TURNING ELEARNING DISRUPTION TO YOUR ADVANTAGE
How Associations and Nonprofit Organizations Can – and Should – Fully Embrace eLearning for Business Success
DIGITAL LEARNING AND DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

Change has always been inevitable. It does, after all, drive innovation. But in the past decade, the pace of change has dramatically accelerated, bringing not just greater innovation into the marketplace, but more disruptive innovation.

Disruptive innovation describes a new product (e.g., technology) or service that is a newcomer in a market, often starting at the bottom and then relentlessly moving upmarket, eventually replacing established competitors.¹

This is occurring in the hotel industry (think AirBnB), the music industry (think Pandora and Spotify), the publishing industry (think Amazon and self-publishing), and the transportation industry (think Uber and Lyft).

It is also occurring in the adult learning arena as training and education inexorably shift from the on-site meeting room to the online portal, or somewhere in-between.

Organizations have two options: get serious about eLearning to grow membership, revenue, and reputation; or be extremely cautious and tentative, like the music, publishing, and taxi industries, and find yourself left behind as your customers move on.

Unfortunately, too many associations and nonprofits are paralyzed by the fear of the unknown – and digital learning is often an unknown.

Organizations insist they don’t have funding; don’t have the technical expertise; don’t have the personnel required to implement such an initiative. And yes, increasing your eLearning presence requires all that. But there are ways to find the resources without breaking the bank.

Just think of the words serial entrepreneur and investor Elad Gil wrote in an analysis of Uber in the online magazine Techcrunch: “As disruption occurs, organizations that ignore the shift go through four phases: overconfidence, sudden collapse, too-little-too-late, and ongoing decline.”²

eLearning may not cause a collapse of your business or mission, but if you don’t fully embrace it, you may find yourself trapped in the “too-little-too-late” category.
A NINE-STEP ROAD MAP TO ELEARNING SUCCESS

1 DON’T BE LEFT BEHIND.

Before you and your organization can truly embrace eLearning, you need to understand why it is imperative that you move to this form of education.

• You need eLearning to maintain and grow your membership. The millennials are the largest population bump in history – even bigger than the baby boomers. In that sense, they are your current and future members, and they live online. They bank online, shop online, communicate online, meet potential partners online, and even receive health care online. They want to learn online – when and where they choose.

In fact, this is exactly how they are learning or have learned in college. In 2013, one out of three college students enrolled in at least one online course, for a total of 7.1 million learners. Educational leaders predict that in five years most higher education students will take at least one online course.

Bottom line: Focus not just on where your audience is today, but on where they will be in the future.

• It works. A 2013 survey found that 74 percent of academic leaders rated learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in live learning venues. Meanwhile, a 10-year assessment of online learning found it helps foster “active, engaged learning that leads to a satisfied learning community.”

When researchers randomized 605 college students taking exactly the same course at six universities to either an online or classroom venue, the two groups attained similar learning outcomes.
• Learners like eLearning (even prefer it). They tell researchers that eLearning platforms provide an easier and more efficient means of accessing resources than traditional methods of delivery.\(^7\) One study found that learners who received training on how to use a large government database not only did just as well as those who learned in a classroom setting, but were more satisfied.\(^8\)

• eLearning will make you money. Yes, there is an upfront investment. But over time, this investment can be more than offset by increased revenue from the greater array of courses you can offer and the increased number of learners who enroll. Even if you decide to provide your education as a value-added, free service to members, you will generate more revenue through increased membership and savings from reduced staffing requirements, travel, and the incidental expenses required for live education.

• eLearning provides flexibility. When the riots hit in Baltimore, several major meetings had to be cancelled. Had these organizations arranged for online components of the meeting, or even had a backup plan to produce the meeting online in the event of an emergency, they could have still provided the education their members needed and maintained their revenue flow.

• eLearning has advantages live learning will never have. Digital learning allows search-and-retrieval of critical information and 24/7 availability that can extend your reach. It can be personalized for learners. It also provides content in a variety of formats that can be repurposed for use throughout your organization. Plus, online learning allows for just-in-time education, such as when a clinician is treating patients.

The facts and trends are clear. The train has left the station. eLearning is the future.

**ELEARNING WILL MAKE YOU MONEY. YES, THERE IS AN UPFRONT INVESTMENT. OVER TIME, THIS INVESTMENT CAN BE MORE THAN OFFSET BY INCREASED REVENUE.**

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2 **START WITH THE END (GOAL) IN MIND.**

As with live learning, content is king. So begin with your ultimate goals and work backward. What do your users need? What perception of the organization do you want the learning to convey? How do you want your users to feel as they interact with the organization throughout the eLearning process (from registration to postmortem)?
IDENTIFY A STARTING POINT.
You don’t necessarily need a Maserati from the get-go; you could start with a Prius or Kia. Plan a one-hour program using existing content. Market to your existing membership. Assess the results, revise, then repeat. The same advice applies to technology; you don’t need a Cadillac system, just one that handles the basics and can expand as you grow.

DEVELOP A BUDGET.
Surprisingly, you may find your biggest expense isn’t the technology, but human capital. This doesn’t mean hiring extra staff. Consider outsourcing some of your infrastructure to organizations that specialize in digital learning, or can help you sell and market your courses, speeding up your return on investment. Their expertise will save you money in the long run.

PERFORM A NEEDS ASSESSMENT.
Poll your membership about their desire for eLearning and how it fits their needs. Use a needs assessment to design your first program based on existing content, but aim for educational modules not readily available from other sources that your members access on a regular basis.

After you launch the first module, request feedback from users about everything from the ease of registration to the quality of the technical components. Use that information to fine-tune future programs and start planning the next one.

CONSIDER BLENDED LEARNING.
You don’t have to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, i.e., completely ditch live learning. In fact, studies show a blended learning approach tends to work best by enhancing participant engagement, thus providing a richer learning experience.

Blended learning helps learners review and digest information online, in advance of a face-to-face meeting, making live sessions more valuable and interactive, while allowing for a deeper discussion of the principles, data, and research presented.
You have numerous options for blended learning.

- Require participants to take an online course before the live meeting. Include the cost of the course within the registration fee for the meeting, then use the results of the post-learning test to target your live education.

This pre-conference online learning and testing provides a valuable tool for presenters by highlighting learner education gaps and areas needing extra focus. In addition, learners attend the in-person session with a common baseline understanding of the content.

- Create an online social network to allow attendees to interact and learn from one another prior to the meeting.

- Offer free or discounted post-event eLearning opportunities to attendees that delve deeper into the topics they encountered during the live learning.

- Create digital feeds of the live event to allow off-site learners to participate.

- Embed digital education into the live program with real-time quizzes, full-text articles and case studies. And, don’t forget follow-up post-meeting tests to reinforce learning.

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**BLENDED LEARNING HELPS LEARNERS REVIEW AND DIGEST INFORMATION ONLINE, IN ADVANCE OF A FACE-TO-FACE MEETING, MAKING LIVE SESSIONS MORE VALUABLE.**

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7 GET THE REST OF THE ORGANIZATION ON BOARD.

You can’t do this alone. You need the entire organization, from membership to marketing, supporting this new initiative. But be patient. The key is demonstrating how digital learning will benefit them.

Show how digital learning can increase membership, provide new marketing opportunities and generate revenue — all of which will enhance senior management’s relationship with the board. And use data — reach out to colleagues in the field for metrics on their digital learning programs.

8 ENGAGE PARTNERS.

You don’t have to do this alone! Partner with consultants to tap into their expertise. This doesn’t have to cost a lot; many will be flexible on payment terms as you build your business and as they seek to develop a long-term relationship.
Another option is to partner with similar organizations to provide joint programming. You’ll learn in the process, and you’ll each be able to promote the programs to a larger audience.

Finally, don’t forget to tap into expertise from LinkedIn groups and organizations that serve the industry such as the Association for Talent Development (formerly the American Society for Training & Development) and the Center for Association Leadership, which hold technology conferences every year.

**BE CREATIVE.**

The beauty of eLearning is its diversity. Today’s learners learn from each other – so consider launching a private social network. Online chats. Twitter “conferences.” Really, if you can imagine it, you can provide it.

**Remember your goal: Move from the tentative efforts you’ve made in the eLearning space to fully embracing this disruptive innovation.**

This roadmap – with its nine touch points – will help you reach your destination of providing quality digital education to your membership and beyond.

References

ARE YOU READY TO EMBRACE YOUR eLEARNING BUSINESS?

TRADITIONAL

eLEARNING

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MILLENNIALS
comprise the largest population bump in history to embrace online learning.1

74%
ACADEMIC LEADERS
rated learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to live learning venues.2

9 STEPS TO eLEARNING SUCCESS

1. DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND

2. DEFINE YOUR ULTIMATE GOAL

3. IDENTIFY STARTING POINT

4. DEVELOP A BUDGET

5. PERFORM NEEDS ASSESSMENT

6. CONSIDER BLENDED LEARNING

7. BUILD BUY-IN

8. ENGAGE PARTNERS

9. BE CREATIVE

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