The Human Side of eLearning
by J. (Jay) Bahlis, Ph.D., Eng.

*"Choice has always been a privilege of
those who could afford to pay for it."
- Ellen Frankfort*

Our latest issue on whether eLearning improves performance and the bottom line generated interesting comments. Jim Kalivoda with the Chief Naval Education and Training presented another angle that is the subject of this issue. Jim points out that the article brought up "insightful points regarding eLearning. You address analysis to determine if eLearning is appropriate to the defined problem. You address the cost/ROI issue. You miss what I consider to be the bigger question, which you allude to in your lead paragraph: A lot of people find eLearning boring, and there is a high failure (rejection) rate of completion."

Jim continues "the problem stems from the fact that we are much more capable of generating silicone-based engineering breakthroughs than we are in modifying the learning processes of the carbon-based unit we call "human." What is being lost is that not all people learn from a "canned" program that is only as creative and inspirational as the budget and the creativity of its author(s) allow. The man-machine interface that was so important in the industrial revolution has been overlooked in the technological revolution."

"Humans, in spite of all the technology that surrounds and supports us, still relate best to other humans… a good human instructor is infinitely adjustable and sensitive to how his/her students are reacting to the presentation. The best human instruction is informational and inspirational--possibly even entertaining. I have NEVER encountered eLearning delivered on any monitor screen that could equal a good instructor. You can't fire and replace mediocre software; it stays in place, boring thousands, worldwide… To me, technology based instructional delivery still plays a supporting role. You wisely state that eLearning is not always the answer. I concur. It is THE answer sometimes, and a partial answer a lot of the time."

I am sure many of you may feel the same way - after all interacting with humans is by far more interesting then machines - except perhaps for my 13 year old son and his Sega/Nintendo. I would like, however, to bring up a different point of view to this discussion that is again focused on the main reason for training. First, however, let us clarify the meaning of eLearning. It is defined by ASTD as follows "eLearning refers to anything delivered, enabled, or mediated by electronic technology for the explicit purpose of learning."

Given the right circumstances - i.e., time, money and good instructor - many of us may prefer the instructor-led approach. This, however, does not imply that we are incapable of learning on our own or through a virtual classroom environment - whether conferencing or Internet based. Moreover, we are living in an era in which information overload and time management are of major concern. In our highly competitive environment, in which companies - across various sectors - are developing new products and technologies in a drastically shorter period time - time, money and I dare say good instructors - are hard to

come by.

Although in some cases choices are driven by the organization, in many others, individuals - for personal reasons - are opting for an eLearning approach. In a recent case reported by Training Director's Form newsletter, the United Kingdom managing director of Global Knowledge Network in Cary, N.C., wanted his 96 employees to use a calendar feature in Microsoft's Outlook for scheduling meetings. Workers resisted, so the managing director tried a goal-based learning approach in which he gave one week for all employees to learn Outlook using one of the following options - online course, personal tutor, two-hour classroom session, or self-paced instruction.

By the time the boss scheduled the meeting everyone was Outlook-ready. Most interestingly are the choices individuals made for learning Outlook.
* 03 people (03%) took the classroom option with an in-house PC instructor - two hours.
* 09 people (09%) opted for the personal tutor - average time 15 minutes.
* 15 people (15%) used the online course - average time 11 minutes.
* 69 people (72%) used the help features of Microsoft Outlook.

The morale of the story is - regardless of the approach used - the outcome is the most important element of learning. This is by no means a one of a kind event. Studies by Microsoft have also confirmed that the majority (over 80%) of NT Certified Engineers completed the course on their own - as opposed to attending instructor-led courses. On a personal note, I often opt for self-study or virtual classroom courses to cope with time limitations.

This does not imply that the quality of existing eLearning courses are acceptable or adequate. We must work harder and complain louder to ensure that the quality of alternate delivery options will continue to improve and perhaps one day will become "informational and inspirational--possibly even entertaining". Until that time, we have to manage our time, money and resources to ensure that the outcome of our learning objectives are being met - which is the main reason that led us to the development of Select the Right Blend of Delivery Options module for ADVISOR Enterprise • http://www.bnhexpertsoft.com/english/products/advent/overview.htm.

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