

Seven Secrets for Successful eTraining Implementation

INTRODUCTION

Picture the last time you rolled out an online learning solution. The IT team put the link onto the intranet training page, and HR sent an email to the workforce letting them know the training was available. Then sat back and watched. And waited. And after the first little flurry of registrations, enthusiasm waned, few courses were completed and even fewer people registered after the first few weeks. And worst of all, you didn't see the productivity and quality benefits the training should have delivered.

This report explores how the principles of change management can help you maximise registration, improve completion rates, build the skills of your workforce, and realise the productivity benefits your eTraining program promised to deliver.

In particular, the seven secrets identify the major considerations for change – people, processes, technology and organization – that align to drive eTraining success.

- Secret 1: Plan your approach
- Secret 2: Pick the right product
- Secret 3: Prepare your workforce
- Secret 4: Prepare your systems
- Secret 5: Pace your rollout
- Secret 6: Measure and celebrate successes
- Secret 7: Find the right partner

SECRET 1: PLAN YOUR APPROACH

You can roll out new training with a link on your intranet and an all-staff email. This may let your workforce know that the training is available, but to what extent will that result in real course registrations and completions, knowledge retention and productivity? Stepping beyond simple awareness activities is pivotal to a successful eTraining implementation.



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Start by asking the following questions:

- **Is this a change from how we've delivered training before?**

Traditional training programs are highly scheduled – they require attendance at a certain place at a certain time, and a facilitator will monitor engagement and completions. Registration and approval for time away from normal duties go through a supervisor approval process, and it's obvious when an employee is out of the office.

eTraining, on the other hand, is generally self-directed. Participants can register from their computer, and complete the training on work time – or on their own time – a supervisor may only know their employee is completing training if they walk past and see it on their screen.

- **Does our workplace culture respect eTraining as much as in-person training?**

For a long time, online training has been seen as the poor cousin of 'real' in-person training. Employees may feel that they are being disadvantaged by being provided what they perceive as a lesser solution, while others may continue to access traditional training options, resulting in an increase in training expenses overall. And managers may prefer to hire or promote employees that they 'know' have completed traditional training, rather than those who have just 'clicked through' an online course.

- **Are we as employers prepared to meaningfully support our employees in this?**

There is more to an eTraining rollout than just purchasing access to the training: employees need to know what the expectations are around learning during work hours, and whether they can access it as needed – just-in-time – or if completion is expected by a certain date. Can they access it on non-work devices and/or outside of work hours? Does everyone have to do it or just specialists?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, it means that your employees will need to change their habits and attitudes towards eTraining, and your organization may need to change some of its processes or technology to support them. A change management approach would be worth considering.

Change Management

There are a few structured approaches you can take to managing the changes needed to make your eTraining implementation a success.



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- John Kotter's¹ model is one of the most popular, providing a sequence of eight steps that start with establishing a sense of urgency and work towards institutionalizing new approaches within your organization. It is very well-suited to transformational change, when the way you do business shifts to a fundamentally different approach.
- Prosci² uses six steps in its ADKAR model: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement. Prosci provides a comprehensive approach, useful particularly for technology and process changes. On its own, the ADKAR model can be used as a handy checklist for more minor rollouts.
- Viral Change³ focuses on achieving behavioural and cultural change through networks of influencers. Most organizational changes are behavioural at heart – after all, adoption of a new technology or organizational structure is mostly about changing habits – so this approach is highly responsive and can enable significant quick wins.

Each approach has its own strengths, and they can also be blended depending on your organizational needs. The following six secrets draw from a mixture of these three.

Most important is that there is meaningful support at the most senior levels to create a plan at the start and follow it through. Use metrics, such as course completions and the number of lessons accessed, to measure success, as well as surveys and anecdotal evidence to measure cultural change.

SECRET 2: PICK THE RIGHT PRODUCT

eTraining products need to reflect the structural and technological capability of your organization. Selecting a product that doesn't fit with how your organization works will make implementation significantly more difficult.

Technical

Is your organization running Windows XP from 2001 or the latest release Mac OS? Or a mix of both? Is your workforce highly mobile – in the field, spread around the world, or collocated in one office? These questions have impacts for the product you choose: ie. selecting a product that requires large file downloads may not be practical for learners with poor internet speeds, and detailed imagery may be highly impractical for remote employees using mobile devices.

¹ <http://kotterinternational.com>

² <http://prosci.com>

³ <http://viralchange.com>



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And if you're looking to develop custom content, are the authoring tools as easy to use as the training itself? It's unlikely that your subject matter experts are also IT experts, so an easy-to-use tool to capture their unique corporate knowledge, wherever they are, will determine the quality of the final training product.

Questions to ask your vendors include:

- What platforms is it compatible with?
- How enduring is the technology? (For example, HTML5 is device-agnostic – it works in any modern web browser, so won't lose functionality like standalone programs when systems or hardware are upgraded.)
- Is it cloud or server-based?
- Do learners and/or developers need to download special software?
- What bandwidth is required to access and complete the eTraining?
- Is it responsive and mobile-friendly?

Structural

The type of training your workforce needs depends on their jobs, location and the organization's policy on time spent in learning and development.

Just-in-case: The closest to a traditional training approach, just-in-case training is provided in advance of the need to use the skills. The online equivalent is requiring employees to complete a course to obtain certification, or meet a particular deadline or target. It can be efficient to get all employees in one place and teach them everything they need to know in one course, and it makes measuring course completions easy, but research shows that a majority of learning is lost when not applied immediately so the efficiency is quickly lost.

With eTraining, ask your vendor for an arrangement where coursework may remain available to students following initial completion, so they can complete the course as required, then revisit the coursework later as tasks require it – a just-in-time approach.

Just-in-time: Just-in-time learning results in better long-term knowledge retention, as the learning has immediate relevance and is put into action quickly. It also reduces time away from day-to-day work as learning is undertaken in small chunks only when needed.

This approach is particularly useful for employees in the field who need technical support on the spot, such as engineers on construction sites. It does require the eTraining platform to be accessible when and where the learner is, so finding an eTraining product that is mobile-friendly and low-bandwidth is pivotal.



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Blended: Blended learning is a combination of eTraining and in-person training. This approach may be useful for staff who are completing apprenticeships or are new to a particular skillset. eTraining can be used for theory, and hands-on learning can be conducted onsite via mentorship arrangements with experienced colleagues. This approach reduces downtime of your most valuable, experienced employees while still ensuring their knowledge is shared with those who could benefit most from it.

Some eTraining solutions also allow for capture of that expert knowledge directly into the platform, making corporate knowledge transfer available right in the theory portion of the learning, and making their expertise accessible and scalable across the organization.

Questions to ask your vendor about their products include:

- Is course material available after completion?
- For how long can it continue to be accessed?
- Can learners complete modules out of sequence to allow for just-in-time learning?
- Can we add organization-specific material to the coursework?

SECRET 3: PREPARE YOUR WORKFORCE

Your training rollout plan should make sure employees and their supervisors know the following from the start:

- Who is expected to take the training, how and when
- Who has power to approve participation
- Policies on training during work time, own time and overtime
- Whether participation will be monitored or reported
- Completion targets or deadlines (eg. annual performance review)
- Consequences of non-participation (if any)
- Where to find help (ie. through the vendor, or in-house learning and development team).

An intranet site may be great for providing complete information, but employees rarely visit websites without cause, so employing 'push' communication tools can be powerful for making sure the information definitely gets in front of the relevant audiences. Tools that make compliance easy could include:

- Creating postcards with training titles, web addresses, important dates and helpline contact details for quick reference.
- Providing suggested statements for inclusion in performance plans, so employees don't have to develop their own.
- Developing meeting kits to help supervisors discuss the opportunity with their teams.



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SECRET 4: PREPARE YOUR SYSTEMS

Preparing your systems should be straightforward if you have selected a well-matched eTraining product. Gaps in technical capability can have flow-on effects to eTraining adoption and broader organizational culture, creating 'second class employees' who can't access the learning.

Make sure the data plans of remote staff can handle the additional expectations for training downloads, and that their devices have the appropriate software and capability. If you're using a server-hosted solution, can your staff access it from their devices? Failing to account for the needs of remote or mobile staff can result in them feeling unvalued and isolated from the organization.

Work with IT to ensure all staff devices – desktop and mobile – have the appropriate software available. For example, an eTraining product that uses HTML5 will work well and efficiently across all modern web browsers, but in many larger organizations it's not unusual for some teams to be using outdated browsers that won't deliver the full functionality of the training. Updating those pockets of disadvantaged staff will have benefits not only for training rollout, but for overall engagement as well.

Firewalls may also need to be updated to allow employees to access cloud-based learning solutions. A strong firewall can provide excellent security for your enterprise networks, but can also sometimes block access to unfamiliar cloud-based eTraining platforms. It is worth working with your IT team prior to rollout to ensure that an overzealous firewall will not prevent staff from accessing training.

SECRET 5: PACE YOUR ROLLOUT

If you answered yes to any of the questions in Secret 1, then you'll need more than just an all-staff email to roll out your new eTraining initiative. A two-pronged preparation that starts before official launch can add a lot of power not only to the launch, but ongoing success of your initiative.

At the start of the project, even before you identify the eTraining platform, find and engage your influencers – those employees at all levels in the organization who have extensive networks and are highly respected by their peers. This may include establishing a structured working or testing group, or simply inviting them to try the eTraining before organization-wide release. Involving these highly influential employees from the beginning means they are positioned to actively champion the initiative to their extended networks, and be a role model for participation.

As much as influencers can be powerful supporters, dissenting influencers can also have a strong presence across the organization, so working directly with them to build buy-in is both a success and risk mitigation strategy.



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Secondly, the cultural transition from traditional learning needs to not only be stated, but modelled, by senior leadership. Senior leaders should be seen to treat eTraining as equivalent to traditional training, and model acceptance of eTraining in their promotion and recruitment of direct reports.

Most powerful is for senior leaders to also complete the training to demonstrate that they are not 'above' eTraining. If training is organization-wide, the CEO should be the figurehead, followed closely by functional heads. If the training is for a particular function or specialty, then the highest-ranked official within that section of the hierarchy should be the most visible champion.

SECRET 6: MEASURE AND CELEBRATE SUCCESSES

Monitor performance on a regular basis – early in the rollout, weekly is perfect, as it allows you to make simple adjustments to maintain momentum and achieve results. For example, an additional deadline reminder email may be sufficient to motivate stragglers to complete courses by a certain date; adjusting course structure or length may help close the gap between registrations and completions; and connecting with team leaders and your influencer network to identify their “barriers to adoption” could reverse low registration figures.

Reinforcement is actually a critical part of all change management approaches, as it validates to employees that they are doing the right thing, encourages achievement and helps to sustain momentum.

You can use the data stored in the eTraining system or your LMS to:

- Identify every 100th completion (or every 10th or 1000th – whatever is appropriate for your organization) and interview them for the employee newsletter or intranet about why they enrolled, what learnings they've already used in their job, what they found challenging and what they enjoyed about the eTraining product.
- Recognize the highest-scoring learner of the quarter.
- Include completion rates in monthly reporting for HR and teams. This helps to identify teams that may need additional targeted support, and helps HR to evaluate their overall implementation success.

And don't forget to celebrate behind-the-scenes staff and support teams as well as learners. Recognizing one-year anniversaries (especially if your results are worth celebrating!) is a great way to build team rapport, as well as creating an opportunity to analyze, discuss and review progress against long-term targets.



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SECRET 7: FIND THE RIGHT PARTNER

Like a great marriage, finding the right partner can make all the difference to a successful eTraining implementation. A good partner will provide your implementation team with access to a dedicated expert experienced in eTraining implementation and will assist you in developing a comprehensive rollout plan. They will provide ongoing support – not just for the technical aspects of their learning platform, but for promoting adoption across your organization.

A robust educational psychology and instructional design basis is as fundamental to learning success as the technology. In the online learning sector in particular, there are many providers with excellent technical credentials for course development, but no formal educational foundation or experience. Does your selected provider have educational psychologists and instructional designers on their payroll? Can they provide evidence of successful educational outcomes, rather than just successful delivery of educational technology?

And don't just take their assurances for granted – check their references by reading their case studies, and speaking with other clients (if they can't provide references, cold-call the companies whose logos show in the 'clients' section of their site). A good partner will be able to discuss implementation, results such as uptake and completion rates, and educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

If you're wanting your online training to really make a meaningful difference to your organization's productivity and efficiency, plan your rollout from the beginning, and follow it through. Partnering with your organization's internal communication specialists to work through the seven secrets is perhaps the eighth secret to success: their experience, tools and networks can be an especially powerful resource for HR and project teams.

eTraining is an extremely efficient and cost-effective approach to ensuring your workforce is knowledgeable and highly productive, but ensuring that your people, processes, technology and organization all align is key to realizing the benefits of faster, more effective learning.

Good luck!



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