

“Picking pilot projects”

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When organisations initially start to explore the potential for e-learning, it is important that their initial experiences are positive and show real value. Whilst everyone talks about pilot projects as an obvious thing, often the reality is somewhat different. Obvious pilots often turn out to be not particularly useful or successful, or if they are, turn out not to interest the business very much. It is critical to get the right combination of appropriateness, achievability and business value in order to make the pilot a success and a useful success.

The first question we need to ask when picking pilot projects is what are we are trying to achieve with the “pilot”. To my mind, the answer to this is simple. We want a positive experience from a pilot that can be successfully delivered, from which we learn, and which proves that e-learning is useful to the business. Addressing each of these briefly in turn.

We want a positive experience because we want initially projects to help build momentum for e-learning within the organisation. At a deeper level, we also want a positive experience for many stakeholders; the learners, the instructors/training people, management, the IS department and so on. All of our criteria need to be considered in the light of all these stakeholders – that’s what sometimes becomes tricky.

We need to pick a project that can be successfully delivered. Experience of working with many organisations over the years indicates that often this is the thing they are most worried important. I would disagree that it’s the most important – I see it more as a base assumption, there is no point picking projects you can’t deliver! Ability to deliver will include a multitude of factors. Availability of the learners, subject matter expertise, content and instructional resources. Availability of infrastructure. Willingness to engage in this as an e-learning project. Appropriateness of this project for e-learning, and so on.

This criteria also includes a dimension of risk management. Risk management on e-learning pilots is important because you have little or experience of them, your ability to guarantee any of the components of the solution is limited. You therefore need to be thinking through areas of risk to the project and how you can build contingency into the project. This is true for even simple projects using external third party providers. Just because the e-learning content exists and is availability across the Internet, doesn’t mean the learners can access the Internet, or have time to do it, or will complete it or think it was worth doing when they have. Think through the major areas of risk around the project and think how to manage these areas of risk.

Learning from the experience of doing the pilot project is critical. Given that in nearly cases, pilots are the first steps in using e-learning in a broader way within the organisation, we need to rapidly develop our understanding and experience of the real issues in making e-learning projects successful. Where e-learning can be usefully applied? How do we design an e-learning solution, what the components of that solution might be and from where to source them? What can vendors really offer? How do e-learning products and technologies really work? What will they do to our networks? What about the learners – what is their view of e-learning, what do they like and what don’t they like? How do we motivate learners to engage with the programme and how do we motivate them to complete it? How do we manage the delivery process? What information do we want to track about the process? What does it cost? How do we measure and prove value? There are many things we want to learn about so that successive projects can be better planned, designed and executed.

Finally, when we’ve done all the above, we need what we’ve done to be useful to the business. In spite of lots of talk of alignment to the business, this surprisingly turns out to be often quite low on the criteria for many organisations. Often this is because they have been so desperate to find a project that can be done easily; they pick something

that doesn't really engage with the business. Yes the business agreed it was useful, but it didn't agree it was important.

Of course in the ideal world, you would do more than one pilot and so spread your bets, and your risks. And that is exactly what I would do. When we work with a large organisation to help develop a more strategic approach around e-learning, we nearly always try and pick three to six pilot projects that can be progressively delivered over the period of a year or so. As well as individually fulfilling my criteria, they should also collectively do so. Picking an IT-based pilot might be fine to quickly prove the infrastructure can support e-learning. Doing remote product training for the sales force, gets the business really engaged. Providing coaching support and resources to your leadership programme via e-learning gets senior management and executives on board and develops a clearer understanding of the possibilities.

Collectively they add up to an awful lot more buy-in, proof and learning than any one project alone. And by picking off smaller pieces, each one is much easier to do than one big monolithic project.

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