Case study: The evolution of the business case for e-learning at St George Bank

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Executive summary: This case study article looks at the implementation and impact of e-learning at Australia’s fifth largest bank, St George, from 2000 to the present day. The holistic business case for e-learning is explored within the context of the competitive financial services industry, organisational change and government regulation. Key cost savings achieved by e-learning over other learning methods are detailed but it is argued that in building a business case, it is inadequate to rely solely on the cost-comparison approach. Instead, proponents of e-learning need to look also at the broader issues that sustain the business case. The case study additionally shows how e-learning often needs to be mandated in its early stages by limiting learner and instructor choice but suggests that by employing the right mitigation tactics within a sound overall strategy, including adopting hybrid or blended learning techniques, widespread commitment to e-learning can be realised. The article concludes with a discussion of key lessons learnt and of the future directions and ongoing challenges around e-learning, in particular charting a course for greater learner choice through personalised learning environments based on open source content and connective, social software technologies.

Keywords: workplace e-learning; learning and development; learner attrition; learner readiness; blended learning; business case

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the Australian financial services sector has emerged to become a prominent industry and influential employer, both domestically and internationally. The geographic reach and knowledge-intensive nature of this industry, along with the various pressures imposed by government regulation and intense market competition, make the search for a uniform, effective and economically viable approach to workplace training an important business pursuit. The sector as a whole has traditionally been active in understanding the role of workplace learning, but some organisations within the sector have been more active than others in embracing innovation and, in particular, finding and negotiating a legitimate and effective role for information and communication technologies (ICTs) within their learning culture. St George Bank, Australia’s fifth largest bank, is especially
renowned for its approach to e-learning and has been widely awarded within the broader learning and development (L&D) community for the quality of its e-learning initiatives. Over the past decade, e-learning has earned a legitimate place in the learning culture at St George, and the delivery of many programs through e-learning is seen as indispensable to its business success, particularly given the customer-friendly positioning the bank has embraced.

The case study reported on in the present article examines St George Bank’s approach to e-learning implementation over the past decade and the business impact of the e-learning initiatives undertaken in these years. The article shows how a business case for e-learning emerged at St George that transcends a mere cost comparison with traditional classroom learning. The case also discusses how blended learning programs helped to foster key leadership and customer service competencies at various organisational levels, which were integral to the overall success of the bank’s strategy. Last but not least, the ongoing business case for e-learning is explored, with a focus on the potential role of ‘connectivism’ (Siemens, 2005a, 2005b) and personalised learning environments based on Web 2.0 and social networking tools in the future direction of workplace learning at the organisation.

The study used a single-case study design and followed a case study research protocol drawing on multiple embedded sources of qualitative and quantitative data over the study period, including analyses and reports internal and external to the organisation. The protocol included documented strategy and reports of outcomes, internal data collection from the organisation’s e-learning platform, detailed business case analysis used in the case study, examination of relevant, extant literature, as well as personal leadership experiences of the lead author. Attempts to broaden claims and/or make generalisations beyond the current context have been reviewed against established e-learning theory and published scholarly literature on the topic.

The origins and journey of e-learning at St George Bank

Initial positioning of e-learning

The origins of e-learning at St George can be traced to a transformation program undertaken in the early 2000s, known as the Best Bank project. Best Bank was a visioning process aimed at keeping St George competitive through cost effectiveness and through completing the bank’s process of transformation from a regional building society focused on home loans into a full-service bank with a national profile in both the retail and commercial sectors. While Best Bank identified over 1,500 initiatives for cost savings and process improvements, one key proposal sought to transform all learning at St George into online learning. In parallel with this proposal, a revitalised L&D function in the form of the Corporate Performance Centre (CPC) was instituted in 2001. Its mandate was to “position learning at the centre of the organisation” (SumTotal, 2004).

It became apparent to the CPC managers early on in their tenure that the controversial recommendation to move all L&D to an e-learning platform was neither feasible nor practical. Thus the managers opted for a more tactical and measured approach, hoping to gradually build momentum around e-learning. They recognised the centrality of the role that learning would play in the bank’s leadership strategy in the longer term, and a potential place for e-learning within the leadership development plan was envisaged. As a result, e-learning was positioned as being highly business-relevant, an approach that held obvious appeal to senior management stakeholders. Steps were also taken in an attempt to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of employees. For example, an in-house competition was run, with a laptop computer as the prize, to find a name for the new learning management system (LMS) to be built for the bank by an external e-learning provider. The name that won the competition was e-luminate. Such company-wide internal marketing activities were intended to generate excitement and identify early adopters for the introduction of e-learning. A key feature of e-luminate’s design was its positioning outside the bank’s firewall – This was a
particularly important decision that subsequently gave the LMS flexibility in a number of applications, some of which are alluded to later in the present article.

The learning culture

In 2000 L&D had little status at St George and was focused on low-level, ad hoc interventions such as bank teller induction training in local branches. In addition, learning had a strong classroom emphasis, both for frontline programs and for programs pitched at a more senior level. Learning was also tactical rather than strategic, and coverage was limited – only two of the seven divisions of the organisation had formal training programs (Burns, 2004). The Best Bank project had led to significant cost reductions for learning generally, and thus there was significant resistance to early e-learning initiatives as these were perceived by many solely as a way to cut costs. Fortunately, at the time, St George had an open-minded, high-trust culture that allowed for learning investment and experimentation. Internal analyses of the organisational readiness for e-learning showed that the availability of technology, computer literacy of employees and alignment of targeted learning goals and objectives to the needs of employees and organisational culture would be important considerations; St George stood up well against these criteria. Hence, it was concluded that the environment was open and conducive to the introduction of e-learning.

Initially, the CPC team opted for a tactical positioning of the e-luminate platform through a learning initiative that would involve a large population of the organisation. This population had to access information and pass a licensing test mandated by the Federal Government under the Financial Services Reform Act 2001 (FSRA). The FSRA provided the CPC with an ideal opportunity to trial a key implementation tactic, namely the removal of learner choice within its overall approach. For this first e-learning program, the information could only be accessed via the e-learning platform and because the content and assessment was compulsory for all employees and managers, it allowed for the coverage of 5,500 learners. This tactic forced familiarity with the technology across the organisation and at all levels, and created initial awareness of e-luminate. From a cost perspective it was also a powerful demonstration to senior leaders at St George of the potential business return on the initial e-learning investment.

Momentum built from the success of the initial e-learning initiative, and the CPC now looked for opportunities to integrate e-learning into higher-level programs addressing management and leadership skills. At the middle management and executive level, St George adopted what has been called a “blended learning” approach (Harris, Connolly & Feeney, 2009). For example, participants in a management development program attended online learning modules (with assessment) prior to being admitted to the face-to-face workshop component of the course. Failure to complete the online learning modules prevented attendance at the workshop, which was, at the time, a very unfamiliar process for St George employees and managers. According to a review of industry case studies conducted by Vaughn and MacVicar (2004), the blended learning approach appears to broadly reflect industry practice and is the most common way that employees undertake e-learning.

Having gained sufficient traction through the early positioning of e-learning, the CPC now stipulated the use of e-learning as a core learning technology. This was not an easy task, and there were objections from many key stakeholders. Learning professionals, for example, needed to be convinced that e-learning was a legitimate means of delivering of adult education. Employees, too, needed convincing – they were reluctant adopters of e-learning because of their fear of the new technology and also because of the negative perception that the organisation was merely implementing e-learning because it was a “cheap” solution that would enable “on-the-job” training. Finally, managers needed convincing, as they had reservations in relation to the use of e-learning because of a belief that e-learning was not going to yield the same learner outcomes as the more traditional classroom-based
approach. The managers were also influenced by the objections (however minor) they were receiving from employees.

**Measuring the business impact of e-learning**

Having taken the decision to integrate e-learning within the learning culture of St George, continual measurement of the business benefits and risks of each e-learning initiative was important in justifying to the organisation the value of the technology. The advantages commonly associated with e-learning include asynchronous training, training at individual pace, ‘just-in-time’ training and cost effectiveness (Powell, 2000). Building a business case for instituting e-learning typically entails justifying expenditure through potential benefits such as increased employee satisfaction and retention due to wider access to learning opportunities, increased innovation and sales, increased operational efficiencies due to time saved on face-to-face training and travel, less duplication of materials and more streamlined training (Scheurs, Gelan & Sammour, 2009). E-learning also offers rapid documentation of training outcomes, an important compliance outcome (Smith, 2009).

The benefits or ‘pros’ of e-learning are balanced against the possible ‘cons’ (as compared with traditional approaches to employee training), which include the high cost of developing content, mixed or uncertain results in terms of learning outcomes, the lack of adaptability of e-learning for a range of learning styles, learner attrition (ie low completion rates) and, of course, the potential technology problems and barriers associated with creating and using an e-learning solution. These issues can be compounded by instructor and employee preferences for face-to-face modes of learning delivery, which, if not actively addressed, can lead to program failure.

At St George, it was realised that in measuring and assessing the impact of e-learning in a business context, many factors must be taken into consideration. Perhaps the most obvious evaluation method – and certainly the most visible initially – is the relative cost comparison of an intervention based on e-learning to that based on another, alternative mode (eg classroom delivery). Such a cost comparison is often the only business case consideration taken into formal account by an organisation because it is the easiest to quantify. However, cost-based metrics in assessing learning outcomes have been shown to be inadequate in many circumstances (Servage, 2005); it is well acknowledged that there are many other factors that should be taken into consideration to determine the real strength or weakness of the overall business case and the real business impact of any learning intervention. Other important criteria include learner readiness and capability, the speed of execution, convenience (eg as measured by lost productivity and resource time) and ongoing ease of maintaining knowledge, learning and capability. All of these factors were deemed to be significant at St George.

Nevertheless, at St George significant cost savings have been achieved from the implementation of e-learning. In fact, a detailed assessment of five projects undertaken within St George showed extremely favourable cost benefits from e-learning when compared to the more traditional classroom approach for a large-scale rollout. From the initial cost perspective each project was assessed as best implemented through e-learning, as illustrated in Figure 1. Details of each of the five projects that appear in the figure are as follows:

- Project A: training in accordance with a major regulative requirement involving all employees across St George
- Project B: implementation of a new technology system involving over 2,000 employees
- Project C: a new software program involving over 4,000 employees
- Project D: a product knowledge and information program for approximately 2,000 employees
- Project E: an updated knowledge maintenance program for about 1,000 employees.
Figure 1 demonstrates the measurable cost impact of e-learning at St George when judged against traditional, classroom-based interventions. This quantitative outcome was a very strong business driver to consider e-learning as a powerful, cost-effective learning methodology. Nonetheless, despite this, L&D professionals should not be content with cost comparison models alone as a means for building and sustaining a business case for e-learning. While compelling in terms of building a financial business case, “… test scores and completion rates, those variables easiest to measure in an e-learning initiative, do not capture learner satisfaction, impact on corporate culture or effects – either short term or long term – on productivity” (Moyer, 2001, cited in Servage, 2005, p. 306).

As a result, to further build and strengthen the business case, each of the five projects was also assessed and measured for business impact using a number of additional criteria. Table 1 describes other the e-learning impacts strived for and the business benefits resulting from e-learning deployment at St George. The table shows a number positive business outcomes that were attained. For example, the organisation was able to design a consistent learning approach that enabled managers and employees alike to apply the same practices to enhance customer familiarity with the St George brand. Furthermore, because learning occurred on-the-job, disruption to operations and customers was limited, and lost productivity time was minimised. However, there were some risks associated with implementation of the e-learning interventions. Compared with classroom interventions, e-learning generated significant resistance that needed to be addressed and managed, in some cases requiring firm and decisive action in order to mitigate risk. Table 2 lists the main negative issues identified and the actions taken to alleviate and/or overcome the issues.

E-learning has not always been implemented smoothly or without risk. As Table 2 indicates, at St George, for successful implementation to occur potential problem areas needed to be identified and assessed and appropriate responses developed. In this case study a serious miscalculation on the capabilities of the learners in using the e-learning technology was an early problem that needed to be rectified before the CPC could be satisfied that full uptake would take place. Similarly, the organisation required increased diligence in terms of the measurement of progress; it also needed to develop managerial accountability for correctly positioning e-learning and introducing mechanisms to hold employees accountable for satisfactory completion of e-learning modules. This last point echoes a key aspect advocated
by Vaughn and MacVicar (2004, p. 412), who note the critical role of managers with staff responsibilities as “e-learning facilitators” and suggest their performance should be actively measured with respect to their responsibilities in this role.

### Table 1: E-Learning business impact and benefits relative to classroom delivery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business impact of e-learning</th>
<th>Resulting business benefits</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of consistent and uniform message, information and/or knowledge</td>
<td>Employees apply the same approach and practice internally and with customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased speed of execution from developing the initial business case to full implementation and roll-out</td>
<td>E-learning achieved, on average, greater than 80% reduction in time to execution as compared to classroom-based programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisting line managers and support staff in achieving minimal disruption to their normal work (eg not requiring them to assist with managing the logistics of learning deployment)</td>
<td>Leaders were more comfortable and satisfied that they could continue to deliver to customers without needing to take key employees off their jobs to undergo training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimisation of productivity losses caused by travel, accommodation and off-the-job requirements of employees</td>
<td>Business productivity was maintained while employees trained, thus limiting lost-time opportunity costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent means of measuring and assessing capability</td>
<td>Knowledge assessment and compliance of every employee was monitored and reported to the trainee’s managers, thereby enhancing the leader’s capacity to take steps to help an individual improve his/her performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: E-learning deployment risks and actions taken to mitigate those risks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deployment risk</th>
<th>Mitigative action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not all employees were comfortable with the use of e-learning technology</td>
<td>Supplementary training was conducted as a precursor to the roll-out of early e-learning projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers and project managers were sceptical of the effectiveness of e-learning relative to classroom delivery</td>
<td>Increased use of transparent measurement, particularly of employees’ perceptions, eg reporting, proved particularly valuable in diffusing negative reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees had the perception that e-learning was a “cheap strategy” because of the loss of classroom experience and off-job involvement/participation</td>
<td>Content was designed to stimulate as much interaction as possible and programs were developed to be of high quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many traditional training practitioners did not support the use of e-learning</td>
<td>Expert and committed resources were found and, where necessary, steps taken to ‘force’ initial exposure to, usage of and immersion in e-learning amongst the organisation’s L&amp;D community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Although the business impact of the above examples was significant, it is worth noting that in the St George L&D strategy, all projects commence with a thorough assessment to determine the most suitable and appropriate type(s) of learning intervention for the given scenario.
E-learning has only been used where it has made good pedagogical, commercial and business sense; there have been many instances in which it was decided that e-learning was unsuitable, inappropriate and/or impractical, and in these situations other learning methods have been chosen instead.

Key lessons learnt

Overcoming learner and instructor bias

A controversial tactic adopted by the CPC at St George, yet one that has proven to be successful in many respects, was to remove learner choice around how information could be accessed. Initially, the conscious decision was made restrict access to key information required to pass licensing tests, making it available exclusively via e-learning. This tactic set in train an awareness-building process for a large and influential audience of learners, and also business sponsors, and went some way towards breaking down pre-existing learner bias in favour of face-to-face learning. As depicted in Table 2, significant effort was invested into devising mitigatory actions to overcome initial scepticism for e-learning amongst the L&D community at St George.

Another key challenge faced was that of the need to overcome instructor bias and preferences for traditional learning methods. To address this challenge another important control mechanism was put in place. For all new programs they were proposing, CPC trainers had to demonstrate that they had actively explored and sought out ways to integrate an e-learning component into the wider learning approach before the go-ahead on their project was forthcoming. If the trainer could not demonstrate they had investigated e-learning opportunities for the project, approval would not be granted. In practice this did not necessarily mean that e-learning was ultimately selected, but it did mean it was more widely considered, which assisted it in gaining legitimacy. Instructors often found novel ways to incorporate an e-learning component into a program – For example, e-learning often became the platform through which program participants accessed pre-requisite knowledge prior to attending a classroom component of a program. A positive learning outcome of this blended learning approach was that learners came to programs better equipped and prepared to participate; it also allowed for greater efficiency in the face-to-face sessions/workshops and higher-level activities that called for the recollection and integration of prior knowledge. Programs consequently became shorter, more focused/targeted and cheaper to run, so that learners were away from the workplace for shorter periods of time.

To some this ‘control-based’ approach may seem heavy handed and indeed some criticisms in this regard emanated not only from the wider staff population of St George, but also from within the CPC itself. The CPC adopted the view, however, that to overcome learner and instructor bias it was crucial that the organisation mandate e-learning at the outset; over time this control-based approach would be replaced by their preferred management paradigm of commitment (Walton, 1985). What the CPC found was that as time progressed widespread commitment to e-learning did begin to emerge and the learning culture at St George was transformed in the process. All stakeholders began to see the financial and other business benefits of e-learning, and realised that equivalent if not superior learning outcomes (such as greater opportunities for reflection) could be achieved when participants came to face-to-face/classroom programs with similar levels of knowledge and understanding already in place.

The challenges and opportunities of compliance training

As alluded to earlier, Federal Government regulation of the finance sector was one critical element in the operating environment that drove the need for compliance-based training, which provided an ideal opportunity to demonstrate the benefits of e-learning. However, compliance training needs (including Occupational Health and Safety, Emergency
Procedures and FSRA requirements) continued to be a source of opportunities as well as challenges for the CPC. For example, an unforeseen requirement contained in the FSRA led to a situation whereby in order for St George to have its finance products recommended to customers by on-site car finance advisers, those advisers had to first be licensed for the loan products. This presented an opportunity to extend the application of e-learning technologies to the licensing of car dealership finance advisers. Here, the earlier decision to locate the e-luminate LMS outside the St George firewall proved to be visionary. What this meant was that the CPC could develop its training and testing program and make it easily accessible to the extensive network of car finance advisers all around Australia, who could be efficiently trained and tested from their desktops and rapidly begin to offer the loan products to their customers. While the business benefit of this learning initiative was not directly measured in this case, it was undoubtedly significant.

The CPC also recognised that compliance-based learning should not and could not be the only acceptable application of e-learning. Limiting e-learning to this type of training would have inhibited the strategic importance of e-learning in the fabric of the St George culture. In reality, at certain points in the e-learning journey, there was too much compliance training being conducted via this delivery mode. This challenged the CPC to rethink how to integrate compliance requirements within mainstream learning programs, reduce the time taken to complete the training and at the same time make the training more compelling and interactive within a business application.

In any case, the compliance need has meant that the LMS has become indispensable for St George, partly because it houses all of the bank’s records relating to FSRA employee compliance and other legislated requirements. Therefore it is now critical to the maintenance of St George’s banking licence – This positions the e-learning platform as a mission-critical system, placed alongside and comparable in status to the key information and transaction systems (SumTotal, 2004).

**Top-level buy-in**

Recognition from industry helped to foster organisational commitment along the e-learning pathway at St George. The bank won several awards from the wider human resources (HR) and learning community for its e-learning programs – For example, in 2003 St George won ‘Best E-Learning Strategy’ at the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) Awards. It also won the 2004 SkillSoft Asia-Pacific e-learning award for instant learning (SumTotal, 2004), and in the following year obtained a prestigious BEST award from the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD, 2009). External recognition of this kind was and is important in promoting ongoing top-level commitment and support for e-learning at St George.

E-learning is now well accepted as a legitimate and viable learning method at St George. Indeed, it can be argued that it has become integral not only to the learning culture of the business, but also to the development of core competencies and competitive advantages that are essential to the operation of the business at large. A good example here is the role embedded learning is starting to play within frontline, customer-facing areas, where lesson reminders have been placed within easy, ‘just-in-time’ access to frontline staff and managers, particularly within the realm of customer service – a key point of difference on which St George prides itself. Frontline employees and managers are able to quickly ‘call up’ a learner note (in the form of a cue or reminder from a previously-completed program) on how to best manage a difficult situation, and this is broadly seen a way to build competitive advantage in customer service. Furthermore, the strategy of using a blended learning solution on-the-job supports a customer-centric rather than product-centric approach (SumTotal, 2004), and lends itself to more authentic and relevant learning. As part of this emphasis, training and coaching on-the-job takes account of a range of possible situations. The employee is trained using embedded e-learning, simulation and role-plays conducted by their manager, the latter two of which are comparable to classroom-based experiential
learning, albeit more tightly linked to and integrated with the workplace. Improved transfer of learning becomes a key outcome because formal learning is reinforced as employees undertake their job tasks. Managers become closely involved and in tune with the development of their staff, which allows them to manage staff performance more effectively, and vice versa, i.e., they are able to use their staff’s performance as a basis for identifying gaps pointing to the need for further development.

E-learning in the learning culture

E-learning now not only enjoys a dominant position in the learning culture of St George Bank, but also is a central component of that learning culture. For instance, e-learning is often the preferred and primary method employed by the bank’s L&D professionals and managers to deliver content. This is due to the speed of implementation and the ease with which business impact and other demonstrable advantages are able to be measured. In a different way, employees have also embraced e-learning as a primary learning tool. This may be attributed to ease of use, availability and the fact that they are (now) familiar and comfortable with the technology and delivery mode. Below is a non-exhaustive list of some of the many practical examples showing how e-learning has now been integrated with the operating culture of St George:

- Learning programs that convey vision, values and desired behaviours are deployed via the LMS for all bank employees on a regular basis.
- Forty per cent of learning for customer service officers and call centre consultants is delivered via e-learning.
- E-learning knowledge components are used in all leadership and management training programs.
- E-learning is incorporated into all on-the-job sales and customer service training, as well as technical training on the store-front teller systems. (SumTotal, 2004)

Learning at St George is now also more learner-focused, but this outcome has not been achieved without substantial effort. Failures were followed up with corrective measures, and along the way considerable amounts of data collection and analysis of the overall L&D strategies were undertaken by the CPC in order to facilitate both proactive and reactive solutions and strategies. For example, data became available mid-way through the period under discussion that showed poor completion rates for externally-sourced content (both custom and off-the-shelf). A conclusion was drawn that in the main the external programs were too long, so modules were condensed into shorter sections (e.g., 10 minutes in duration), which resulted in better completion rates. This shows the criticality of ongoing evaluation of e-learning, with active data gathering formatively feeding into learning program development and implementation strategies. Evaluation should also be holistic; completion rates alone are not a sufficient metric and do not adequately capture learner satisfaction or the richness and intricacies of learner perceptions and attitudes. While companies that opt for shorter program modules are generally pleased with the results, “… this should not become a universal rule… [it may result in the creation of] a ‘speedy’ environment with little time [for learners] to reflect and deepen the learning process” (Ettinger, Holton & Blass, 2006, p. 210).

The changing face of e-learning

Although greater levels of learner choice were introduced following the initial compliance-type projects, as part of the evolution of e-learning at St George, the approach has always been to attempt to strike a balance between the requirements of the learners and those of the organisation. To some extent, the introduction of learner choice has not only afforded learners greater autonomy and control over their method/modality and pace of learning, but has helped to mitigate the ‘big brother’ effect. St George has also worked hard to keep pace with the changes and growing sophistication of e-learning technologies, while...
going through great lengths to maintain insights into learners’ dynamic preferences and needs and taking steps to reconcile their needs with the needs of the business.

Notwithstanding the many awards it has received, in their endeavour to continually learn and improve, St George and the CPC have remained ever open to feedback about their e-learning approach, and actively solicit suggestions for improvement. The bank’s L&D managers have attended and presented at numerous Australian and international forums, sharing their experiences and exchanging ideas with peers and experts from both academia and industry. The CPC has also partnered with external providers who work at the leading edge of trends in the e-learning environment; as part of this process, it was able to rationalise its relationships, reducing the size of its training provider network from a fragmented set of 770 suppliers (many of whom were using conservative instructional methods) to a group of 30 companies highly skilled and adept in using e-learning (Burns, 2004). E-learning therefore changed the way St George’s L&D managers interacted with learning partners, and brought about much greater standardisation as well as innovation in content development.

E-learning at St George has evolved dramatically over the past decade in a number of very perceptible ways. Where once the technical platform for e-learning was in the form of a central system tightly controlled by the CPC team, it has now moved to a distributed system with tools placed in the domains of business managers. There is ever-increasing segmentation of learners in job groupings or ‘families’, and e-learning is driven jointly and cooperatively by the L&D function and the business managers themselves. E-learning content is now arranged in small ‘chunks’ or bite-sized modules that are interactive and quick (less than 20 minutes, including time taken to complete assessment). Training content is linked to and embedded in the day-to-day operational activities performed and technologies used by staff in their jobs. Similarly, timely and useful knowledge and information are easy and convenient to obtain from multiple sources within and outside the organisation.

In addition to the above, where once the organisation determined the learning approach, the content and the reason for learning, it is now the learners who choose the way they learn and the place and time of learning, with the organisation creating the supportive framework, supplying the necessary tools and infrastructure, and empowering the learners themselves to embed the learning into the current business context. The changing face of e-learning at St George has also started to see the early adoption of social networking techniques and technologies to enhance the communicative and collaborative aspects of e-learning.

Overall, while e-learning at St George started out as a cost-driven exercise whose momentum was fuelled primarily by the need for regulation-based training, it has now grown to become one of the leading exemplars of e-learning in Australian industry, widely recognised across the country as a benchmark or reference point for effective or best practice. One thing this case study underscores and emphasises is that business leaders and L&D practitioners alike should seek to match the most appropriate learning approach to a particular project, which may entail a mix of multiple delivery modes and methods including but not limited to e-learning. While business leaders can generally find a compelling initial cost benefit to justify e-learning deployment, e-learning is not always the best solution and perhaps, by itself, is rarely the best solution if treated in isolation from other options.

A critical factor in securing sustained and ongoing investment in e-learning at St George will be the learning managers’ ability to continually demonstrate the real value of e-learning approaches in a business environment and context that is both dynamic and turbulent. This is due both to the present global economic conditions, and to the organisational change resulting from the acquisition of St George in 2008 by Westpac Banking Corporation (one of the ‘big four’ banks in Australia). Finding ways to merge or ‘marry’ the distinct and apparently different learning cultures, approaches and competencies of the two organisations and looking for synergies between them will constitute some of the next challenges for the e-learning team. St George, which has constantly been acknowledged to be at the forefront
of e-learning practice, will be challenged to stay abreast of the fast paced and dynamic e-technology field.

**Irrelevance or opportunity: is e-learning at the crossroads?**

Perhaps one key lesson that may be derived from the St George experience is that technologies, tools and systems can become obsolete and irrelevant if there is a lack of renewal and innovation in the approach to e-learning. It is critical that both the learning technologies and the ways those technologies are used continue to evolve, and these must be linked to future needs, directions and trends. This is necessary in order to maintain relevance to societal demands and other external factors, not to mention appropriate alignment of learning so that it continues to meet business needs. Rapid technological innovation and environmental change are currently occurring in the form of the proliferation of Web 2.0 and social networking tools, as well as the increasing uptake and use of mobile devices, and organisations using e-learning need to adapt appropriately and make decisions on whether or not, and if so how, to modify their strategies and tactics. In many ways it is more important now to be able to anticipate the future direction of e-learning than it was at the initial introduction of e-learning at St George nearly a decade ago. It is imperative for researchers and practitioners to work together in this regard. If a forward-looking perspective is not adopted, decision-makers may implement a next generation of e-learning that is out of step with important societal changes and technological developments.

The future direction of e-learning technology may see e-learning systems being integrated with nascent connective technologies (see below) to increase individual support while ensuring alignment with business goals and senior management plans, policies and directives. In a similar vein, e-learning may increasingly leverage open access content that is freely available to individuals and organisations on the World Wide Web, even if not vetted for reliability and accuracy as is the case with traditional, ‘authoritative’ sources of information such as course manuals and textbooks. Organisations may thus need to find effective ways of moderating information use, taking steps to ensure the content being accessed is of a high quality and relevant to business outcomes. Learning is also likely to continue to move progressively towards being available anywhere and everywhere, via smartphones, PDAs or other remote access points at any time that suits the learner, with the learner being responsible for creating connections between and integrating available information (Quinn, 2000; Metcalf, 2002, 2006; Lee, 2005).

Last but not least, the authors of the present article believe that e-learning will shift strongly to being driven at the business-unit level, with learning professionals acting as the innovators. Their role will be to increase awareness and catalyse experimentation, evaluation and application of new learning techniques and technologies, which in the near future will include the aforementioned mobile computing and social networking technologies, integrated with performance support tools and used in ways that assist in the achievement of business outcomes.

**A new context for e-learning**

In the emerging technological and social context, e-learning faces developments and changes that present substantial challenges, but that are simultaneously also sources of much promise and opportunity. The ever-expanding raft of connective technologies such as those that belong to the ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly, 2005) movement, including but not limited to social computing services like blogs, wikis, podcasts, YouTube, Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as portable and wireless devices providing mobile and ubiquitous access to these services, such as Netbooks, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) and smartphones/iPhones, provide the basic building blocks or elements of what has been termed a ‘Personal Learning Environment’ (PLE – Athwell, 2007; Siemens & Tiffenberger, 2009; Syed-Khuzzan & Goulding, 2009). These developments, together with the broader societal and economic changes against whose backdraft they are occurring, place ever higher demands on organisations
and on learning professionals. Connectivism has been proposed as a theoretical model or paradigm of learning for the future (Siemens, 2005a, 2005b; see also the article by Strong & Hutchins in this inaugural issue of Impact). Perhaps within this context the future direction of e-learning is likely to evolve through the concept of connective technologies being linked to the advantages of e-learning. The fusion of these approaches offers great opportunity – Higher levels of capability can potentially be achieved by combining informal learning, social networking and knowledge sharing enabled by the new wave of connective technologies with tried and tested e-learning tools, techniques and methods.

Consequently, adjusting to new trends and staying abreast of emerging knowledge and competitive pressures through existing e-learning applications present an enormous challenge for organisations. One of the ironies of the current environment is that although e-learning is more important and prominent now than ever before, new tools and trends that hold great potential for e-learning also threaten to create vulnerabilities within e-learning cultures and systems. E-learning could disappear as quickly as it has evolved unless proponents and practitioners move rapidly towards the integration of social, connective technologies for business benefit. In this regard, a number of challenges and considerations are becoming particularly relevant, and these are outlined in turn in the paragraphs that follow.

First and foremost, it appears that the needs of today’s employees are not going to be met by acquiring singular, one-dimensional knowledge from a traditional e-learning content delivery platform. Web 2.0 and social networking technologies have firmly placed the power of knowledge and content creation in the hands of “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006, para. 1). Individual users (learners), not organisations or learning professionals, are now envisaged as the key instigators and compilers of information and knowledge. Social connection will play an important role in self-directed learning within organisations and as such, less formal and more flexible, adaptable infrastructures will be required to facilitate contact, communication and collaboration between peers and experts within and outside the organisation, in ways that are conducive to the formation and maintenance of self-organising communities and networks. Moreover, evidence suggests work-based, experiential learning is and will continue to be the most dominant mode of learning in many disciplines and domains (Scott-Jackson, Edney & Rushent, 2008), so for e-learning to continue to evolve as a valued approach, social software technologies such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and social networking sites will need to be leveraged in appropriate ways to integrate the types of social, informal learning afforded by these tools with opportunities for participation and immersion in more structured forms of work-focused learning both on and off the job. This will be a significant pedagogical challenge for traditionally-trained learning professionals who are accustomed to teacher- and content-centric, didactic modes of instruction.

Second, there appears to be confusion and a lack of consensus in the e-learning community in terms of where and how to take e-learning and situate it within organisational systems and structures. Some e-learning practitioners and suppliers are attempting to integrate e-learning with existing Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS’s) that encompass talent management, succession planning and performance management. Although such integration has its merits, it is arguable that the interests of the next stage in the evolution of e-learning will be best served by an increased emphasis on research and continued exploration of business applications of ‘e-’methodologies geared towards integrated and holistic learning approaches, taking into account broader social and business outcomes. Within this there is a pressing need to ensure that technology-aided learning is inclusive of learners with a wide range of learning styles and abilities. While one approach to achieving this may involve attempting to account for diversity through careful instructional and course design, it may be unreasonable and unrealistic for trainers and designers to hope to be able to predict and accurately cater to the needs of each and every single learner as an individual; here it becomes crucial to give learners freedom and choice in selecting not only which tools and techniques to use but also how, when and where to use them to support
their learning. (Once again, see also the article by Strong & Hutchins in this journal issue.) This is consistent with the aforementioned notion of a PLE (Syed-Khuzzan & Goulding, 2009).

Third, one of the big challenges is encouraging and facilitating reconceptualisations of the roles of learning practitioners and departments, so that they can be better equipped to deliver value to both the individual and to the organisation in the emerging e-learning landscape. For example, the ‘Google-driven’ approach to learning adopted by many of today’s learners creates a new mandate for learning professionals to become more the custodians or guardians of assessment, mentoring and advising learners on the business relevance of the content and learning as opposed being responsible for transmitting or imparting information. This means finding new ways to support the transfer of learning in the work role and in the wider context of a dynamic business agenda; this could lead the future of e-learning down a number of different paths. One option is for organisations to seek to reassert control around the e-learning agenda, for example by closing access to social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace; some organisations have banned or regulated their employees’ access to such sites at work. A contrasting approach, one that is at the opposite end of the control spectrum, involves making e-learning completely learner-driven and the content and objectives learner-determined. (See Hase’s article on heutagogy, the concept of truly learner-determined learning, in this journal issue.) In this scenario, the organisation no longer exerts any control over what is delivered, but instead seeks to channel learners to appropriate resources (eg freely-available content and ‘open’ communities on the Internet), which they are expected to use in autodidactic ways to achieve their learning and work goals – thereby freeing the organisation from the need to invest in bespoke or commercial off-the-shelf courses and materials.

Summary and conclusion

This case study article has shown that the rapid integration of e-learning into the learning agenda of St George has assisted the credibility and reputation of the learning function in the organisation. This in turn has generated significant business advantages. However, even if e-learning is well established and will play an important role in St George’s future, it is clear from the case study that the bank’s e-learning journey has necessarily been and will continue to be continuous and evolutionary; for example, in the years ahead, the rapid acceleration of other, less formal ‘e-’ methods is likely to cause a rethink of the overall direction of e-learning at the organisation. As a consequence, sustaining the business case for e-learning will require consideration of the fundamental questions surrounding the impact, benefits and costs of the integration of more connective technologies such as the participatory and user-driven tools and applications of the Web 2.0 movement.

In summary, the case study has demonstrated how e-learning at St George has transformed from being driven purely by cost advantages to the need for a far more involved and sophisticated business case analysis. This evolution must continue; although e-learning has many advantages in its present form, in the future it may gradually devolve towards irrelevance and obsolescence unless integration with connective and social computing technologies occurs with a sharp eye on current and emerging business imperatives and social and technological trends.

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doi:10.1108/00197850610671991


doi:10.1108/00197850610671991


doi:10.1108/00197850910950961


doi:10.1108/00197850910927769

