**Digital Learning:**

**Why Many Organizations Are Wasting Their Resources**

**and**

**How You Can Ensure Yours Isn’t One of Them**

A few years ago, our team at Aericon was tasked with producing a series of training videos for the sales team at a large tech company. The series featured interviews with global rainmakers, and was a big hit, initially. It was broadly promoted in the company by the HR department, and was shared along with great supplemental resources.

Then, it was promptly forgotten.

Within a year, few of the incoming employees knew anything about the program, which had cost over $200,000 to produce and distribute. The content is now presumed to be missing in action, along with the $200K.

To prevent losses like this, in this white paper we advocate a wholistic approach to digital learning that includes not just content production, but a comprehensive set of steps that enrich, support, and prolong content’s usefulness. Our approach prevents the loss of critical institutional knowledge, engages learners, ensures that content is always relevant, and brings other surprising benefits, which we’ll share below.

We’re going to discuss digital learning strategies that apply in all organizational contexts, but it’s helpful to first take a quick look at digital learning in it’s home context: traditional educational institutions.

**Some illuminating statistics regarding digital learning**

You can [click here](http://www.socialnomics.net/2011/11/08/khan-academy-online-learning-changing-education/) for an infographic about the state of digital learning, but here are the highlights:

* Digital learning is a $34B industry.
* Online Universities are now the largest universities in the US and the UK
	+ Open University of the UK (250K students)
	+ University of Phoenix in the US (500K students)
* It isn’t just higher education
	+ There have been over a million K-12 enrollments online
* It isn’t just young folks
	+ Half of online students are 26 or older
* It isn’t just for dabblers.
	+ A majority of public universities offer courses online.
	+ The London School of Business and Finance offers its Global M.B.A. entirely through a Facebook app.

Digital learning isn’t just for traditional schools, of course. A number of alternative educational platforms have arisen.

* [Udacity](http://www.udacity.com/) – engaging videos on a variety of topics delivered in short snippets with quizzes.
* [Udemy](http://www.udemy.com/) – practical lectures from high quality practitioners.
* [Khan Academy](http://www.khanacademy.org/) - offers free lectures and exercises along with a wealth of supporting functions. Has delivered almost 200M lessons!
* [MIT OpenCourseWare](http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm) – free MIT lectures.
* [Udutu](http://www.udutu.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) – a solution for organizations looking to get involved in digital learning.
* [CourseSites](https://www.coursesites.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) – a platform for K-12 and other educators to bring their courses online.
* [Litmos](http://www.litmos.com/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) – helps organizations build online courses.
* [Coursera](https://www.coursera.org/) – free online courses from a variety of institutions of higher learning.

But as we mentioned, digital learning isn’t just for educational entities. *Any* organization can (and should) set up and benefit from creating a robust digital learning platform.

So, how do you do it right? Well, thanks for asking! That gives us a nice segue into our next section.

**The right way – a wholistic approach**

Many organizations attempt to create learning content, but fail to consider the whole picture. When investing in creating online learning, an organization should determine the how to best facilitate the entire learning lifecycle; not just how to make good content. Here are the four main phases of learning that we think need to be considered:

1. **Discovery** – How do learners find your materials? Are they assigned through a formal program, are they casually available and spread by word of mouth, or can they be found through organic search?
2. **Planning** – When should learning events be scheduled? What materials should be shared? Who should be invited to collaborate?
3. **Activities** – Is learning led by a live instructor? What interactive components are useful? Should there be exercises and offline assignments? Would group activities be illuminating?
4. **Discussion** – How can learners give feedback, comments, and ratings? Can content be easily shared? How will content be improved and revised going forward?

The point of considering these steps is to ensure that content is findable, well-designed, enriching, and, most importantly, can take on a life beyond production so that it spreads widely, sparks discussion and innovation, and is updated continuously so that it never goes stale.

Why go to all the trouble? Why not just shoot a video, post it, and be done? Read on.

**Benefits of the wholistic approach**

1. **Loss prevention and succession planning.** In every organization, there are people who know things that no one else does. When those people leave the organization, their knowledge may leave with them. A wholistic digital learning platform can capture this knowledge and ensure it spreads, instead of disappearing into the mist.
2. **Innovation.** A robust digital learning system is like a transparent comment card box. Not only can ideas go in - they can be analyzed, discussed, and the brainstormed solutions can be evaluated openly. Check out [MyStarbucksIdea](http://www.starbucks.com/coffeehouse/learn-more/my-starbucks-idea) to get a sense of how this can be done well. It may not scream “digital learning,” but the goal is the same.
3. **Sharing and Engagement**. When you spend energy to make content findable and enable sharing, you get more viewers, and those viewers are more engaged. Not only are more people educated, but you get better insights into the quality of your content.
4. **Evergreening.** If content and feedback are reviewed regularly, and the content is tweaked, it never gets stale. Instead of a video being created and aging badly, it can be edited and augmented. That way, it lasts for a longer time, giving you more bang for your buck, and ensuring that it stays relevant.
5. **Cost-effective.** Virtual classrooms can let you bring people together at a low cost, and allow you to deliver content at times and places that are convenient for learners, even if there’s only one person who wants to see a lecture. If a learning system is self-perpetuating, you also maximize the effect of your content at low additional cost.
6. **Break down walls.** If your organization has team members in far away locations, digital learning is a way to bring them together and help them share insights that would otherwise be locked up.
7. **Unique teachers.** Digital learning is a great way to provide wide access to “teachers” with a unique perspective, like a CEO. The CEO may not be able to find the time to lead a full-blown live seminar, but he or she might be able to fit in a webinar that’s broadcast from a conference room. Imagine the insights and epiphanies that can result when an organization’s most successful personnel are made available!
8. **Interactivity.** Digital learning platforms are remarkably interactive, allowing for easy facilitation of real-time feedback, linking, and turning a video into a jumping-off point for further learning after an event has ended.

Think back to the tech company we referred to at the beginning. The investment they made may have had an impact, even a return, if there were a wholistic digital learning platform in place. But instead of being an investment, the learning was treated as a commodity that was quickly used up and discarded. It could have been the foundation for something that would add value for years to come!

Like the difference between sending a food to a developing country versus sending farming equipment, irrigation techniques, and good seed, the difference between content production and a wholistic approach allows real organizational synergy to occur.

**Wait. That all sounds great, but can we *afford* digital learning?**

Don’t be scared to produce videos with inexpensive, handheld cameras. The videos can be low-budget and still be effective. Webcams are also ubiquitous, so you can tap people in the crowd and have them connect from their terminals. Live events can become great videos, too.

You also don’t have to go crazy building a whole platform on your own. Many of the pieces are available at low or no cost! Make use of YouTube, Facebook, Meetup, and anything else you come across.

Producing learning content is helpful, but if you want to make sure the resources you invest in it come back to you, take a wholistic approach, and your organization’s learning will take on a life of it’s own, becoming something much more than the sum of its parts.

Contact \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_@aericon.com to learn more and continue the discussion.