Technology-Enabled Learning

BY ED HOFFMAN

Information technology develops at such a rapid clip that most of us are scrambling to keep up. This is particularly true for those of us involved in workforce development. If you need compelling evidence of how information technology is affecting the delivery of learning, you need look no further than higher education, where many colleges and universities are experiencing double-digit growth in technology-enabled courses and programs. Government agencies have discovered that technology assists with learning at a significant cost savings. But there's the rub: management loves the idea of saving money, so learning efforts that promise better learning with fewer dollars are immediately embraced, even though they may actually result in less learning.

I possess a healthy skepticism when it comes to using technology to achieve better learning outcomes. This is not an unfounded bias. I have seen millions of dollars spent on technology that promises gains in workforce competence and capability but fails to deliver. One example: learning repositories that store organizational knowledge to make it available for reuse. Some very expensive systems have been constructed on the *Field of Dreams* build-it-and-they-will-come philosophy, but they don't come, and that money and effort are wasted.

But the right technology in the right situation can pay off. Applying good learning practitioner-based learning-design principles to clearly defined and strategically aligned learning objectives comes first. Then technology can often help achieve these clear objectives at a cost savings. I have seen established programs and courses use technologies to improve what they already do very well; for example, by helping them to extend the reach of their products and services or allowing them to update content more rapidly and efficiently. Effective learning in the future will rely on the smart application of technology because of accelerating knowledge expiration, with content becoming outdated and inapplicable much faster than in the past.

The Academy for Program/Project and Engineering Leadership currently uses various technologies for learning. *ASK Magazine* is available on the Web as well as print; case studies are distributed online; and we use decision-making tools to guide discussions in meetings. Blogs and wikis allow us to create updated online essays to distribute knowledge and invite participation through online editing. Social and professional networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn help us create communities of practice, chat, and share information using videos and sound. Virtual worlds allow us to socialize in simulated environments based on real-world and imagined situations and processes. Twitter and Tumblr create mini-blogs that allow people to report and follow activities minute by minute. YouTube allows the sharing of knowledge in a video format and connects us to other potential resources related to the content.

One new development that excites me is Google Wave, a communication and collaboration platform based on HTML 5 that is open source, browser-based, and will encourage myriad third-party widgets, gadgets, and Web-based tools to enhance learning. Think of it as a combination of any technology tool you can think of in a browser. One Google Wave gadget already allows for automatic translation of more than forty languages in real time as you type. So take it from a skeptic: technology can be wonderful. ●