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## Critical success in e-learning: the human factor

Over the past three years Ashridge has gained experience of delivering 'virtual' or e-learning to successive cohorts of international Executive MBA candidates. Anthony Mitchell and Sue Honoré review the programme and look at the critical importance of human behavioural factors and assess the key role of group dynamics in learning outcomes. They highlight learning points for participants, sponsors and providers.

### Why e-learning?

*"Learning is a much more complicated phenomenon than can ever be limited to a classroom. In organisational learning efforts, the confusion of learning and training is fatal<sup>1</sup>."*

E-learning extends beyond the classroom and consists of material and communication sent over the Internet directly to the learner's PC. This channel has experienced significant growth in recent years<sup>2</sup> appealing to employers, learners and academia. The most commonly quoted

benefits are continuous learning, time saved and reduced travel costs<sup>3</sup>. Over the last few years e-learning has become increasingly popular in the worldwide MBA market, although it must be remembered that it still requires a lot of time and resources and is not a cost cutting alternative.

Whilst Ashridge remains committed to core residential campus delivery, we recognised – not least from the considerable success and popularity of our Virtual Learning Resource Centre (VLRC) – that e-learning has value and potential. We took an

approach that capitalised on “blended learning”. Essentially we wanted to retain the benefits of face-to-face teaching and class interaction as well as capturing the benefits of virtual learning.

Whilst designing and delivering blended learning to three successive cohorts on our European Partnership Executive MBA, we simultaneously adopted an action research approach. Initially the purpose of the research study was to enable us, as learning providers, to observe, learn and improve. In this article we would like to share our findings: not just with other e-learning providers, but also with participants and their sponsors – as, we discovered, all three groups have a vital role to play if e-learning is to deliver its full potential.

### Our study

This study involved approximately 75 learners on three successive intakes on our European Partnership EMBA, from the same group of four multinational companies, over a three year period. Individuals completed twelve MBA modules over two years, of which two were e-learning (one in Year One and one in Year Two). The online experience was blended with six conventionally taught modules at Ashridge and four in Germany at corporate universities, supplemented by an international unit (South Africa or China).

The virtual modules were initially designed for a five day duration starting on a Saturday morning, but were subsequently reduced to four days in Year Three. Each module was based on an online portal and community environment, with a calendar of events, instructions for activities, asynchronous discussion area, live chat, supporting

documentation and learning resources, and links to a virtual classroom area.

Each topic module lasted about two hours. The individual learning activities were varied across the calendar and within a topic to provide both motivation and flexibility. Typical tasks included background reading, interactive exercises, group discussion and a virtual classroom session or asynchronous discussion with the tutor.

Although the content was arranged in a calendar format, the participants were encouraged to manage their own time. Key deadlines were indicated so that individuals and groups could negotiate work to meet them. Care was taken to make the weekend activities self-managed, to ensure greater personal flexibility. A practical challenge was finding a realistic compromise on timing to suit both US and Asian-based participants.

The participants were supported by a technical team who took them through a pre-event hardware and software test and manned a Help Desk throughout the modules. There were also two facilitators who were online throughout the events, providing encouragement, discussion and moral support.

### Methodology

Input to the research was obtained through online and face-to-face discussions with the participants and extensive post-module evaluation forms containing both quantitative and qualitative data. Additionally, a colleague conducted literature research more generally in this field, and made use of our experience and survey data<sup>4</sup>.

The programme was based on the principle of continuous improvement, and all responses were evaluated and changes made for the following year. Participant comments resulted in a number of key improvements, including a reduction in the number of days learning, a change from Lotus Sametime to Macromedia Breeze for the virtual classroom tool, and a higher level of event technical support.

### **What was our experience – in Year One?**

Our initial experiences were encouraging in the following respects:

- **Teaching material was well structured and found to be engaging**
- **Simulations were judged to be realistic analogies of the 'real world'**
- **Interaction with faculty and peers was both encouraged and warmly received by participants**
- **Participants appreciated the ability to work at their own pace and review material and discussions at a later date.**

Some disappointments included:

- **An initial perception that the approach was for cost reduction rather than for learning benefit**
- **The virtual modules were often regarded as an alternative rather than an extra source of enrichment**
- **Technical issues associated with functionality and bandwidth**
- **The challenge of technical support that was customer sensitive as well as technically proficient.**

### **The 'Human Factor'**

Attitude and motivation of individuals play a major part in virtual learning success, more so than in the classroom<sup>5</sup>. Initial impressions of this form of learning can have a significant impact on acceptance and participation in events.

The location and grounds of Ashridge provide a considerable draw for those who want to escape from day-to-day life in order to learn. Learning from home over a weekend is a greater challenge. This was a new experience for most of the tutors and support staff as well as the participants.

In the first year there were some technical issues with participants' own computers and network connections as well as use of Sametime. The difference in expectations between the participants and Ashridge on 'support' was also significant. Nervousness in their first module, frustration at not having someone onsite to help and struggles with isolation all had an impact on the participants<sup>6</sup>. On the Ashridge side the tutors themselves did not know what to expect, and quite commonly in this area<sup>7</sup> assumed that having created a module they would not need to monitor it actively. The challenge for the first year was therefore high. The attitude that this experience was a cost-cutting exercise by their companies and was more effort than a conventional classroom, resulted in an overall negative view by participants at the beginning. However, by the end there was valuable learning from the module both in terms of the academic subjects and in their understanding of remote communication.

*"Thanks for giving us the opportunity to work with the new learning tools for the first time. I really enjoyed it and would never have thought that with my old PC and really slow line it would work but it did."*

## Year Two

A major programme of improvements was planned for these same people in their second year and for the new cohort.

Internally, there was recognition that support in all its forms was critical (**Figure 1**), and using the feedback from the first run, the technical support was increased both pre-module and during the module; the level of facilitation was also higher.

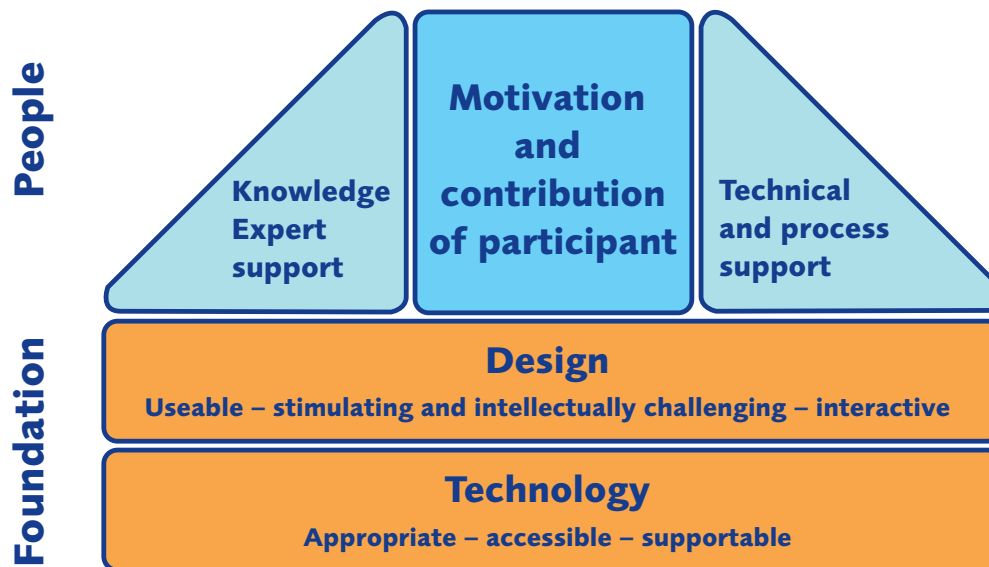
An unexpected situation was the high level of communication between the first and second cohorts, which resulted in the latter group starting with a negative impression that required a huge effort to turn that attitude around. At the end of their first virtual module, there was mixed feedback ranging from high praise to high criticism,

but once again a large number of comments that the experience and learning had been valuable. Most of the criticism was levelled at the virtual classroom tool – Lotus Sametime. In fact the problem was more one of network bandwidth between all the participants, but given that the tool was complex and had a bad reputation it was decided to change it, both for technical and psychological reasons. The participants loved the concept of virtual classrooms; it just had to be made to work for them.

Despite their reluctant attitude in their first module, the first cohort tackled their second module with more drive and came out with a far more positive result. Familiarity with the approach and a greater feeling of self-control and confidence may have been the major factors<sup>5,8</sup>. Evidence was demonstrated in their approach to time management.

### Figure 1.

Develop from a strong base



Although they had been told about managing their own time in the first module, nearly all followed the timetable provided. They had the confidence to tackle the second module in a different way, managing their own and the group's time to achieve the critical deadlines. The second module was designed deliberately to be an intellectual step up in e-learning. It contained more challenging tasks, self-directed exploration and far more discussion and group work. It also included some business simulations which were both interesting and more fun. The group demonstrated a greater volume of discussion which was of a higher quality, often providing interesting examples of their own experience to add to the learning of others.<sup>6</sup>

**Key learning points from the second year were that acceptance of and motivation in e-learning takes time, and that fundamental technical and design factors are 'qualifying criteria' before learning can commence.**

### **Year Three**

In the third year, the second cohort also emerged from their second module with a more positive attitude and sense of achievement; in fact it was even higher than the first cohort.

*"I like the free paced learning environment. It is good to have live sessions, but not too many. I think it was just right. Overall, I was positively surprised at how well the module was organised and how well everything went."*

Major people-related changes took place for the final new cohort in the third year. Two years of feedback forms provided empirical evidence that those tutors who played an active part in their modules through

discussions, support and virtual classrooms had higher ratings than those who did not. It was therefore easier to persuade the remainder to become more active.

A step up in technical support added to the positive attitude of the experience. The technical pre-tests were made compulsory in this year and followed up rigorously. The aim was to ensure everything was functioning before the module started, rather than expecting Ashridge to solve all problems at a moment of crisis. The face-to-face introduction given to new participants was more intensive and covered key issues and queries. Additional training and information were given to Help Desk staff and a skilled support person manned the desk over the weekend – committing to results and responding promptly with answers. Together the high level of tutor and technical support provided a strong 'warm and fuzzy' feeling.

Finally, it appears that the first two cohorts were less inclined to pass on negative attitudes to the third team. This programme was routine by now, and the improved experience of the second virtual module had lessened the negative approach. The third cohort came in with an open mind to the whole experience and that is what made the difference. They criticised when things went wrong, but they worked to solve problems, they took control of their own learning from the outset and they showed enormous levels of activity in the chat and discussion amongst themselves and with the tutors.

The difference in the quality of in-depth questions and comments from participants, the increase in contributions of their own experiences and reference sources, and the enthusiasm shown for the topics became an example of e-learning at its best.

It is not known if they were merely an exceptional group compared to the others; a true scientific experiment would have been to run all three groups in parallel. However, there appear to be a number of other factors at play. The fact that technology within the companies has improved and international projects are more of a way of life could have helped. The absence of negative feeling before the start and the intense levels of support must have been major contributory factors. This group now has high expectations for the final module and has set a major challenge for the support team.

Ongoing review of the same approach in subsequent years could confirm or change these findings. Comparison with a new design format for the future, where there are fewer, shorter virtual sessions over the two year period would also be valuable.

### The annual CIPD survey for 2005<sup>9</sup> revealed:

**86%**

...agree that e-learning demands a new attitude to learning on the part of the learner.

**63%**

...agree that e-learning demands a new skill set for people in training and development.

*There are real implications in these new learning methods for all concerned – learner, tutor and support staff.*

### So what have we learned?

- We should take care with balance in terms of blended learning. Participants feel two virtual modules out of 12 is about right, and in the future support a drip feed approach with fewer sessions of shorter duration. Most do not want to lose the classroom Ashridge experience, but they also want e-learning. Our e-learning materials provide support for revision and backup to ensure understanding, as well as being useful for future continuous development activities.
- E-learning should not be positioned or perceived as a cost cutting activity. The costs in fact are substantial, particularly for the technical infrastructure, but are increasingly the cost of 'doing business' in today's environment. These findings are supported by recent Ashridge research in the implementation of e-learning in blue chip corporations and public sector organisations<sup>10</sup>. A certain level of technology, infrastructure and performance is expected by our clients and that will continue to change over time. Cost-cutting also sets the wrong tone for successful motivation to learn. This is particularly frustrating where it may never have been the intention – but suspicion has fuelled the perception of cheaper, therefore second best.
- The investment in human resources to create and run virtual learning programmes is also considerable, although very rewarding when successful. There will always be competing demands on scarce resource unless we have the luxury of a dedicated team, but a lack of resources has an exponentially negative impact on the outcomes of the learning when it is remote. The support and participation of the tutors, facilitators and technical team are all critical success factors.

- Initial impressions last a long time. From the outset, participants in virtual learning need to start with the right approach. It helps if the team members know each other and feel comfortable working together. They need to have open minds and grasp ownership for their own learning success. Both positive and negative comments can spread very rapidly in the Internet age and impact those who have yet to go through such an experience.
- It takes time for people to become comfortable in the online environment. Early activities are important for generating confidence. It may take multiple runs before people participate fully. Once a few become active, it raises the activity level of others.
- Progression by participants in the quality and depth of learning achieved online can be demonstrated by penetrating questioning, intensity of discussion, taking responsibility for supplying and sharing information, taking control of the learning process as well as through positive qualitative feedback comments.

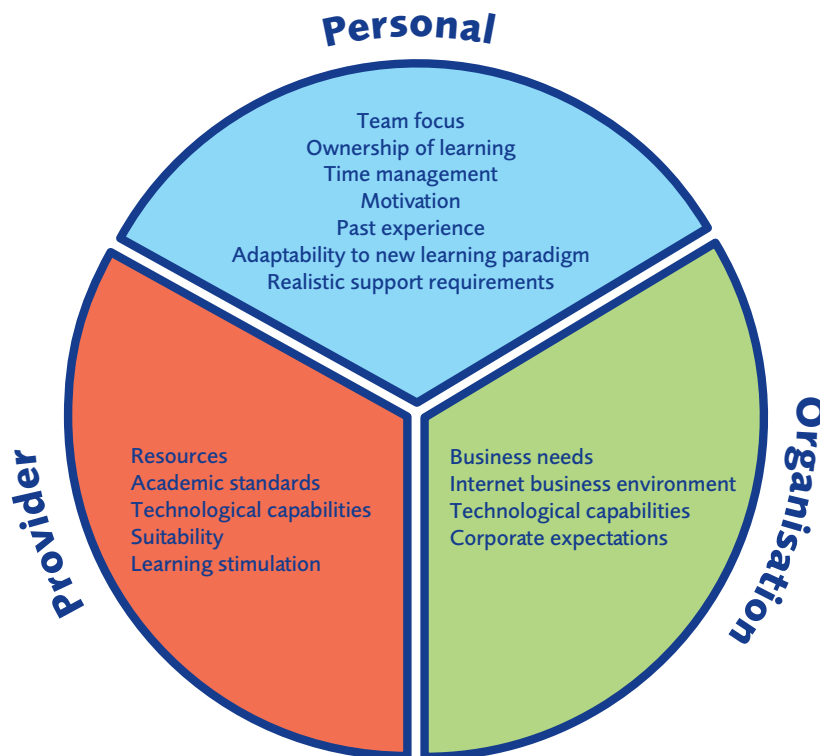
### In conclusion

The foundations – technology and the learning design – need to be of the highest quality possible. However, with technology becoming a secondary issue as organisations become more e-enabled, the most critical factors are the people – the support and tutoring staff, and the learners themselves – with the right attitude and ownership of their learning success (see **Figure 1** on page 35).

The success of e-learning depends on a three-way partnership between the organisation, the learner and the supplier, taking into account the following factors (**Figure 2**):

**Figure 2.**

A three-way learning partnership



E-learning has strengths and weaknesses, and needs to be used appropriately. E-learning has the potential to promote the paradigm shift from teaching to learning, but its adoption is a change process, and to be successful needs to be built on a learning culture across all players. Encouraging the right human conditions for a successful learning environment is perhaps even more important in the virtual world. If we were to go further and review how companies might exploit e-learning, then it should be aligned to business strategies and needs and managed as carefully as any other business change.

Finally, some comments from students:

*"Remote learning which I never experienced before ... the virtual module makes you search for the solutions on your own and therefore was an enriching situation. I found all activities valuable. All topics were interesting. I think the group work was very interesting."*

*"It gave our LSG (Learning Support Group) new experience of working together on a project with the use of various ways of communication... I also liked the individual work via the Internet giving you a chance to move through the material with the speed appropriate to each participant."*

*"A very good mix of topics and tools. The topics were well connected and suitable for virtual learning. The tension was strong in the beginning with group work in order to get to know one another and gradually eased. All in all it was a very valuable experience!!!"*

## Glossary

### E-learning/virtual learning/online learning

Learning that is delivered, enabled or mediated by technology (CIPD).

### Blended learning

Learning involving multiple methods and approaches, commonly a mixture of classroom and e-learning.

### Asynchronous

Learning where participants are in different places and communicating at different times.

### Synchronous

Learning from participants in different places but at the same time.

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