How is UK pharma embracing e-learning?

Is e-learning being embraced within the pharmaceutical sector? Laura Scarlett looks at trends within the industry and what it might mean for the delivery of training in the future.

Chances are, considering the intense regulation of the pharmaceutical industry, the precise nature of its products and the pace of research, you will regularly complete training and assessments on a variety of subjects.

Increasingly, organisations are using e-learning techniques and technologies to train and assess staff. E-learning is defined as the use of any technology across the learning process, most obviously for delivery of content, but also encompassing tests, ongoing assessment, and management of learning content. A recent survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that 60% of organisations have increased their use of e-learning in the past two years and many expect this trend to continue.

"New technologies, increased connectivity, and growing computer literacy amongst the workforce have helped to drive the trend," said Dr Rachel Meller, a partner at Information Transfer, one of the UK's leading training and communication consultancies and specialists in pharmaceutical product training. "Product and brand managers have a whole new set of tools at their disposal for supporting the product sales team, and we have certainly seen a steady rise in interest for e-learning training materials."

But, of course, access to new tools and an available new channel do not necessarily mean e-learning is always the most appropriate medium. We asked a selection of learning and development managers and sales representatives about how they use e-learning, when it is (most) effective and what changes they anticipate within the industry.

Advantages of e-learning

When asked what makes e-learning work, respondents highlighted the same advantages. They cited that e-learning:

- presents a consistent message
- is flexible and rapid to deliver
- supplements other learning
- assists in record-keeping.

Consistency of message

Whereas in classroom training there is the risk that individual trainers can emphasise or deliver differing information, e-learning provides a consistent message to everyone. Learning and development managers told us that e-learning can be particularly effective where the same information needs to be delivered to a large group of learners, for example, in induction training. Lindsey Wells, Learning Technology Manager at Janssen Cilag UK, cited their 2008 Foundation Academy programme that has been benchmarked by the organisation and will be modelled across Janssen Cilag Europe in the near future.

Speed and flexibility

E-learning shortens the time required in the classroom, so that learners do not have to spend as much time away from their 'real' work. One Learning & Development Director told us that 30% of training in his company has shifted to the 'virtual' classroom, saving travel costs and allowing for increased productivity. He described how, in the past, a new sales rep would have spent two weeks in the classroom, whereas now the format is one week in the classroom and seven two-hour e-learning sessions, interspersed with time in the field. The training now takes longer to complete, but the learners have time to review and consolidate their learning, while remaining productive. He considers this a more cost-effective way to train staff than a 100% face-to-face approach.

Supplements other learning

One training manager told us that learners need four or five exposures to the same information to absorb it, so e-learning is the perfect complement to textbooks, clinical papers and

the classroom. Another Learning & Development Manager said that e-learning is particularly effective for rudimentary, self-check quizzes that help learners test their knowledge. He also mentioned the advantage of self-paced learning, for users to dip in and out of.

A global healthcare company told us that e-learning is blended into their entire learning programme, so that learners receive printed manuals and a password to the learning management system (LMS) at the outset: they are trained to a core level before they come into the classroom. The company is proud of its Knowledge Portal that incorporates self-paced learning modules, plus articles, videos, an interactive "ask a question" facility and games with a competitive element. The general consensus was that e-learning adds value by supplementing understanding and aiding revision.

Assists in record-keeping

With the pharmaceutical industry's level of regulation, it's no surprise that keeping training records ranks high among the advantages of e-learning experienced by learning and development professionals. E-learning management systems allow companies to keep training records and capture information about learners' achievements.

Limitations of e-learning

The Training Manager of one leading biopharmaceutical company told us that one-to-one training was the main approach for his relatively small number of reps selling niche therapies, but that he viewed e-learning as an additional resource enhancing face-to-face training. E-learning at his company includes assessment quizzes and one particular therapy area has developed a self-paced learning zone, consisting of several modules and including videos from doctors, which is continually updated with the latest clinical research.

Simon White, Learning and Development Manager of Janssen Cilag, pointed out that the limited shelf-life of training content can be an issue. Keeping materials up to date is all-important and it can be a challenge to achieve this within a realistic cost-benefit framework, he said. The very nature of pharmaceutical product training means the content has to be custom-built and local language variations for product training are often necessary. Any effective LMS must be easy to update in-house and be supported by a committed, trained team of people.

White has found success using e-learning content for therapy areas which can be shared. For example, he might commission an anatomy and physiology module that supports several products, rather than discrete product training for a small sales team. He added that competitor and market information is very dynamic and therefore still tends to be covered in the classroom.

One sales representative, with over 30 years' experience at a global biopharmaceutical company, described a frustrating experience accessing a quiz online and told us one reason she chose to work as a rep was to avoid spending all day behind a computer. She said she preferred interaction with real people and the best training she had received was from senior registrars in the classroom.

Nana Lou Isbye of Lundbeck showed us the results of a survey she conducted in Spring 2009 among UK sales representatives, assessing the e-learning they received for one particular product. They reveal a relatively low level of computer-use among reps, but overall satisfaction with the quality of the e-learning.

The Learning & Development Director of a leading pharmaceutical and healthcare products company told us that the classroom is the only forum for observation of learners' confidence levels, which e-learning scores cannot reveal subtly enough, although he predicted that technology will continue to push the envelope in this regard and the day may not be too distant when avatars, for example, can overcome this limitation.

The future

E-learning will never be the sole provider of courses, but it is a significant component in learning programmes and, universally in our respondents' opinions, leads to a higher level of retention than classroom learning alone. With ever-increasing availability of e-learning tools and ICT infrastructure, and a corresponding increase in learners' familiarity with them, the prevalence of e-learning will increase.

The training manager who told us of his preference for face-to-face training still expects e-learning expansion in his company, such as other therapy areas developing their own learning zones. Another Learning & Development Director, who described e-learning as thoroughly embedded in his company's product training, says his company is refining its choice of technologies.

The good news, Matthew Borg of Information Transfer tells us, is that the e-learning of the future will be more accessible and you won't be chained to your desk to take advantage of it.

"We're already seeing greater flexibility with mobiles, PDAs and iPods to receive learning content," Matthew said. "But the biggest change is likely to be in the source of the information."

The latest evolution in e-learning is companies' use of collaborative Web 2.0 tools, such as instant messaging, wikis and blogs, for user-generated content and online discussion. There has been a huge increase in the use of 'social networking'. The ready availability of such technologies is beginning to impact how organisations approach e-learning, according to Howard Hills, who conducted the 2009 *Towards Maturity* Benchmark Report on business' use of learning technologies.

The regulatory environment of the pharmaceutical industry means this sort of informal training is still in its infancy, but we're likely to see change. The Lundbeck survey asked learners whether their e-learning encouraged discussion among colleagues – an element some respondents felt might be lost without classroom training – and whether they wished to see more online discussion possibilities. Over 85% of those surveyed would have liked more discussion.

Overall, the trend appears that the use of e-learning in the pharmaceutical sector is here to stay, will continue to grow and will evolve, with Web 2.0 becoming a more habitual part of the learning process.

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