

# Unlocking the Potential of On-Demand Learning in the Workplace



**UNC**  
KENAN-FLAGLER  
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## Promise

Employees and employers face the same dilemma these days when it comes to keeping skills sharp; neither have the time nor the money to spend on long-term learning and development opportunities. Most training and human resource professionals know, however, that there is a direct, positive link between providing meaningful learning and development opportunities to employees and job satisfaction--when you train employees, job satisfaction increases, as does employee retention.

### Introduction

One solution to the dilemma of providing quality training opportunities as corporate resources continue to dwindle is on-demand, online learning programs. Many training and development professionals shelved earlier E-learning prototypes because they lacked key components to the transfer of learning—the ability to interact and collaborate with instructors and fellow students. Over the years, E-learning programs have matured into interactive experiences that engage all types of learners.

Today's E-learning takes what worked from earlier versions of distance learning (such as video conferencing) and combines it with new Web technologies, to provide richer, more dynamic learning experiences than ever before.

This white paper will discuss the evolution of online, on-demand learning and what to look for when designing or purchasing E-learning programs for your organization. Through case examples, it will also provide training and development professionals with ideas about how to apply on-demand learning in their workplaces to meet strategic objectives and succeed in today's fast-paced global marketplace.

### E-learning Benefits

- Reduces costs
- Saves time
- Offers flexibility
- Allows social interaction with other participants and instructors
- Engages all types of learning styles

## The E-learning Explosion

E-learning in the workplace has evolved rapidly over the past 10 years, growing from a traditional, “transfer-of-learning” approach to include new technologies, such as discussion boards, blogs, wikis and other social interaction tools, which allow program participants to engage with each other and their instructors. A recent Ambient Research study found that the U.S. market for self-paced E-learning products reached \$16.7 billion in 2009, an unprecedented growth rate in the last decade.

This emerging E-learning format, known as E-learning 2.0, addresses concerns about earlier E-learning technology that there was little interaction among instructors and learners and, therefore, wasn't as effective as face-to-face instruction. Increasingly, E-learning models are taking a more blended approach to presenting content, encouraging social interaction among students using new social media technologies.

As the technology has improved, the demand for online learning has increased exponentially. Today, more than one in four students are taking at least one course online and while the demand for face-to-face courses increased by 1.2 percent in 2009 (due in no small part to the 2008-09 recession), the growth in demand for online courses was far greater at 17 percent (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

The trend toward providing more E-learning and/or blended learning opportunities is gaining more acceptance among training and development professionals; a 2008 survey by the American Society of Training and Development found that nearly one-third of all training content is now delivered electronically. Given the overall satisfaction rates regarding the quality of online learning versus face-to-face instruction, it is highly likely that this number will continue to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

As technology continues to evolve and improve, most employees will likely participate in some form of E-learning during their academic and professional careers. These employees will expect on-demand, online learning programs from their employers, particularly when time constraints and geographic boundaries are challenging.



## Negotiating E-learning Jargon

**E-learning** is the general term used for all varieties of electronic teaching and learning. Varieties of E-learning include Web-based learning, computer-based learning and virtual classrooms. Content can be delivered through the Internet, intranet or extranet, audio or videotape, satellite TV or CD-ROM. It can be self-paced or instructor-led and includes media in the form of text, image, animation, streaming video and audio.

**E-learning 2.0** emerged with the launch of Web 2.0 technologies, which emphasized information sharing and collaboration. E-learning 2.0 technologies supplement E-learning by adding social learning components such as discussion boards, wikis, blogs, podcasts and virtual worlds.

**Blended learning** integrates computer-based learning with practical or classroom based interactions.

**Computer-based learning** refers to the use of computers as the primary component of the educational environment.

**Computer-based training** refers to the use of computers as the primary component of the training environment. Computer-based training activities are usually self-paced and present content in a linear fashion (e.g., “Unit 1”, “Unit 2”, etc.).

**Web-based training** is similar to computer-based training, however the delivery differs. In computer-based training, the content is usually delivered by CD-ROM. In Web-based training, content is delivered via the Internet.



# E-learning's Evolution to a Dynamic Learning Environment

On-demand, online learning can be a powerful tool used on its own but can be extremely effective when combined with a blended-learning strategy. The concept of blended learning has been around for decades but more recently has evolved to mean a combination of traditional face-to-face learning and technology.

For example, E-learning used alone can be a cost-effective way to teach introductory concepts like business basics or sales techniques to get people “on the same page” quickly and efficiently. The value of this learning is real and could stop there, but when used as a prelude to instructor-led training, provides a foundation for the next level of development. This same program or course can precede instructor-led sessions, allowing class time to be spent on more advanced concepts where face-to-face discussion is critical.

This blended-learning approach uses time and dollars more effectively. A 2006 Bersin & Associates study found that self-paced study helps prepare learners for later interactive learning and can reduce time investment by nearly 50 percent.

E-learning's evolution is leading training and development and HR professionals to re-evaluate its potential as an efficient, flexible and cost-effective method to deliver quality learning and development opportunities to employees. Today's high quality E-learning content includes video conferencing, interaction, creative story lines and exercises developed by recognized subject matter experts (Avalon Consulting, 2008).

## Getting Employee Buy-in

Despite the fact that a recent U.S. Department of Education study found that students participating in E-learning conditions actually out-performed their peers learning the same material in a traditional, face-to-face classroom, some employees may be reluctant to engage in online learning opportunities (Means et al, 2010). Training and development professionals are well aware of this reluctance and as a result, may be hesitant to embrace E-learning.

A key to achieving buy-in from all employees is to provide them with a quality E-learning experience that includes interaction, videos and exercises designed to engage adult learners. “The reasons people resist online learning run the gamut, from ‘I don’t learn well without a class’ to ‘I’ve tried it in the past and didn’t like it,’” reports Mike Cain, program and student services manager of UNC Business Essentials, an online business training program. “We find that most of these excuses melt away once we show them part of our online Business Essentials program. In fact, that resistance usually changes to enthusiasm. On-demand, online learning is much more exciting than in the past. Done right, it can be very effective.”

Flexibility is also a key selling point when it comes to E-learning. Since on-demand, online, learning can occur any place and at any time, participants can work at their own pace and on their own schedule.

“I was impressed with the comprehensiveness of the UNC Business Essentials program,” says Andrew Cary, co-founder of Infused Industries Inc. in Raleigh, N.C. and recent UNC Business Essentials graduate.

“The coursework provided a well-rounded set of tools that I can use for thinking and acting in business situations. The level of personal attention by the tutors challenged me to approach discussion questions with depth and clarity. The material was practical and urged me to connect my working experience with the themes presented in the lectures. Lastly, the delivery format is very accommodating to students' schedules and timely in the light of emerging work practices. I began the coursework in Chapel Hill and finished in Buenos Aires, Argentina.”

For training and development professionals considering incorporating E-learning into their training offerings, seeing a demo of the product is an absolute must. Develop a checklist listing the benchmark features you are looking for in an E-learning environment. Items on the checklist may include:

- If the training is to be asynchronous, does it allow participants easy entry and exit points? How easy is it for participants to stop and pick up later where they left off?
- Does it offer learning checkpoints along the way to assess learning? These checkpoints can include quizzes but may also involve videoconferences or collaborative bulletin board postings where students work on a project together or discuss a particular subject.
- What other interactive features are included to help students learn? Is there tutor or instructor support available?
- What reports are made available to the employer to ensure employee participation and completion?
- Is the technology easily accessible by all participants?
- For the less technically adept, are there clear, simple directions and tutorials for use?
- Are there case studies included to help bring the learning into the workplace and real-life situation?

If possible, consider piloting the E-learning program with a smaller group of employees and ask for their feedback at the end of the training. These employees can provide excellent testimonials and help support a wider launch of the E-learning activity.

## On-Demand Learning for Corporate Education: University of North Carolina

Existing E-learning programs can offer excellent examples of how on-demand, online learning may be applied in workplace training and development situations. Educational institutions and innovative businesses have developed programs that clearly demonstrate how E-learning can deliver flexible and high-quality training opportunities to employers and their workforces.



Designed to provide basic business skills to people without a business degree, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill launched its online Business Essentials certificate program in mid-2009. Today, nearly 200 people have enrolled in this comprehensive online learning system. Programs like UNC's Business Essentials may offer training professionals and their employers the educational solution they are searching for by providing flexible and meaningful career development opportunities to employees in a cost-effective package.

The certificate program is self-guided and includes a mix of audio, graphics, quizzes, discussion boards and live tutors, making it attractive for corporate education because of its flexibility and interactive features. The program works much like Microsoft Outlook. Individuals can work online or download the application onto a local hard drive which automatically syncs with a server the next time they have Internet access. This flexibility allows people to work on the program from virtually anywhere, such as an airplane while in flight.

Checkpoints along the way and application exercises help participants stay interested and connect their learning to the workplace. At the end of the six-course program, successful participants earn a certificate of completion from UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School.

"The Business Essentials program is affordable, which is certainly important in today's economy, but more important, it is flexible. By allowing participants access to the courses at anytime and anywhere, it is designed to fit the variables in their life – not force them to fit their lives around it," says Susan Cates, associate dean of University of North Carolina Executive Development.

Corporate education programs like Business Essentials are not an online-or-nothing proposition. Online courses can be paired with traditional learning opportunities or interactive video sessions to accommodate geographic constraints. "Instructors can spend significant time during a three-day executive education program laying out the basics to get everyone up to speed. On-demand, online courses covering those basics can be developed and assigned as pre-work for participants. That way, instructors can start an executive

development program at a higher level and spend more class time engaging the participants to push their thinking in ways that relate to the challenges they face at work,” says Cates.

The program has been so successful, UNC Kenan-Flagler expanded the offering to allow businesses to customize it to their organizational goals. A leading global entertainment content company recently partnered with UNC to offer the Business Essentials program to their human resource staff. While most of the business content remained the same, staff from Kenan-Flagler worked with the company to customize parts of the program to meet its organizational goals and to facilitate multiple program checkpoints where application is discussed. UNC and their client already plan to customize the program further for future participant groups with mini-case studies specific to the company’s industry.

## E-learning for the Health Care Profession: Saint Elizabeth Health Care



Saint Elizabeth Health Care (SEHC) has served Canadians across Ontario for more than a century. The system began with four nurses who went by foot or streetcar to care for patients. Today, SEHC has more than 4,500 employees and delivers 3.8 million health care visits annually.

SEHC also provides health care services to 200 First Nation (or native Canadian) communities in British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. With such a large service area, SEHC began investigating online learning technology in the late 1990s to help educate their patients about their own health care. They soon realized that the E-learning technology could be applied to staff training as well.

SEHC developed @YourSide Colleague, a 24/7 accessible training program for their employees. Employees from any location with Internet access can go to the site and access training and support, including discussion forums monitored by experts who can offer advice on specific case issues, which can then be viewed by the entire SEHC community.

Health care professionals can upload images to the system, allowing for virtual consultations—a great benefit for nurses working in remote locations. “These consultations make a real difference in patient care since nurses can immediately apply the feedback they get. They don’t have to wait for a physician to fly to their location. Access to expert consultation literally brings care closer to home for patients,” reports Linda Forster, SEHC’s product manager.

The online program allows SEHC to track usage and performance. These metrics help SEHC determine what topics may require additional training opportunities. SEHC reports that their online training portal has improved confidence and performance of field staff and has

reduced costs, travel and lost clinical time associated with live training. Other benefits include standardization of training content throughout the organization and streamlined distribution of HR policies and procedures because they have been added to the platform. SEHC's experience and success with the program illustrates how organizations are finding new and innovative uses for on-demand, online learning initiatives.

## Online Sales Training Goes Virtual: ADP

Automatic Data Processing, Inc. (ADP), with nearly \$9 billion in revenue and about 550,000 clients, is one of the world's largest providers of business outsourcing solutions. With more than 60 years of experience, ADP offers a wide range of HR, payroll, tax and benefits administration solutions from a single source.



A key element to ADP's success has been the company's commitment to continuous learning for sales associates—a process that starts from the day they are hired. Until 2004, new sales associates were given two weeks of face-to-face training at ADP's Atlanta training center, followed by two weeks off and then another two-week training period, also in the Atlanta training center. According to Tim Dewey, ADP employer services sales distance learning manager, the process was effective but, with 7,500 sales associates nationwide, extremely costly. ADP decided to rein in costs by piloting an online training program. The results were so positive that ADP quickly adopted it for all new sales associates.

### ADP Benefits from Online Learning

- Nearly \$1.6 million savings in training expenses.
- 60-day increase in sales productivity for trainees.
- 12 percent increase in first-year annual sales.
- Increased retention.
- Increased comprehension.
- Increased engagement.
- Improved grades.

Source: Blackboard.com

The online training program has reduced the time spent in Atlanta from four weeks to one, a benefit to not only ADP but to employees as well. The company's new sales associates "enjoy the process more because it is less intrusive in their family lives and they are more productive right off the bat," reports Dewey. The online training program has increased comprehension, retention and even final grades. The program was initially designed for new hires, but has been expanded to include every aspect of training for the sales organization.

In addition to a better-prepared sales force, ADP saw substantial cost savings. The organization saved \$1.2 million in travel and accommodation expenses the first year alone. Additional benefits have included more than \$1.5 million in annual savings, a 12 percent increase in first-year annual sales per sales associate, and a 10 times faster time-to-deployment of new content.

## Emerging Evidence of Bottom Line Impact

The development and delivery techniques of online learning solutions for businesses are new, leading-edge ideas, yet evidence is emerging that the cost-to-benefit ratio now surpasses most traditional instructor-led and in-person training programs. While reductions in travel and accommodation expenses are the most obvious and easily measured cost savings, other cost benefits can include improved productivity, increased innovations and reduced turnover.

Research has found that employees who are offered substantive career development opportunities tend to be more engaged, and therefore more loyal and more productive. New and improved skills also equate to a more innovative and responsive workforce. These factors often aren't easy to quantify; however, the benefits are certainly real and can have a long-term positive impact on an organization's bottom line.

Organizations with the best and most innovative management development programs are always ranked among the most successful businesses. On-demand, online learning clearly offers training and development professionals a tool for crafting the flexible and high-quality learning programs that their organizations need to meet strategic objectives and succeed in today's fast-paced global marketplace.

## About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We call this approach [The Power of Experience](#). We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

### Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

### Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined
- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.



## About the Business Essentials Online Certificate Program

UNC's Business Essentials online business certificate program was developed with the content expertise of UNC professors from the Kenan-Flagler Business School and with the technical expertise of Avalon Consulting, LLC, an E-learning development firm based in Plano, Texas. The certificate program features six courses and covers topics such as introduction to business, financial accounting, economics and finance, marketing, business operations and business communication. By investing four hours each week, the entire program takes an estimated four months to complete. Because it is asynchronous, participants can choose a slower or more accelerated pace that fits well with the other priorities in their lives.

The university can provide participant data (e.g., how many participants have accessed the courses, how they are progressing through the quizzes and their participation rates on the discussion boards) to organizations that offer this program to their executive management teams. Organizations can also use mid-point check-ins with participants to assess progress through the program and to receive participant feedback.

## Contact Us

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