# E-learning Success Cases

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## Abstract

Worldwide, it is estimated that the civil society or not-for-profit sector constitutes a roughly $1 trillion industry that employs close to 20 million people. While civil society leaders are increasingly turning to e-learning to enhance internal managerial and technical skills, the use of e-learning in this sector goes well beyond just staff training. Innovative organizations are designing and implementing e-learning and blended learning programs to educate clients and donors, train volunteers, and develop new sources of funding. The paper begins with a discussion of the four principal contexts in which e-learning is being used in the not-for-profit sector, and of the four key issues and opportunities faced by civil society organizations implementing e-learning. The paper then provides tangible examples of how leading civil society organizations have overcome challenges and focused resources to achieve real success with various types of e-learning.

**Keywords:** e-learning, success factors, implementation, employee training

## Introduction

E-learning describes the ability to electronically transfer, manage, support, and supervise learning and learning materials. It allows organizations to train and develop employees. Cost savings, learning flexibility, better retention, unified and updated information and the ability to provide safe and easy to manage learning environments are just some of the advantages e-learning provides. In today's competitive environment, work based training and learning are critical. They enable organizations to keep up with the fast-changing world. From large projects such as the American Red Cross' new online first aid training program to smaller programs educating families about multi-racial adoption, civil society organizations are using learning technologies to improve service, increase volunteer effectiveness and provide broader and more economical access to educational resources. Likewise, universities, foundations and technical assistance providers are offering online programs to enhance management effectiveness and improve the skills of non-profit workers. Our goal in this paper is to identify enterprise e-learning success factors.

## Not-for-Profit Organizations using E-Learning

The following current and emerging models underlying civil society organizations' use of learning technology:

- **Internal Staff Management and Technical Training**

As in other sectors, not-for-profit organizations use online learning to train staff in a more accessible, cost-effective manner. The largest North American and international organizations are implementing online learning programs to train staff in distant chapters or international field locations.

- **Communications and Advocacy**

Online learning and reference tools will become essential to effective advocacy and communications campaigns, allowing organizations to quickly and coherently educate and inform stakeholders about campaigns, issues, their significance and the organization's positions. Already, a few organizations are starting to experiment with rapid e-learning or "campaign briefings" to send updates to dispersed activists and volunteers. These short briefings and Web conferencing tools are quick and easy to use, but provide richer interaction than simple e-mail or Web sites. For example, an organization advocating for an environmental issue could provide (and record for later use) a briefing with charts, graphs, pictures and audio to motivate activists, complemented by application activities to ensure consistent understanding of key ideas.

- **Educational Service Delivery**

For organizations with an educational component to their mission, online learning can offer a scalable new medium for public awareness and educational campaigns. For example, the Autism Society of America is dedicated to increasing public awareness about autism and the day-to-day issues faced by individuals with autism, their families and the professionals with whom they interact. The Society makes it easy for parents and caregivers to learn more about autism via an online course. Other organizations profiled in this paper, like Adoption Learning Partners and Forum EMPRESA, similarly use e-learning as a key vehicle for delivery of high-quality learning opportunities to a far-flung clientele.

- **Volunteer Education and Retention**

Online orientations, training and reflection sessions offer a whole new way to train and support volunteers. Used in conjunction with strong volunteer management practices, these tools can greatly expand an organization's potential pool of volunteers by providing more accessible training and support, and hence more opportunities for development of valuable competencies. One example of an online learning program that enhances training and offers ongoing support is The National Mentoring Partnership's "Learn to be a Mentor" program. Some of the most promising projects cut across various categories, such as the American Red Cross' new $10 million initiative to provide online health and safety training. Not only can the Red Cross deliver training to learners in an accessible, cost-effective manner, but the system also allows the organization to maintain contact with millions of training recipients for certification updates, volunteer opportunities and donor events.

## E-Learning Considerations and Opportunities

The civil society sector is a unique industry with its own culture, language and processes. Just as in any industry, successful e-learning development in this sector requires a nuanced approach adapted to the sector's distinct characteristics. In our research so far, we've identified four key e-learning issues and opportunities specific to the not-for-profit sector:

- **Working Within the Civil Society Culture**

Civil society organizations' focus on their mission — not profit — results in a unique cultural environment and organizational structure. The complex interactions among staff people, volunteers, board members, donors, clients, and audience member and community

stakeholders require a much more collaborative process than does the traditional business environment. To be successful, leaders of e-learning initiatives must convince stakeholders (including donors) throughout the organization of the value of online learning. While this process can be time-consuming, the payoff is an initiative that is much more closely aligned with the real needs of the organization. While some corporate business skills e-learning does wander into the domain, we expect that the best examples will come from the not-for-profit sector in the future. This paper describes at least one excellent example of this type of content.

- **Exploiting Opportunities for Collaboration**

Because of the many similarities in content needs and the inherent scalability of e-learning, organizations can work together to develop industry-specific and issue-specific content. For example, an online course on mentoring children could be applicable to literally thousands of grassroots community-based organizations. Given e-learning's relatively high capital but low marginal costs, it is cost-effective for organizations to share the expenses of online learning projects. Collaboration can help everyone reach their goals, but it can be difficult to achieve.

- **Creative Funding of Projects and Initiatives**

While the sector has increased its investment in professional development, educational funds are still limited. E-learning consultant Carol Remz points out that "the system does not allow non-profits to spend dollars on staff." In the public eye, funds spent on staff development or training issues are deemed administrative expenses – not direct program expenses. Even though most not-for-profit work is entirely dependent on the skills of the organization's staff and volunteers, longer-term investments in human capital are difficult to justify in the face of immediate community needs. "Training and development are always the first things to get cut if there are budget issues," says Altruvest's Donna Walters. This is not a constraint, however, for e-learning ventures that focus on an external clientele. Private-sector funding for non-profit e-learning also appears to be on the rise. For example, in the last few years, several US banks have provided millions of dollars to non-profit organizations willing and able to develop online learning on personal financial education to help address issues of financial illiteracy. Similar developments are taking place in other critical skill areas.

## Example 1: Adoption Learning Partners—Filling a Need for Thousands of People Touched by Adoption

As one of the oldest and largest adoption agencies in the United States, The Cradle has a long history of providing preparatory training for adoptive families in the Chicago area. It has also long been realized that many families and adoption professionals in areas outside of major cities have no access to high quality adoption education. Online adoption communities and other information resources provide part of the solution for some, but many are left without easy-to-use learning resources. Because adoption education clearly targets personal rather than work-related learning goals—for the majority of the audience in any case—busy lives and schedules also prevent many individuals from participating in available courses, even if they live in urban areas where face-to-face learning programs are available.

## Example 2: Forum EMPRESA—A Global Learning Community for Corporate Social Responsibility

Forum EMPRESA, a Santiago, Chile-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR), is using the Web to expand its learning network. With its recently launched eForum, the organization created a virtual learning community for CSR associations in a password-protected environment. Members can share best practices, access valuable resources and training opportunities, and collaborate on projects.

**Example 3: Technology for All—Scaling Up E-learning Efforts to Bridge the Digital Divide**

Technology for All, a Houston-based nonprofit organization, has big plans for its online learning program. Technology for All provides technology training to the thousands of underserved communities and workers who reside on the other side of the digital divide. Its goal: to create a more diverse, better-trained workforce and help underserved people take their rightful place in the new economy.

## E-learning Success Factors

Results are divided into two categories: "Must-have" factors and "Nice-to-have" factors. Must-have factors are those undisputed, widely agreed upon. They must be part of the implementation. Nice-to-have factors appeared to be inconclusive among interviewees. Although they should be considered, they are more contexts related.

- **Must-have Factors**

We further explicate on the factors as they relate to prior state of the art.

**Perceived usefulness and ease of use** - According to the Technology Acceptance Modal (TAM), there are two determinants of new technology acceptance: perceived usefulness - "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance" and perceived ease of use - "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort". It is critical that employees understand the relation to their daily work and personal benefit. Perceived usefulness should be considered when choosing learning materials and as part of the marketing program.

**Marketing** - Marketing is an integral part of an e-learning implementation. It helps create a "critical mass" of users, prevent user resistance and raise the awareness to the tool and its benefits. Some have supported intensive marketing while others claimed marketing should be used only to the extent where employees are aware of e-learning tools available. Advertising techniques mentioned were emails, electronic brochures, teasers, portal, videos, conferences, and more.

**Management support** - As with other information systems, management support is critical to e-learning implementation. Masie (2001, p.4) notes that "The role of the manager as an overt champion of the learner's development must be extended toe-learning offerings."Management support is one of the most important factors reported. The top management support was mentioned as important due to the organization-wide change required. The direct management support importance is due to their ability to influence employees. Direct managers are more familiar with employees. They are able to guide and direct. They can assist employee in finding the right time to learn and by that support acceptance of the new technology and the process.

**Organizational culture** - Developing organizational culture that encourages e-learning use is one of Masie's (2001) recommendations. The right organizational culture is necessary for several reasons: Employees' resistance to using technology instead of face-to-face learning ,Overcoming a legacy of prior experience and old values and norms, making people understand how to 'e-learn, convincing managers to encourage and support employees to study rather than discourage them from doing so and more.

**A real need for the organization** -e-learning use in the organization has to be a "no other alternative" one (e.g. other alternatives are too expensive, difficult to implement, or very inefficient).

- **Nice-to-have factors**

**Time to learn** - researchers recommend scheduling and providing time to learn during company time. This is mainly due to a work load that prevents employees from doing "extras" such as e-learning. Seven interviewees said e-learning was more effective when learning is actively scheduled by managers.

**Support** – The provision of technical support (how to use), guidance (by instructor), and peer support had a positive effect on the willingness to use and the actual participation in e-learning. Lee (2006) and Carter and Bélanger (2005) found that the support increased the perceived ease of use. Those in favor of e-learning support explained that the mere knowledge of the fact that they have someone to help them reassures learners and prevents negative attitudes and dropouts. On the other hand, some claimed support to be unnecessary and even said the need for support to be a quality issue (namely, poor e-learning systems need more support).

**Mandatory usage** - Both Lee (2006) and Govindasamy's (2002) studies implicate that mandatory usage (vs. voluntary) is necessary and can increase e-learning effectiveness. Nevertheless, mandatory usage does not guarantee 100% participation (Masie, 2001). While four interviewees said e-learning should be voluntary based, five objected, saying that usage would drop in such a case. Mandatory usage supporters often said that non-obligatory learning material should not be offered.

**Incentives to use e-learning** - The incentives had encouraged employees to use e-learning. Other studies support this assumption.The meaningless certificates that provide valuable benefits such as career advancement and peer recognition. Our interviewees suggested using material incentives such as certifications, continuing education programs, personal file records, or promotion preconditions. Others opposed that idea. They worried that material incentives might become the sole reason for using e-learning. Thus, they suggested only using nonmaterial ones, such as peer recognition. Employees must understand the added value of e-learning (such as the ability to learn materials that are unreachable in other ways).

## Conclusions

When implementing e-learning, a holistic approach has to be taken. We should consider different aspects, such as technological issues, design, users support, subject matter, incentives, and culture. Transforming "learning" into "e-learning" is not just about developing online courses. More factors should be taken into account ("must-haves"): useful and easy to use e-learning tools, the existence of a real need for the organization, direct and executive management support, marketing, and an organizational culture that supports and encourages learning, and especially e-learning. In our discussion we saw tangible examples of how leading civil society organizations have overcome challenges and focused resources to achieve real success with various types of e-learning.

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