the implications. Managers should view the opportunities for outsourcing on a case-by-case basis rather than decide one way or the other.

Inhouse	Outsource
• You may need to select and employ one or more people to form your team. • Staff will probably need training in the design of interactive lessons and in the use of the authoring tools, but such training may have a low priority and status in your organisation. • You are in direct control. • Access the latest specialist software. • Fewer intellectual property or copyright problems should arise. • Maintenance of the product should be easier. • Your staff will enhance their skills. • You aren't relying on a contractor's schedule.	• The contractor will need regular assistance from a project manager within the organisation. This can be a significant unanticipated commitment. • Changes to the materials after stages have been signed off may be expensive. • Contractors may find it difficult to pick up specialised procedures so you may need to allow for a subject matter expert to assist. Another unanticipated commitment. • Are regarded as experts and may be more credible than internal developers. • Generally more expensive. • More aware of recent developments.

Typically the roles and responsiblities of a rapid eLearning proiect are:

Role	Responsibility
Project leader	Project management (targets, budget, team); liaison with client and subject experts; installation and maintenance of the package; management of piloting and evaluation.
Subject matter expert	Content analysis and curriculum design; programme planning; planning and implementation of piloting and evaluation.
Rapid developer	Storyboard/script/authoring ready material, instructional design, video/audio editing and i integration, image manipulation.
Graphic designer	Interface and screen templates design
Flash developer	Development of custom flash animation.
Video production	Produce and edit videos.
LMS Administrator	Imports content to the learning management system. Review and test course to validate content, functionality, compatibility, ability to integrate effectively, and alignment with brand and standards.

Two or more of the roles may overlap in some smaller teams. The roles of subject matter expert and developer are often combined in the rapid eLearning world. Depending on your LMS your rapid developer can import the courses with one click of a button, instead of integrating with third

Primary questions to answer under the Resourcing area are:
- Should you build up an in-house team or contract out development?
- What are the implications for staff workload? Can this be managed?
- Can our trainers manage this technology themselves or will they be depending on supplort personnel?
- What are the implications of team development?

party content repositories. In other teams a particular area of responsibility may be separately allocated to one person. For example the in-house proofing may be the role of a specific team member rather than one of the many duties of the project leader.

Titles also vary widely and the rapid developer is sometimes called the author. Some skills sets remain distinct: instructional design, for example, requires pedagogical skills (such as devising questions and giving feedback) whereas flash developer requires programming skills (such as coding). Team size varies from one to two people to (in larger organisations) teams of about eight. In-house teams tend to be smaller (typically three or four members) than specialist providers, who may also support a video production resource (in-house teams tend to subcontract this function).

In organisations with little previous experience of eLearning, the existing team (if there is one) are unlikely to have the skills and knowledge required to perform most of these eLearning functions. In some respects an educational institution, such as a university, may actually be at a disadvantage in comparison with a business enterprise, due to the culture of maintaining 'lecturing' as an educational paradigm established by centuries of precedent. If this is the case an eLearning training provider that also has extensive experience in developing eLearning solutions for businesses should be engaged.

4. Content

This is the stage where you build your design concept. This is really what will make or break your eLearning strategy. It needs to be yawn proof, engaging, easily accessed but most of all the user needs to learn from it. A badly scoped and / or mapped out content structure can be a developer's nightmare. So this is where time needs to go into getting the structure right from the start.

Let's revisit our design strategy and identify its different components.

Type	**Information (receptive)**: The goal of the course is to add information to the learner's memory. **Performance strengthening (directive):** The goal of the course is to teach procedures and require performance demonstration. **Knowledge building (guided discovery):** The goal of the course is to teach principles and guidelines the learner will use in unpredictable situations on the job.
Approach	Both **Live (synchronous) and On demand (asynchronous)** delivery methods are used for Rapid eLearning. Synchronous training is when students and teachers meet at a specific time and the teacher leads the training session. Asynchronous is when training material is made available on the web and students access it as needed. **Social networking** allows for people to 'connect' with each other online. People can share ideas, experiences and knowledge about a particular subject area or topic of interest. This forms a 'community of practice'. Social learning communities or communities of practice can capture this informal learning that takes place in an organisation. It saves time and money if implemented correctly and effectively. It can also allow for collaboration, co-authoring , mentoring, sharing or resources and peer review between employees. Learning doesn't only happen inside the classroom!
Content	We have already addressed the question of outsource or in-house or using a mix of these in the previous section. Off-the-shelf/custom developed, really depends on the company. Some companies find it more meaningful to their employees to have the images branded for their company. They find it more reflective of their company culture. In some cases, if you have something custom built, as things change in your company, you can edit/add/upgrade to make the information more relevant or particular to you. From a customer perspective, there are things like human resources trainings that are readily available as off-the-shelf. But it really depends on how much control you want to have over the content.

Delivery A Learning Management System, or LMS, is a software package that allows the management of learning content and resources. Most systems are web-based to facilitate "anytime, anywhere" access to learning content and administration. At a minimum, it usually allows for the delivery and tracking of eLearning courses and content through SCORM, and may also allow for the management of instructor-led training classes as well. If you don't have, or don't plan to purchase an LMS, you can deliver the course content via CD-ROM, through the internet or your intranet.

Assessment By assessing performance you discover if your learners have retained knowledge on all the key learning points you included in your eLearning programme. Depending on the type of eLearning it is, you can choose the assessment to be formal or informal.

- It may be part of a qualification and so you have to assess their knowledge.

- You have to prove to external bodies that all your learners have completed and reached a minimum level of knowledge (e.g. compliance training).

- It is part of an overall blended approach and you only want learners who have reached a certain level of knowledge going on to the next stage (which could be a workshop).

- If there is a practical component to the course, for example a Manual Safety course, where users have to perform various tasks in front of a supervisor, this can be marked off on the LMS using a mobile device.


Case Study

A mobile phone company have developed a design concept to transfer their face to face sales program to eLearning. Their concept looks like this:

❶ The type of learning: Information
❷ The approach: Blended with on demand and social networking
❸ The content: In-house with some outsourcing for custom Flash activites
❹ The delivery: In-house LMS and social networking tool (accesible on Smartphone)
❺ The assessment: Online

They have all the face to face training material including course notes, powerpoint presentations, videos and freeform tests. By having a social networking tool their users will be able to share the latest sales information and techniques and network with their peers to find answers to questions or help with problems. By making it accessible on their Smartphones, users can access informaton anywhere, anytime.

The stages of the content strategy would look like this:
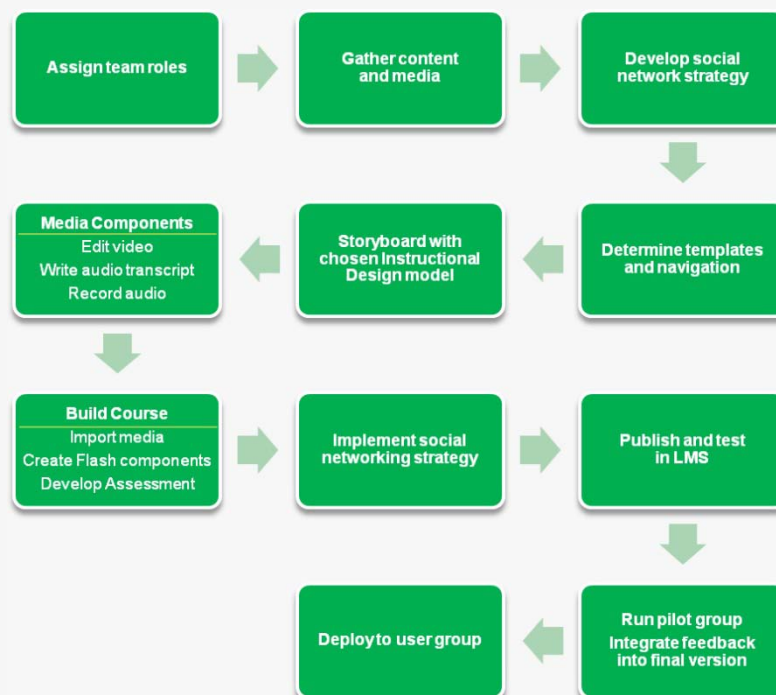
5. Technology

eLearning technology encompasses a broad range of applications of technology that are used to support the process of learning including development, communication, evaluation, management and administration to create online educational materials or eLearning courses. The design concept identifies what technology you will require to deliver your eLearning. Some of these are often very high cost items in terms of capital and recurring costs so it's very important to match your requirements appropriately with the desired solution.

The most important technologies include:	Specifications to consider include:
• **Rapid authoring tools** used to build your eLearning courses such as Articulate, Atlantlic LInk, Lectora or Adobe Captivate • **Learning Management Systems** to deliver or deploy your eLearning which also is used to track, administer and assess your Learners such as LearnFlex by Operitel, SABA, Sumtotal • **Social networking** to foster a collaborative eLearning community such as Facebook and LearnFlex Connect	• Hardware: server, end-user PC • Learning Management System (LMS): installed or hosted solution • Access: browser, plug-ins • Connectivity: Bandwidth • System integration: E.g. with HR system • Security

Some tips to follow to avoid tech pitfalls

- Always test published courses from an authoring tool in your LMS prior to purchase. Test SCORM reporting like bookmarking, course completion status, course progress and quiz results data.
- Before signing a long term expensive contract with an LMS provider, contract them to complete a discovery phase of your requirements first. You will discover any surprises straight up such as additional cost, or functionality the provider states is available that actually isn't.
- There is no such thing as the "right" authoring tool or the "right" approach. You need different tools and approaches for different purposes.
- The IT team should always be part of the stakeholder team that reviews the development deliverables.

It is unrealistic to expect the average manager to master the technical details of an eLearning strategy solution. But managers do need to have some way to assure themselves that they are reaching a decision on the basis of a reasonable understanding of the fit between the strategic needs of an organisation and a particular 'solution'.

Managers need to ask the following questions in the Technology area

- Is it a robust technical solution?
- Is it emerging, 'bleeding edge', established or 'twilight edge'?
- How big is the user base?
- How will users access support both locally and remotely?
- Does this technology offer the necessary range or quality of functionality and interoperability?
- Is this technology readily scalable and flexible to the organisation's changing requirements?
- Can we support/maintain this technology ourselves or will we be dependent on an outside supplier? How dependent will this technology make us on outside providers? To what risks are we exposed?
- What infrastructure do we need to support this system? Do we have it already? If not, what will it cost to develop?
- What level of disruption will this technology bring to our operations?
- Have we an exit strategy for this technology?
- What implications does this technology have for intellectual property – both our use of others' IP in the technology itself, and others' use of our learning materials?
- Does this technology bring with it any implications for student/staff privacy?
- What are competitors using? Why would we want to use the same or a different system?