E–LEARNING

THE GIFT OF TIME

HR professionals are typically overstretched and overworked, so any opportunity to save time should be embraced. E-learning might just be the solution to some of the time-consuming 'necessary evils' of business operation

LET'S FACE IT, meeting compliance obligations and induction training are not likely to be at the top of any HR professional's 'love' list. Indeed, in *HRD*'s 2014 Global HR Survey, which asked over 4,000 HR professionals for their views on the profession, 'identifying risks, regulating and ensuring compliance' was listed as the second-biggest strategic priority facing Australian HRDs. Many respondents cited lack of time and resources as a key concern in this area. For HR professionals, who are already overstretched and underresourced, ensuring that employees are both inducted correctly and trained in compliance issues is just another time-draining exercise.

Yet both exercises are a 'necessary evil' in business: better to do it, and do it well, than risk either non-compliance or poorly prepared new employees.

For Chris Erickson, senior trainer at MicroWay, the reluctance to embrace anything related to compliance comes down to the sheer time and effort required to implement and maintain effective systems to present the relevant content and courses to employees, while also ensuring it is traceable for auditing and reporting purposes.

"There's usually a very good reason the compliance requirements exist – and if it can be done efficiently and effectively there is a net benefit to the organisation with better-trained personnel too," he says.

He adds that for induction training it's a "mixed bag" in terms of what employers are doing. "It's always a constant battle for time and human resources, and in many instances it's highly repetitive – screaming out for some level of reuse and automation," he says.

In short, both exercises – induction training and compliance training – are crying out for e-learning.

Journey to now

Since e-learning's infancy a decade ago, its growth has been rapid – Erickson likens it to a "snowball effect". "The current generation of HR managers are well aware of it and many have experienced it as they've entered new organisations or followed this growing and obvious industry trend. The efficiencies and benefits are becoming well known," he confirms.

However, there have been significant changes during e-learning's evolution. In the past, most e-learning solutions were developed by external consultants and service providers because the technologies and tools used to build courses were very specialised and in many cases required programming skills.

However, this has changed dramatically with the introduction of software like Articulate STORYLINE 2 (articulate.com), which makes authoring e-learning courses easy enough that staff can build courses using a familiar, PowerPoint-like environment with a few extra elements related to the interactive nature of e-learning. This means it's easy for a company's in-house subject matter experts and training teams to produce exactly what they need, when they need it – from the training content itself, through to tests, quizzes or surveys (used to reinforce and confirm understanding).

Articulate STORYLINE 2 is the multi-award-winning, industry-leading e-learning authoring tool that has played a significant role in enabling the rapid growth of the sector due to its ease of use.

Natural bedfellows

Erickson believes compliance and induction training are a natural fit with e-learning, particularly when combined with a learning management system (LMS) that provides full access control, allocation, traceability and collation of results for individuals and courses.

"Because compliance and induction training always lend themselves to ongoing reusability and often require regular changes and updates, it's important to ensure this can be achieved quickly," Erickson says. "E-learning is the ultimate format for both aspects."

Courses produced using Articulate STORYLINE 2 are SCORM, Tin-Can/xAPI compliant – the well-established protocols that mean the courses can be loaded into almost any LMS. This means that regardless of whether an organisation already has an LMS or plans to implement one at a later stage, the content built using STORYLINE 2 will almost certainly work with that LMS.

Time saver

Finding a suitable time to complete any form of training can be challenging, particularly for some professionals/roles and where there are large numbers of staff involved.

The classic example is induction training when multiple new staff or contractors are joining an organisation. However, there is a component of most induction training that could be completed at home by new starters prior to day one. E-learning allows this to occur. With a link to the content in an email and with the right systems in place, individuals progress through the content, while a collation of their quiz/test/survey results can be used to reinforce and confirm understanding of the content. "In many ways it's a far more efficient and effective way than providing simple documents," says Erickson.

Importantly, e-learning is an easy way to connect with younger employees (Millennials or Generation Y), who have an inherent desire to interact using mobile technologies – especially in BYOD environments. This blurring of the boundaries between work and social has been leveraged and embraced by some organisations

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WHY E-LEARNING?

Chris Erickson outlines some key benefits of e-learning:

More effective learning techniques. E-learning opens up several powerful options for enhancing learning. In addition to all the different ways content can be presented (ie slides, videos, photo-realistic characters interacting to give real-life context to the text or audio), there are also a wide range of quiz/test/survey options that go far beyond the traditional short-answer or multichoice methods. Simulations involve creating interactive courses, which emulate a system or process. This allows users to learn to use and interact within a safe environment. Gamification is a popular technique in which fun and highly interactive game-like content is created. Research indicates these techniques are very effective at getting learners engaged and improving information retention.

24/7 availability. The content can be viewed and completed anytime, anywhere – which can be more than just a convenience where different time zones are involved.

Self-paced. Individuals learn and operate at different speeds and some may already be experienced in some of the topics. E-learning allows individuals to complete modules at their own pace, reducing delays and frustration for those who are able to complete them more quickly, which ultimately leads to productivity gains.

Automatic record-keeping. With the right systems in place, much of the burden of maintaining records and auditing happens automatically with e-learning.

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as it provides them with a flexible workforce willing to interact and complete tasks at times well outside business hours.

This also dovetails with the 24/7 availability of e-learning, as commutes to and from work on public transport – now often with free wi-fi – provide a new time window for some employees to complete courses.

"A key technology change caused by the rapid spread of mobile devices was the elevation of HTML5 as the primary and preferred format for content on the web and within many mobile applications," Erickson explains. "Since Apple iOS devices, including the iPad and iPhone, don't display Flash content [the previously dominant multimedia format] all modern content needs to be in the HTML5 format. HTML5 content is significantly smaller in terms of data size and is much more efficient for bandwidth requirements and device power consumption – important considerations when using content on mobile networks."

Articulate STORYLINE 2 publishes courses in the HTML5 format. This means the courses can be viewed and completed on almost any modern device, including phones, tablets,

notebooks or desktop machines.

Because e-learning content is based on modern web technologies, it also allows for the integration of links to external resources – including social tools. For example, Erickson notes that using YouTube to host and serve streaming videos used in courses is a common and effective way to educate employees. Articulate STORYLINE 2 makes this very easy to do.

The end result is not just informed and compliant employees but also cost savings. All of the benefits above lead to a net cost and resource savings, especially when the e-learning can be built and maintained in-house by existing staff and training units. Consider that for a moment: compliant employees and cost-effective and highly efficient training. What HR professional wouldn't want that for their organisation? **HRD**