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Proven recipes

Peter Williams heard from E-Learning Award winners telling a good story.

One of the messages that the e-learning industry is perhaps belatedly waking up to is the need to tell the good news. The E-Learning Awards, organised by e.learning age publisher Bizmedia, has been one of the key drivers of raising the profile of all learning within organisations, not just e-learning. Other channels that can be used to explain the business benefits of e-learning include the Bizmedia Bringing Business Benefits campaign and Towards Maturity's Evidence for Change.

The eLearning Network (ELN) plays an important part in the E-Learning Awards programme – establishing the criteria by which entries are evaluated and carrying out the judging. So it seemed appropriate for ELN to devote one of its regular events to hearing the stories of some of the 2009 E-Learning Award winners. The fastest way to gain inspiration for e-learning is to learn from those with proven success, who have overcome the challenges that come with any major change programme, and been able to exploit the multi-faceted opportunities that e-learning brings.

The day was chaired by Piers Lea of LINE Communications – an appropriate choice as a 2009 winner of an outstanding achievement award. A quick show of hands revealed that all those present were working on an e-learning project which was due for implementation in the next three months. So the day where best practice would be shared could be used as a learning exercise to feed into those upcoming projects. Lea said that one of the key challenges he constantly faced was how the lessons that individuals were learning could be shared across the whole organisation, especially to e-learning professionals who were creating e-learning day-to-day.

And after the sessions key learning points were captured to be drawn together at the end of the day.

Please can I have some more? - Awakening the appetite for learning at CMG

One presentation which demonstrated the value of the Awards and the huge potential of e-learning was given by Alison Innes-Farquhar from Mainstay Solutions Ltd for her client, Care Management Group. With Owen Rose of Information Transfer, she presented a fantastic example of how technology-based learning can be a key driver in radically improving business performance. The programme claimed the gold award last year in the best e-learning project securing widespread adoption.

Care Management Group (CMG) supports people with learning disabilities and associated complex needs. It has over 100 care homes in southern England and Wales and employs 1,500 staff, most of whom are front line carers. The e-learning journey started in 2008 when new owners of the business started implementing major changes. The company was encountering difficult operating conditions and faced significant challenges. Centralised training provision had been struggling with increased regulatory requirements, a growing number of sites and a rising burden of specialist training needs. A management consultant concluded that a lack of access to training for operational staff was having a negative effect on staff confidence and regulatory issues.

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The existing CMG training model faced four significant challenges:

- Inefficient: expensive to deliver and as it only allowed limited access it could not be scaled to meet the requirements of a growing business.
- Inconsistent: faced with a breakdown in central training provision local sites were making independent arrangements and training paths were diverging.
- Risk: the care sector is highly regulated with the services of all providers subject to annual audit. Maintaining staff competencies in mandatory skill areas was seen as an increasing training burden.
- Alignment with corporate values: the lack of a CMG central training programme meant learning and development (L&D) were not aligned with corporate values or culture and there was no link to the business objectives.

CMG decided to enhance the quality, availability and consistency of staff training and development to support new business goals using e-learning. But implementation was going to be difficult, with significant barriers to adoption. It was a fragmented organisation with no technical infrastructure and perceived low levels of IT literacy among staff. The fax machine was its primary means of communication. And culturally people did not consider sitting at a PC to be working – as a care-focused environment, many saw work as interacting with the people they were caring for. Innes- Farquhar said it was therefore essential that driving adoption was built into every aspect of the project.

The choice of e-learning provider, or partner, was crucial for CMG. It wanted someone who understood its core values and who was learning-oriented rather than technologically driven. This had to work as a long-term relationship, not just as a one off project. And while being creative and innovative, the e-learning provider had to be realistic and responsive to the particular culture. And of course price was important: CMG needed to know it was getting value for money.

Information Transfer fitted the bill. With CMG it created six strands of activity which became the model to structure the project. These strands – defining need, learner context, work context, building capability, ensuring engagement and demonstrating value – measured how learning could affect the business.

Make it tempting

A key feature of the CMG e-learning journey was ensuring engagement, so a communication plan was formulated with the learning message tailored for each stakeholder group. What managers want is different to the support worker on night duty, for example. CMG thought about the channel for the message and also the timing: too soon and the message is forgotten but the company could not afford to deliver the message late.

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The communication plan produced by Information Transfer with Mainstay Solutions – which used multimedia, email, posters and newsletters – had specific goals including:

- demonstrate the benefit of e-learning for e-learners
- demonstrate workflow improvements for managers
- empowers managers to support learners
- build anticipation and trust
- support an effective launch and communicate developments and successes after the launch.

Communication started weeks before the learning programme was launched, using tools like cascade briefings, road-shows and a poster competition.

CMG ensured engagement by creating a powerful and memorable identity which encapsulated the corporate and learning values and which was generated from the vision of key stakeholders. Technology was central to this to communicate and reinforce the rejuvenated corporate vision of CMG. Information Transfer translated the board's vision into the "Fulfilling Potential" identity.

The outcome in terms of learning was the launch in February 2009 of six structured e-learning modules covering a range of specialist training needs. Each was accompanied by an offline learning activity. By then Information Transfer and CMG had been working together for about six months. Modules were accessed via a bespoke learning management system and CMG's recently installed network infrastructure. The e-learning was introduced with a multimedia presentation entitled "Every moment has potential" with staff at all levels speaking directly to camera.

And did all this work produce a notable success? In the first 12 months 12,800 e-learning modules were completed; 18,470 hours of e-learning had been delivered and, perhaps most impressive of all, CMG said 99% of staff had logged in and started some e-learning. The programme received high approval ratings and it was possible to prove that the e-learning had demonstrated value. For instance, it helped with staff rostering so fewer agency staff were required, which meant better continuity. New members of staff became more effective more quickly and the improved training and development has been noted by regulators. Perhaps most remarkably, when staff were asked "what is the best thing CMG has done for you in the last 12 months", over 60% of respondents answered "training", head and shoulders above anything else.

Peter Williams is editor of e.learning age