

## talking point

## Publishing sector leads the way in online learning

by Alan Nelson & David Croom



Elearning has been heralded as the next big thing and dismissed as an expensive waste of money. The truth behind the hype is that it is already delivering transformational results for some of the UK's leading publishers.

Since 2000 we have heard John Chambers of Cisco claim that elearning would "make e-mail look like a rounding error" – and we have watched disillusion grip both investors in over hyped start-ups and early customers of the big US vendors. Both were over-reactions: our experience suggests that well designed elearning resources, with realistic goals, can transform the way people engage with their own professional development, particularly in publishing and media.

### Publishing Leads the Way

Why is publishing such a fertile ground for elearning? There are four reasons:

- Huge product ranges create a need to keep everyone up-to-date in the most efficient way possible
- Dispersed workforces, especially in sales
- Complex international distribution networks with local offices needing to communicate with the centre
- Workforces high on intellectual curiosity but with too little focus on their own professional development

Over the last four years we have created online learning resources at Pearson, ProQuest, Elsevier and Hodder Murray that have changed people's knowledge and behaviour. The Publishing Training Centre has engaged enthusiastically and work is well underway at Taylor and Francis and Hodder Headline and is just starting at Wiley. This is not a flight of fancy – it is really happening. Jim Green, then President of Pearson Higher Education and now MD of Collins Education summed it up

*"The project was a real success and it demonstrates that online learning has enormous potential for multi-functional, product rich organisations in many fields. We spent around £15k and the value to us – a combination of better prepared sales people and a reduced sales meeting cost – far exceeded £100k."*

Why have these projects worked? What do they have in common? We believe the secret lies in integrating three separate elements:

- Knowledge Management
- Communication
- Learning

We brought these together by creating a web application called Imago. It works by enabling a learner to log in to a linked pair of websites. One contains all the information they need to do their job, the other has a syllabus that focuses on how they do it. Alongside these two websites is a discussion forum that enables them to share with each other their thoughts and frustrations.

The whole thing is hosted by us and accessed on the web. It avoids the problems of integrating with existing IT systems, and makes it quick and easy to get set up and started. The results have amazed us. People who log on to find out about a new product stay around long enough to learn something – although they may not call it that. Users who are spread out across different locations take the time to share their experiences with each other and learn as they go.

This success story has been noticed in the elearning industry: Imago3 has been short-listed as "Online Solution of the Year" at this year's WOLCE Awards – the Oscars of the learning world.

In publishing we have identified two areas that are ripe for elearning:

- The development of sales and customer service teams
- The development of greater understanding of the commercial context of publishing, right across the business

### Professional Development of Sales Teams

Let's look at the traditional development route for sales reps. Sales conferences are the usual place for new product information – alcohol fuelled jamborees where editors and marketing people struggle to interest tired and hung over sales teams. Reps are sent on courses to improve sales skills. The programmes are often well designed, but they tend to be isolated from work experience and they are not reinforced by sales managers. As for developing an understanding of customers and markets, reps are expected to pick that up as they go along.

We have set up one place that reps can go to for product information, to develop their understanding of customers and markets and to sharpen their sales skills. This has introduced sales teams to a culture of continuous development.

The audience seems to enjoy it. One rep, at the end of a bad day, exploded with frustration in the online discussion forum: "I can't sell our book when I am told everyday that the competition is better." Other reps chipped in to reassure her until the manager was able to recount interviewing a rep from the competitor the previous day and being told that the competitor's book wasn't selling. Clearly the reps were learning from each other, convincing us that shared communication is critical. The amazement of a Spanish regional sales manager at being able to access key information from his hotel room, at 9.00 o'clock at night, has taught us that the availability of up to date information compels people to engage with elearning resources.

### Understanding the Business of Publishing

At all levels of publishing there is often a lack of understanding of the business of publishing. Most new recruits are graduates but historically there has been very little emphasis on continuing personal development. Some readers will protest: "Our company states that people are its most important asset!" Yet every senior manager knows that the proportion of revenues spent on training is lower than in most other industries, especially in the creative sector and that the training budget is the first to be cut in difficult times.

The problem of managing creative talent was recognised some years ago by Professor Richard Scase after running management development programmes for publishing managers and management teams from the high tech sector.

*"The high tech managers were like wolves waiting to get at the competition. They were hungry and aggressive. I certainly expected the publishers to be a little more sophisticated, but was amazed to find them so diffident even about whether it was entirely necessary to make money. They seemed to believe they were engaged with some higher cause!"*

So how can we do better? As with sales force development, we need to combine elements that have traditionally been kept separate. People will take charge of their own professional development when they have a single environment where they can find knowledge about the business, develop their business competencies and engage in cross-functional dialogue with colleagues. Their own natural curiosity and intelligence take the lead – and publishers have always had plenty of that!

We have seen the results in all areas of the businesses: publishers changing forward plans as a result of input from a sales rep and a production controller; financial controllers changing the format of management reports as they became aware of their colleagues' confusion in scenario based learning activities.

### Relevance the secret

Why has elearning worked where more traditional approaches have not? The answer seems to lie in elearning's ability to engage people for long periods of time if they are convinced the learning is relevant. Users at one major publisher have spent over 50 hours online this year. This level of commitment to personal development that can only come from the individuals themselves embracing the solution as a key tool for their work.

To engage what we perceived to be groups of reluctant learners, we identified three principles

*Personalisation:* Content is designed to let learners personalise their learning experience by defining what they want to learn and how they would like to learn. There are two interlinked websites, one providing activities to help people learn, the other a library of information. Together they combine learning with knowledge management. Learners answer questions about themselves to find out how they like to learn – their learning style. They can then follow a route through the online resources that will suit them.

**Measurement:** The sales managers wanted to monitor learners' activity: what they had done, how long it had taken and how they had fared in assessments. The sales managers wanted to track the change in people's knowledge over time and their skills in different situations. We created an online learning management system to report this information.

**Dialogue:** The learning environment enables users to communicate with each other. They can read each others' opinions, or simply exchange views in the online discussion forum. This builds a community of practice. Scenarios ask them how they will handle difficult situations and then offer them a standard approach or the chance to see what their colleagues have suggested

People will only engage if they find the learning experience enjoyable and rewarding, but that has always been true of face-to-face methods. The special strength of elearning is the way you can provide up to date information and learning in the same place. A manager planning an interview with a candidate for a job will log on to find out the specific terms and conditions on offer and find themselves spending half an hour learning about how to conduct a professional interview. The information brings people back– the learning happens more subversively. Dialogue between learners helps them learn from each other and creates a learning environment that evolves with their needs.

### Tip of the Iceberg

Our clients' achievement so far is only the tip of the iceberg. Two of our largest publishing clients have just started professional development projects which they believe can transform their competitiveness.

The publishing industry needs:

- More commercially focused induction for newcomers
- To break down the barriers between the functional departments and build stronger lines of communication
- To raise the levels of professional competence – both specific skills and the more general understanding of the language of business
- To focus on the soft skills too. We tolerate disruptive behaviour as being part of the creative process when in fact it is dysfunctional and avoidable
- To create the right forum within our organisations for discussing our successes and failures in a more commercial way

So there is much to do. But our experience suggests that with a small investment in elearning, management teams, with vision and the courage, can deliver transformational results.

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**Jim Green, President Pearson Higher Education**

**“ Alan Nelson and David Croom are the founders of Nelson Croom. They have been working with publishers to deliver results-driven elearning for four years. Prior to that Alan Nelson founded International Thomson Business Press and was Chief Executive of Thomson Learning EMEA. David Croom was Managing Director of Routledge before being a Group CEO in Thomson ”**

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