

**Critical Success Factors:  
Before, During, and After E-Learning**

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## Introduction

“Does your virtual classroom have voice-over-IP?” “What about virtual break-out rooms?” “Do your WBTs use Flash?” “Can you teach with live video over the web?” These are some of the opening questions I received at some recent training conferences as I staffed a booth in the exposition hall. Rather than answer “yes” to these questions, I realized that my response should be “Why do you ask?”

As those who are buying e-learning solutions look to match features of different products, they must remind themselves that there needs to be a reason to have a feature. The fact that a training course uses Flash is only pertinent if there is some driving factor calling for that feature. There may well be a stated need by a learner population for animation in on-line training. Even then, that “need” must be balanced by system capabilities and budget factors.

In other words, the delivery of course material is not the first consideration in the choice of e-learning products. There are steps that should be considered to build a case for the choice factors of those products.

## Driving Factor

One doesn't go out to buy e-learning just because there are industry statements of cost savings, latest and greatest technology, hoped for ROI, and the like. You still need to decide if e-learning should be part of the solution? Then, in order to choose features of that learning solution, you must know the motivation behind those features. These driving factors help with the weighting of different features, and the compromise and negotiation with providers of the training products.

The motivation behind the features should be driven by a valid education plan. The plan should be driven by a valid needs assessment. The assessment should be driven by the education strategy, of the macro or micro organization. And that strategy should be driven by business needs. That leads us to a model that links these factors in a cycle to make us consider the before, during and after of e-learning, leading to an appropriate, cost-effective, and more successful implementation of the learning solution.

## The Model

The model to the right shows that the business need is the central factor. We do our training and performance improvement interventions as needed to overcome obstacles to meeting this need or improve the application of processes and products to better meet this need. From the business need flow the Education Strategy,



the Needs Assessment, the Education Plan, the Education Delivery, and the Evaluation of the intervention in meeting the strategy and the originating business/organizational need.

In terms of this model, we can parse these stages into the critical success factors of an e-learning solution. **Before** the delivery of the training, we should have identified our strategy, completed an assessment and built a plan. Then, **during** the delivery of the education solution, we need to manage a number of factors to assure success. **After** the delivery, we need to evaluate the success of the implementation in terms of the originating need and strategy.

Here is an outline of each of these stages and some important considerations for success.



## Education Strategy

The strategy is a high level statement of the education vision of the organization and should be driven from the business or organizational need. This is not the place to be philosophical about a vision. The statement should be practical and have business reasoning. Most will look to identifying the how, when and who of bringing a group of employees to peak performance.

Strategy components may include job role definitions, long and short term scheduling, high level planning for design and delivery, and more. This strategy statement may then point out the delivery modes to consider: classroom, web-based, internet, intranet, asynchronous, synchronous, mobile, CBT, or other. The solution may then be a blend of different delivery modes.

When building the education strategy, focus on the organization's business leaders before the training or human resource professionals. This will encourage the links to the business needs.

## Needs Assessment

In addition to assessing the learning needs, it is important to assess the delivery preferences of the intended learner population. If the goal is getting the right content to the right people, the best way, in the right timeframe, the corporate or group culture should be considered. Are the learners currently using desktop training? Does management support self-directed learning? Do students prefer being together in a classroom? The answers to these types of questions will help the planning process for the education solution.

Assessments may be done as departmental or individual skills gap analyses, certification readiness assessments, and more. Organization demographics should be added to help with positioning for local or distance learning and consideration of cultural issues. This should also include a technology assessment to understand the capabilities for e-learning.

## **Education Planning**

The education plan should include curriculum development, design and content development, delivery methods and the scheduling for all of that and more.

At least as important as the above, there must be a communications plan and coverage of recommended management roles. The communications should be for the learner population, to prepare them for upcoming training, and for the first-line management for the same reason. As part of the preparation, think in terms of change management. Since training should result in some behavior change, the organization should be prepared for that both logistically and emotionally. And, to make best use of the management to help motivate the learners, give suggested activities to the managers letting them know that their roles will be vital in realizing the output of the training, that is the improved performance.

## **Delivery and Management**

An entire thesis can be written about the delivery of e-learning. I am going to highlight a few factors that should be considered **during** the e-learning implementation.

Remember that you are focusing on the “learning” more than the “e” of e-learning. So in addition to making sure you have chosen the proper delivery mode, based on the **strategy, needs assessment and planning**, you should assure that the target audience and the presenters are prepared. Are learner incentives in place? Also, the management of the delivery includes both project management and ongoing communication.

There should be a project manager to implement the plans and track the project, and communicate on a regular basis. Technical needs must be considered: IT system integration, training of technical resources, help desk functions, and more.

## **Evaluation**

It is important to align your evaluation process to your original business needs, those that drove the **education strategy**. Performance measures should be put in place based on the original business need, beyond a measure of the success of the content delivery.

Performance and productivity are linked to the business need. Your end result should be improvement in these factors that will enhance the organization.

## Summary

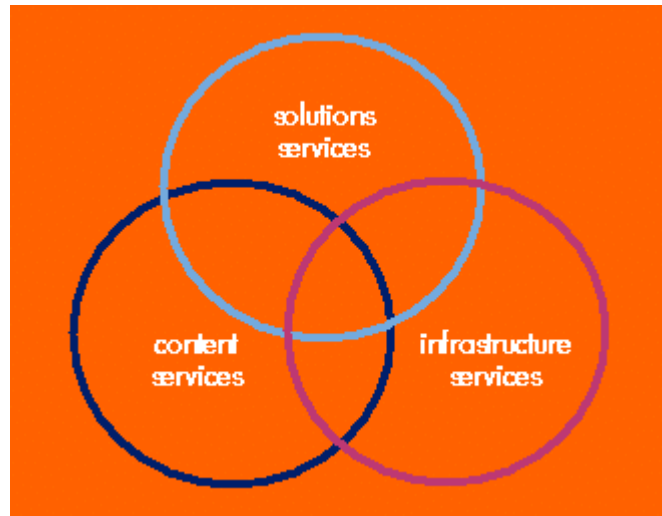
Before, during and after e-learning be strategic and goal-oriented rather than feature focused. The training delivery means and features should not supersede the overarching business strategy.

- Before = Education Strategy, Needs Assessment, Education Planning
- During = Education Delivery, Delivery Management
- After = Education Assessment back to the original need

The results of the final assessment will let you know if you need to move through the cycle again and where to start to meet the new needs.

You should consider an integrated approach as you build the learning solution. Three components to consider are **content**, **infrastructure**, and **consulting** to put these together in the most effective way for **your** organization.

A straightforward e-learning project may link only the content and infrastructure. A more complex project would need internal or external consulting to help assure that all the factors of a successful implementation are considered and carried out. This diagram shows the linkages possible, with the large project sitting in the intersection of all three circles.



This is another way to assure a strategic approach and one that may take advantage of a blended solution that would best meet the business need.