What corporate clients are asking for when it comes to online training initiatives

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What are corporate clients telling you in regards to online training initiatives? Are they suggesting a departure from classroom training? Is your client expressing an interest or showing a preference for online or hybrid options? What your program has to offer "on demand" and online can often make or break a deal.

The purpose of this paper is to lay out some key points that will help anyone in corporate sales focus on the typical factors that their clients use to determine how they want to proceed with their training initiatives. For self-sustaining workforce education programs, "seizing the moment" and bringing home a contract lays the foundation for significant short and long term revenue generation. This is a goal we all share. For the client, having a high degree of confidence that an online curriculum will effectively meet their employee's e-learning needs and provide ROI is of primary, decision making importance.

JER Online has seen a number of its accredited .edu partners make the connection with online courses that matchup specifically to a client's requirements. Examples of such opportunities include schools like North Carolina State and the John Hancock Company; Lakeland Community College and their client Avery Dennison; Chattanooga State and Environmental Solutions Group; Truckee Community College in Nevada and Schneider Logistics. Valencia Community College has gone a step further developing its own 911 Call Center Program which is resold through colleges and universities at the enterprise level. These are but a few of the many instances where institutions are actively engaged in providing their clients with effective solutions to their training needs.

Let's turn our attention now to the main question. What is it that corporate clients are asking for when it comes to online training for their employees? Secondarily, we might ask, how are staff members responding? Here is a list of questions that is not met to be exhaustive. Rather these should be viewed as a starting point for consideration and training purposes.

1. Most corporate clients are asking for self-directed training. You may suggest online instructor-led programs that span out over the course of 6 weeks or more. What can you tell them to help differentiate the two formats and push them to anytime/anywhere instant access?

As commented on earlier in this article there has to be a "buy in" by the client. For example, does it make sense to propose a lock-step, facilitated online program or a high- end, self-directed offering that can be accessed anytime from anywhere? In the instances above, we have noted that .edu partners continue to affirm the latter. The online courses they offer to their clients are authored by nationally recognized companies that market to government and business and industry on enterprise levels. These courses are sold at very high volume and have proven to deliver high quality, outcome based learning. In terms of differentiation, self-directed courses are common in corporate training. The odd man out is likely to be an instructor leading a cohort through several weeks of structured learning. It might make sense in a college classroom, but corporate workplace training does not seek that form of learning in most common areas (such as professional development, etc.).

2. They want employees to have immediate and long term access to the course. What can you tell the client?

This is often one of the first questions asked. How soon can we have access? Having to wait to start a course of study on predetermined dates and schedules may work in some cases but it does not make good business sense as it relates to workplace demands on time and productivity. In a recent buy, a nationally known client was insistent that their employees begin the course of study as soon as they logged into the LMS. The problem was that not all enrollees were starting at the same time during the year. This "open enroll" scenario needed a solution. This was accommodated by adding approximately 1000 names and emails into the LMS. With a pre-load and ready to roll roster, enrollments flowed immediately to the satisfaction of our .edu partner and their client. As to long term access, most providers allow student access well beyond the completion of the training cycle. Continued access often results in employees having a handy desktop reference they can refer to throughout the year. It also builds upon a strong teaching method related to the retention of subject matter.

3. A client with potentially large scale enrollments wants a branded LMS solution they can place on their corporate website. What will that require and how long to setup?

Companies that are contracting with your institution may start with a small group of workforce employees but have an eye on eventually putting hundreds if not thousands through a variety of online training courses. This often requires a corporate learning management system setup that can be branded. In addition, having the LMS reside on an external server with a LMS Access link on the client's Intranet webpage, serves the purpose of immediate course access. There is no need to use up the client's IT resources. This type of setup usually takes no more than 1 business day before a client can begin to enjoy a branded LMS complete with activated courses. The best news of all is that there are no add on fees. This is a free service that the majority of upstream providers offer to customers. The only condition for this type of arrangement requires a starting point of usually, at minimum, 50 or more employees with the promise of more to come.

4. They want deeply discounted pricing. What can you do to make a deal go when it comes to discounts?

Per student enrollments are the basis for wholesale and retail pricing. When numbers are involved the pricing breaks can be substantial. Pre-canned online courses are designed to be sold in large numbers at edu pricing. In the area of HR Training the John Hancock Company looked to North Carolina State to provide a solution affecting their training budget. Certificate courses that topped out at $399.00 were discounted well over 60% per student with further breaks based on recertification. Any course at any price can be negotiated downward when a company has an interest in training a substantial number of employees. For sure, being a skilled negotiator and having the knowledge needed to work a deal is part of the equation. The other half is being able to work with flexible wholesale and retail margins. In this respect, self-directed courses that are already "in the can" are perfectly suited to deep discount options. Selling 100 of something at smaller margins of profit are always better than 10 of something at higher pricing points that get passed on to the client. Instructor-led online courses always drive the price up.

5. How is employee training progress going to be tracked?

JER Online partners with a variety of online content publishers. These companies facilitate the delivery of their courses through extremely robust corporate Learning Management Systems. The one common design consideration among each is the reporting mechanisms they employ. Administrative rights and privileges are available to managers who want to know what employees are doing when it comes to progressing though a course. One of JER Online's strategic corporate partners produces well over 30 reports. Some of these include, The Student Lesson Report, The Lesson Usage Report, The Student Assignments Report, The Group Assignments Report, The Test Report, The Test Detail Report, The Course Completion Report, The Student Training Time Summary Report, The Course Status Report, The Course Credit Hour Report, The Student Roster Report and the Credit Hour Report. The ROI regarding training dollars has everything to do with how effective training is going to be and if the reports bear out the anticipated results.

6. Which is best for us? Online or Hybrid training?

Thankfully, some companies have recognized that if they are going to be sustainable, they have to have a well trained workforce. From initial training to regular training to upgrade and maintain worker competency and certification, companies are exploring the use of online training and training that combines online with face to face training. Here is a case study from one of our partners.

Online training allows a company to have standardized training at all of their locations. One company that we are working with is going to start a corporate academy. The first courses will be online computer courses for Microsoft products. They have had several employees sample the courses and now selected the courses that best meet their needs. Because the courses are online, all of their employees in several different states will be able to access the materials at times that work best for them. Additionally they are confident that each person is getting the same instruction which allows them to establish policy and procedures that are in line with their standardized training.

Another company we are working with needs more technical type training for multicraft maintenance.

We have suggested a blended or hybrid program that would incorporate both online courses and face to face instruction and review sessions. These employees are on different shifts and scheduling conventional classes at 6 am, 4pm and 11 pm would not be cost effective because some of the classes would only have 2-3 students. Through the use of generic online maintenance courses they are able to get the necessary theory information at a time that is most convenient to the employees. Scheduling face to face classes provide an opportunity to check on student progress, answer questions, and provide some customization that is specific to the company. This benefits everyone because the company is not paying overtime for people to come in early or stay late for class, the employees are not coming to class before or after working 8 hours, the employees can work on the courses from home when they want to work on them, and the number of review sessions is reduced by scheduling them on Saturday mornings.

7. Prior to making a major commitment clients want to experiment with a subset population.

There can often be hesitancy on the part of an HR Manager to go full bore if there is little or no online training history to reference within the organization. There can also be other mitigating factors as noted below. In this regard, your clients may be asking for a trial run with a limited number of employees before as one of edu partners stated, "You hit the mother load."

Interestingly, some training managers consider the initial success of online training to be associated with the performance and feedback of a smaller subset of the larger population. In our experience of setting up John Hancock an initial fledgling group of only 12 employees were asked to participate in HR Certification training. Shortly after completion, a focus group was conducted by the client's corporate training manager. This resulted in all around high marks being given for the type and level of the training these "testers" had just completed. From there we went on to train and recertify 300 additional employees. Now, each quarter up to another 300 JH employees are self-enrolling.

Testing, competencies and other criteria are used to measure employee success. Clients want to see their employees complete the prescribed course of study and apply this knowledge in the workplace setting. They are asking, will those numbers be what we would anticipate for a good return of our training dollars?

8. Corporate America wants real world practical training in an Academy format.

Gretchen Burgess, Corporate HR Manager at Environmental Solutions Group, states, "Training has to be flexible to meet the diverse needs of the workforce. Companies want real world practical training that makes a difference in the workplace." Employees will more likely participate in the training if they have 24/7 online access to study at their own pace. To this end ESG is creating an Academy (also see item #2 above) that encompasses subject matter experts in a variety of courses using a hybrid approach (instructor-led, on-line and self-study). Some of the courses build upon each other and lead to certifications, for example, Brown Belt. In fact, a number of ESG classes require pre-work to be completed and action plans for accountability that will be given to their supervisors upon completion of the class. This information can be used not only for performance evaluation but future career progression.

Companies like Environmental Solutions Group benefit from having a broad based inventory of online courses available for "on demand" access. In this regard, institutions need to consider what the best option to meet that requirement is. Should we rely on our own internal development resources or draw from third party offerings that can more quickly meet the client's needs? Perhaps both? These are the type of questions that need to be asked and answered.

As it relates to the Academy format, Ms. Burgess, states the idea of utilizing online training components of the Academy will be of "great benefit to a number of employees as they can choose the classes that best suit their learning needs which, will in turn, help them be more efficient in their job."

9. Prepare a proposal that shows how online training will provide our company a significant ROI.

Companies measure training return on investment in several familiar ways. In creating a proposal for the client some of the traditional methods used to measure ROI should be considered as it relates to online training.

In providing employee training, corporations and government agencies are making significant investments. As shown below there are a number of traditional ways to calculate ROI that have historically been used by training managers. The primary objectives are to tie training to specific business objectives based on a type and level of training that increases individual knowledge. This can then be applied in the workplace setting.

Here are some methods that training manager's use to calculate ROI:

1. Pre and post tests
2. Comparing a control group that had the training versus one that did not
3. % ROI = benefits/costs x 100
4. Payback period – costs/monthly benefits – the period of time when the training pays for itself
5. Training costs are % of payroll
6. Average investment per hour of training
7. Total training hours provided
8. Average number of training hours per employee
9. Dollar cost for no shows
10. ROI for new technology training
11. Employee satisfaction ratings
12. Perceived improvement by others

It should not be lost in this discussion that we operate in an environment where managers sometimes value time more than ROI. Major decisions are based on descriptive business cases, not necessarily pro forma budgets. While there is no substitute for instructor-led training, online training can augment the training plan by reducing the amount of classroom time, allowing the employee to study at their own pace and in some situations accomplish the same objectives.

ROI should then be viewed beyond just the direct dollars and cents savings. ROI can mean such things as measurement of increased morale as a result of a specific training delivery; it can mean improving upon a particular work situation (enhanced productivity) or reducing turnover; it can mean that self-confidence is bolstered. In this sense, proposals should be presented to clients that address both the quantitative and well as the intangible benefits.

10. How can the college and university partner make their online training more effective for our company and employees?

The following 10 points is non exhaustive and offers additional considerations.

1. Make a business case for online training. Which of the key performance indicators of the Company will the online training support and what will success look like?
2. Let clients know how the online training fits with respect to corporate objectives. Tailor the design and delivery so that it is seamless to the employee and that the online training is corporate sponsored.
3. Realize that learning is more than training. Taking online courses should not be the end, increasing workplace productivity should be. Make action plans part of the curriculum and give the employee the ability to send it to their supervisor for career development.
4. Celebrate successful online programs by showcasing examples of how people have implemented what they've learned into their work.
5. Ensure that certificates are part of the online process and that employees automatically receive when they complete a class.
6. Look at participation and ensure that your corporate community knows that your program is actively working to be a partner in the development of a training strategy. Clients should not come across online training by accident when searching for local resources. The institution needs to work to get the word out so that a client’s needs can be fulfilled.
7. Ensure online training incorporates real life situations that employees encounter on a daily basis so that it is meaningful – direct linkage to the performance of their job.
8. Have the employee complete an evaluation of the course and make modifications where needed. Classes that have low participation should be reviewed and possibly discontinued.
9. Online training should incorporate key business and financial skills with the goal to help the employee understand why the course is important in the performance of their position. Example financials for non-financial managers.
10. Improve courses through review and evaluation

Conclusion: If you start and end all of your training efforts by focusing on the Company’s goals, you will never be asked to do an ROI analysis to justify your budget.

Discussion

As noted earlier, the questions posed in this article by corporate clients related to online training initiatives are just a starting point for consideration. Again, this is not met to be an exhaustive compilation. The reader is encouraged to continue the thread of thought.

What has been referenced in earlier sections is how staff members use and interpret this information. This also requires our brief attention.

How well versed are your staff when it comes to answering client questions? Is your sales team able to effectively respond to what corporate clients are asking for? Another way of looking at this questions is to consider the level of expertise consultants and sales personal bring to the table when making recommendations and offering online solutions? Some of our .edu partners continue to rely on face-to-face solutions because that is what they know best.

It has been suggested that staff engage in more professional development training related to the benefits of online training. Here are some thoughts in that regard.

First and foremost, point persons need to familiarize themselves with the courses they have in their inventory. With sole source or multiple providers, the task can be daunting. However, there is no reason to believe that this be an obstacle. Buyers in the commercial sector stock their shelves with all types of "widgets" from a variety of manufactures every day, giving the customer more choices all the time. The key is the investment of time and effort needed to know what is a great product (course) versus an average one. The most common way used by a number of JER Online partners is the budgeting of time to view online course demos and to become familiar with the learning management systems they reside in. This is often accomplished by self-discovery and scheduling conference calls to ask informed questions. It goes without saying that well-prepared and knowledgeable staffs that are able to answer questions with the "voice of experience" are the ones that close a sale. This is what your potential clients are looking for.

A second strategy is to use encourage feedback and elicit comments from each and every staff member who will be in direct contact with the client. Ask staff in your next meeting to use these questions and the respective answers to discuss their thoughts and prompt new ones. Engage in role playing whenever possible.

A third method that we use in our organization for professional development purposes is utilizing a "playbook" that team members contribute to as new knowledge is discovered and built upon. It is recommended that your playbook should include sections devoted to the typical and not so typical questions that are asked by clients. The response to these questions should also be included. Other sections should include listings of online courses that make up the inventory, subject areas, pricing and duration of the courses; procedures and reports that have been generated based on other corporate buys; histories and case studies; RFP documentation, agreements and any other documentation considered "mission critical" should be added. These are just some suggestions. Be sure to document everything and add it to your "sales playbook." Add some nice graphics to the cover and off you go.

Finally, consider how staff expertise can be achieved in other creative ways. For instance, a client might show an interest in a mixed delivery format. In this case, having the skills to "up sell" could be a perfect opportunity to land a contract. In this scenario a creative sales person might know from experience that offering hybrid options opens up the door and can be a starting point for a client. In this type of arrangement your program needs to offer training that can help a vast array of different types of learners. Each client you are meeting with is concerned about how effective the proposed e-learning solution will be. The fact is that training managers will hear from class participants and their boss if the online solution falls short. If you can propose online training with a follow up that offers some instructor-led component you may experience more success and get increased buys on future courses. The next time your customers ask for effective training “up sell” and give them more for their money.

Conclusion

As more companies turn to online training, workforce education departments should be responsive in providing direction, options and opportunities.

Having a good working knowledge of what clients are asking for and being ready to make informed recommendations can ultimately open up a stream of revenue that keeps your self-sustaining program steadily moving forward.