



Educating Your Enterprise Ecosystem

A growing number of companies are expanding learning programs throughout their enterprises, from internal workforces to external channels. Here are four reasons you should follow suit.

If you drew a true organizational chart representing all the individuals that made your business successful, it probably wouldn't stop at the walls of your corporate headquarters. Not only are there employees in far-flung locations doing important work, but there's the "extended enterprise," too — dealers, retailers, partners, resellers and distributors — that helps you get your products and services out to the broader marketplace. The people who make up that part of your ecosystem need to understand just as much about certain aspects of your offerings as those inside the company.

Successful organizations understand the value of extended enterprise learning, and research shows a growing number of them are making sizable investments in it. A study by eLearning Magazine

found that in 2015, companies budgeted an average of \$6.71 million for enterprise learning, a 5% increase over 2014. The study also showed that the top two learning priorities were product training and compliance.

Where is extended enterprise learning on your priority agenda? If it's not on your radar, you risk falling behind. Read on to see how extended enterprise learning as a strategy can drive business and create growth.

GET TO MARKET FASTER

Business moves fast, and organizations need systems that allow them to quickly educate various external audiences on their products and services.

Traditional training intended for the extended enterprise is often a one-size-fits-all set of lessons tacked on at the end of development—perhaps a video or webinar demonstrating how a product works or how a process has changed. This monolithic approach isn't adaptable for different kinds of learners.

And it's not easy to update if something comes up during early training that really should be added to subsequent training.

A more effective approach is to define the different learner personas and leverage assets that are already in the works during product creation.

“That’s really important,” says Barry Kelly, CEO of Thought Industries, a company that has built Learning Business Platform, a software-as-a-service geared toward the extended enterprise. “How do you transition content and information understood by the subject-matter experts, product developers, leadership, and transform that along the way into a training program or product?”

Content created by those experts might include videos, PowerPoint presentations, photos and other images, white papers, articles and book content. Thought Industries’ Learning Business Platform is designed to let users repurpose that content quickly and simply by dragging and dropping those assets into sequences to create courses for online delivery and then brand it for their companies.

The sequences can vary, depending on the particular needs of the learner. For example, there’s a difference in sales processes, Kelly points out, “between selling 400,000 units of an order into a big-box distributor and selling a product to an end user on the floor of the individual store.”

On top of that, he adds, “every organization in the world, from a sales perspective, is iterating on their sales process daily and maybe hourly: What worked, what didn’t work, what objections did buyers have?” When learning is delivered from the cloud, updates

and adjustments to the training content can be created and slipstreamed into the lessons transparently.

To ensure the technology is applied effectively, Thought Industries provides experienced professional services to coach customers through setup of their learning programs and to help them identify where they will want to bolster or fine-tune their efforts.

FOSTER END USER ENGAGEMENT

Quality learning experiences engage users and make them more likely to retain information.

Many organizations have replaced face-to-face training for their extended enterprise with online training, frequently in the form of webinars delivered repeatedly to new audiences. The downside, though, is that while companies can see who has registered for and attended the event, there’s really no way to know whether they’re paying attention. Kelly calls that “passive learning.”

“You can’t stop, you can’t go back, you can’t pause, you can’t really view a particular process over and over again,” he says.

A step up from that kind of training is one that involves reading, watching, taking a quiz then repeating the process, Kelly observes. “It follows a very basic online format that involves a lot of passive interaction with content, followed by some sort of assessment,” he explains.

What audiences need is training that includes better engagement, Kelly explains. Thought Industries’ Learning Business Platform comes with features for content



interaction and social interaction. Surveys, quizzes and other forms of assessment measure learner progress and competency. Asynchronous training — at the students' convenience — lets cohorts come together to discuss components and strategies. "They can ask questions, send a message to the subject-matter experts and really dig in and look at information in multiple dimensions," Kelly says.

The platform's built-in authoring tool lets companies create interactive multimedia objects. Learners can look at images, zoom in on specific parts or features then find more information on the topic in the form of video, text or slideshow. Users can also discuss the images with other learners.

As Kelly notes, the person learning isn't just reading or watching; he or she is interacting with content. "And we're able to track whether or not they've absorbed that through closed-loop assessments, so we know how they did and whether or not they grasped it."

REDUCE COSTS AND BOOST ROI

It used to be that organizations faced the "buy vs. build" decision when it came to training. That's no longer the case, says Kelly. More companies are choosing vendor partners that can off-load the technology work from their shoulders so they can focus on subject-matter expertise, instructional design and other parts of content creation.

Parceling out the work "is going to improve workflow and outcomes and provide a better experience to end

users," he notes, which results in a better return on investment (ROI).

These online learning programs not only decrease travel costs related to face-to-face training but also are more scalable. For instance, Thought Industries' platform supports multiple languages. If the training is delivered globally, the learning content can be developed once and quickly deployed to multiple regions and territories in the local language, which reduces expense and offers significant time-to-market advantage.

Plus, ROI is measurable. Traditionally, Kelly observes, organizations tend to put their training out there and then surmise, "I'm pretty sure our distributors and retailers are up to speed." Results are anecdotal.

The nice thing about online delivery is that at any point in time, the training operation can see how far somebody has been through a particular training session, what they've learned, how engaged they were and who has learned the most based on a leaderboard. Then those metrics can be tied back to outcomes: How many extra percentage points did the extended sales team achieve because they were provided with information on new sales techniques?

More broadly, the best learning platforms also provide notifications, visual reporting and dashboards. "In real time, you can be notified of specific milestones with your distributed learning environment," Kelly explains. "Twenty-eight people got certified on this particular product or process today in this department, and 400 people out of 600 completed this particular update

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ARE YOU ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

To determine whether you are on the right track with how you approach creation, delivery and management of your learning content for the extended enterprise, Thought Industries' Barry Kelly advises asking five questions.

Have we taken training online? If you're in an organization that hasn't yet moved your training online, ask yourself what the efficiencies and ROI benefits are to virtualizing it. "You can put those things in a spreadsheet pretty quickly and understand what the benefits are you're going to get there," he says.

Should we be doing this development work? If your company is already delivering online training but you're building and maintaining your own technology, it's time to ask how core those technology activities are to your business. "Thought Industries has been at this for three years, with a full team of developers, and we still release 30 or 40 new features a month on our platform," he notes.

Do we get the data we want? If your business is using a third-party platform to deliver your training, it's time to reassess whether you're getting the types of feedback and metrics you really need from whatever technology you're using today, he suggests, "in order to be really nimble, to have the ability to adapt really quickly and to evaluate the performance of the particular learning."

Is our training scalable? As your company grows, your extended enterprise will grow alongside it. That means your existing learning technology needs to be able to scale to reach more and different learners. For example, notes Kelly, "if your audience consists of distributors and retailers and extended sales force but you also want to start thinking about training your end users, do you have the right technology vendor to do that?"

Have we examined the learning marketplace recently? With the advent of the cloud and software-as-a-service, new entrants have joined the learning industry to build some "incredibly powerful training delivery technologies," says Kelly. "It's worthwhile to go take a look. You might be really surprised at what you find."

and this is the level at which they passed it. You have your finger on the pulse, at the level of how accomplished your distributed users are, and that's something that's really valuable."

LEARNING IS ALL-ENCOMPASSING

Learning has become an all-encompassing activity in business today. It may be the two-year certification program that keeps the skills and practices of IT or marketing or finance people fresh. Or it may be a 30-minute product update to help salespeople or engineers out in the field. What's important to recognize is that training no longer has to happen in a classroom at a particular time, delivered in a single format or consumed by people with the same goals. They may not even reside in the same building or even in the same company.

"With online learning, now you have the ability to allow individuals in the extended enterprise to make their own rules on how to interact with the content," Kelly observes. And all the while, they can be "continually drip-fed information and notified when there's new, important information being made available." ■

Thought Industries

Headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, Thought Industries is one of the world's fastest-growing online learning companies, and is helping everyone from small businesses to Fortune 500's change how they build, deploy and grow profitable and scalable online learning businesses. Today, more than 100+ customers and brands are using the Thought Industries' Learning Business Platform to transform the way they reach, teach, and engage global audiences. Visit us at <http://www.thoughtindustries.com>.

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