

Is E-Learning the Cure to the IT Industry's *Consulting Paradox*?

Now, more than ever, companies in the information technology industry are finding themselves billing their clients at hourly rates in an attempt to profitably allocate their organizational resources. Unfortunately, this leads to those all too pesky timesheets that everyone loves to hate. But what other sacrifices has the IT industry made to ensure profitability?

Along with the push towards billable hours, it is important to have your IT professionals and developers constantly informed, educated, and up-to-date. But with time spent on training seen as non-revenue generating, training hours are often the first to feel the squeeze in this profit margin driven environment. This leads right into the IT industry's *Consulting Paradox*.

Training organizations are scrambling to adapt to this changing landscape, and there are a number of possibilities out there. For some, e-learning is hailed as one of the answers to the growing difficulties that organizations face. For others, e-learning is an ineffective way to engage learners and properly instill the skills needed for today and tomorrow. The question though: can e-learning help alleviate the *Consulting Paradox* plaguing IT organizations around the world? A closer look at the IT training environment and the factors affecting learning in organizations may give us the answer.

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Organizations are constantly increasing the skills demanded of IT pros and developers worldwide. If you talk to companies invested in IT, they'll tell you that the exponential pace of technological change, the ongoing parade of software upgrades, and the anticipated gap in the IT labour market are persistently putting pressure on organizations to develop and prepare employees for an increasingly connected future.

The experts agree.

In a recent report by research firm IDC, it was suggested that “demand for technology training and education programs will increase by 5.4 percent between 2007 and 2012, with the Americas leading the way with 6.6 percent growth over the forecast period.” The report further concludes that “this demand for training is fueled, in part, by the perpetual advance of technology and continued shortage of skilled workers.”¹

Add the ingredients of limited time and money and this *Consulting Paradox* pot is seemingly about to boil over for organizations around the world.

But this is only half the equation. What about the IT pros and developers? How is the market addressing *their* needs?

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The skilled workers of the IT world are evolving. No longer content with being the mysterious men and women relegated to the shadows, always asked upon

¹ Source: IDC, *Worldwide and U.S. IT Education and Training 2008–2012 Forecast: Growth Though Situation Tenuous*, Doc #211332, Mar 2008.

to do the impossible, they want to emerge from the murky darkness and be recognized for their accomplishments...while still being asked to do the impossible, of course.

"Our learners don't just want to upgrade their skills for the sake of the company," says Andrew Ford, Manager of Client Solutions at Nexient Learning, "they want to be acknowledged for these new found skills and want these skills to lead to a clear career path."

Not only are these learners' motivations different, their study habits also warrant a closer look.

"The classic image of an IT student is in a classroom sitting in front of a computer," said Rob Linsky, group manager of Microsoft Certifications. "But the reality is that a lot of IT learning happens at 2am in front of a laptop, accompanied by a few slices of pizza and a power drink. The schedules and learning styles of IT pros and developers sometimes require alternatives to traditional classroom-style learning. There is a definite need for high quality options."

The question is what are the training organizations and departments doing to address the needs of both the organization and the individual?

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Well to start, it's more than just a job for training organizations and departments. Software giants have been working to develop certification programs that recognize the skill level needed for IT pros and developers to succeed in their jobs. These companies have been attempting to address the unique concerns of IT employees. As IT product lines increase and become more complex, software companies must be rigorous with training users on the complexity of their products by offering diverse and respected skills standards and certifications as well as the appropriate training.

While some have failed in this department, others have continued to succeed. For example, the Microsoft Certification program has sought to recognize and validate the real-world IT skills and offer a life-long career path of IT skills development. And if you ask Microsoft, they truly believe that it's working.

"We're continually working to make Microsoft Certifications relevant and valuable, ensuring that those who earn the credentials can demonstrate high quality skill sets on our technologies," Linsky said. "This way, Microsoft Certifications assist IT pros and developers secure careers that they deserve, and ensure that organizations who hire certified professionals are hiring people who have the knowledge and ability to perform."

So the software companies are addressing some of the needs in the changing landscape of IT learning, but training organizations and departments are stepping things up as well. They are more flexible than ever, providing efficient ways for organizations and individuals to access courses and track their achievements. With functional tools to aid learning like calendars and message boards, training organizations are in a prime position to adapt to the needs of the training industry.

There still remains a need to solve the crux of the *Consulting Paradox* issue, namely providing more targeted and concentrated training that reduces the amount of course time needed. In essence, efficiently reducing time spent on non-revenue generating tasks. With this in mind, many industry organizations are exploring ways to renew their focus on e-learning as one possible solution.

Long the domain of classroom PowerPoint slides and recorded lectures, e-learning hasn't exactly had a glamorous past.

"Early forms of e-learning have been really boring. So much so that many people refuse to take online courses, or never finish them," says Dr. Gary Woodill of Brandon Hall, a leading research firm in the area of learning technology.

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As many have found out the hard way, simply putting information online doesn't make it engaging. But with the constant pressure for companies to manage their IT resources, e-learning is adapting to become more engaging to the student. Microsoft is leading the way, implementing virtual labs, quizzes, and games, along with the still standard pages of information to connect with students' learning methods in as many ways as possible.

So for many, it is encouraging to see interactive developments in e-learning, providing a viable alternative to studying and preparation for certification exams. For IT pros and developers, e-learning affords the opportunity for students, at their own pace and schedule, to acquire skills needed to go after careers they want. For companies training these individuals, e-learning is time and cost efficient and doesn't require employees to go offsite for training.

Although many view e-learning as a replacement for classroom learning, it is actually an addition, not alternative, to traditional instructor-led training. Both vendors and traditional training companies are already starting to offer it as a complement to their comprehensive collections of instructor-led courses, providing students alternatives to various learning styles. Of course, many students who have grown up online and are savvy multimedia users really appreciate the self-paced study and engagement e-learning provides.

The International Association of Microsoft Certified Partners (IAMCP) is one organization that believes e-learning is a great way for IT pros and developers to grow and develop the skills. Partnering with Operitel, a member organization, the IAMCP has launched *ITSkillBuilder*, an online community, providing IAMCP members access to official Microsoft E-Learning at special member rates.

"We're really excited to offer all of our members worldwide access to Microsoft's E-Learning content," explains Per Werngren, president of the IAMCP, "We really think that this will not only add great value to our members, but also allows our member organizations to grow."

Microsoft is also excited about the possibilities that e-learning has to help out their partners worldwide.

"Effective and efficient e-learning offerings are a very important driver to increasing the capacity of partners" notes Robert Buren, Channel Capacity Manager for Microsoft Canada. "Enabling IT professionals with the right skills, at the right time, regardless of where the professionals are, contributes immensely to the overall health of the partner ecosystem. The fact that these solutions scale beautifully and fill a growing niche in today's market is simply an added bonus."

Is e-learning the answer to the *Consulting Paradox*? Many clearly think so. It provides the flexibility both individuals and organizations are starving for, going a long way to address the key issues in the IT training industry today. Most will agree that at the very least, e-learning is a big and important piece of a large and ever-changing puzzle.