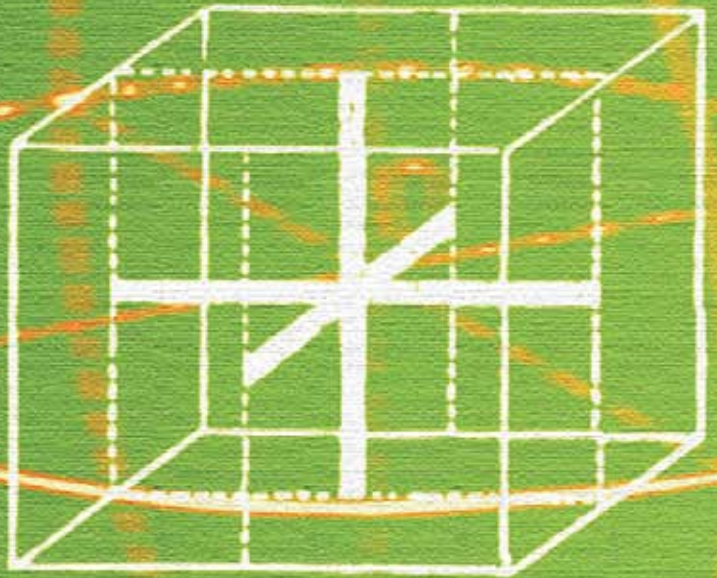


Designers who address the three learning phases will find e-learning success.



DESIGNING

In many ways, designing successful e-learning is a nearly impossible task. The complexity can be overwhelming, with challenges coming from voluminous content that somehow manages to be incomplete, unsympathetic technology, anxious and inattentive learners, inadequate budgets, subject matter experts who are asked to be designers, and restrictive deadlines.

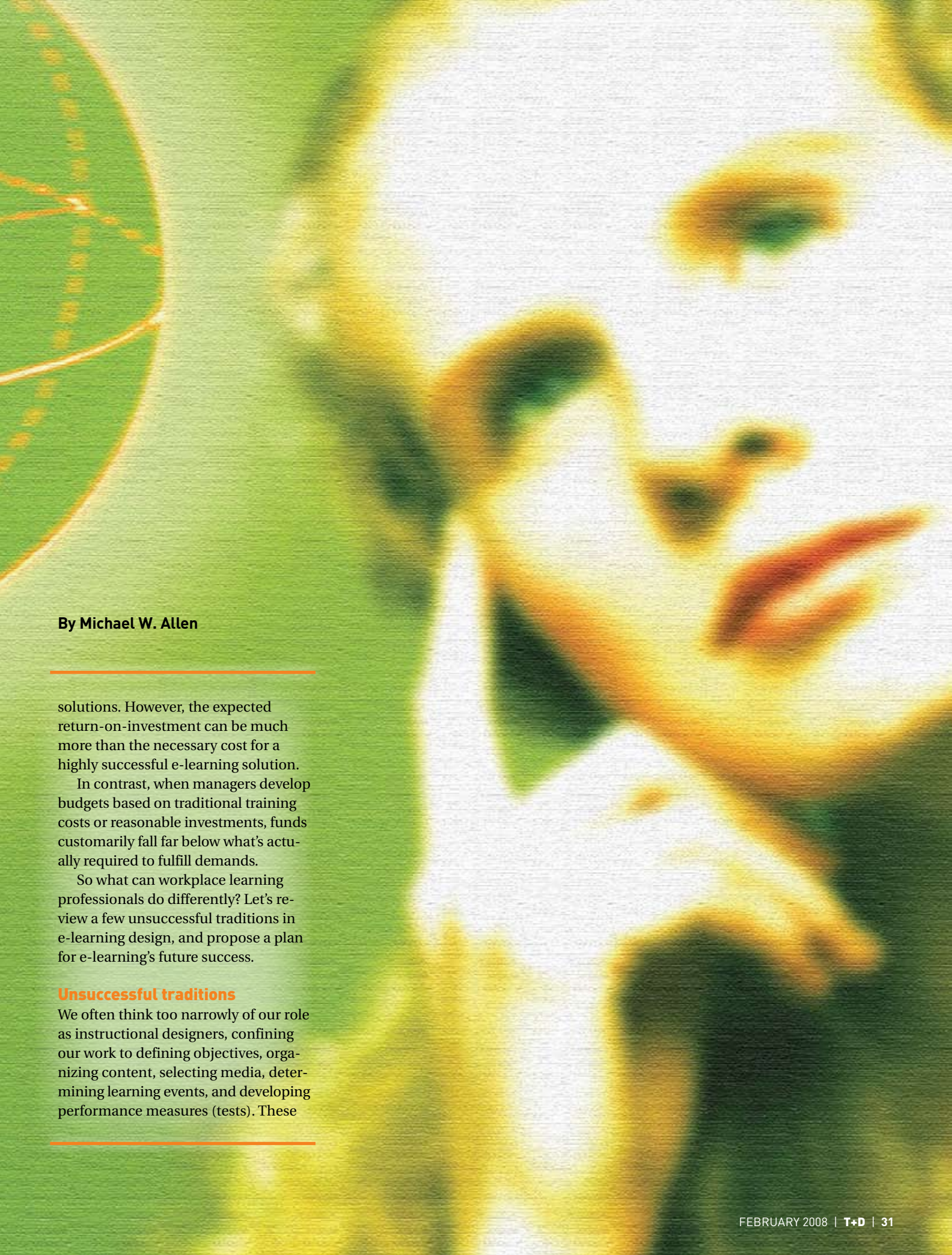
Many current e-learning solutions are so compromised in the design and development process that, in retrospect, e-learning probably wasn't the best delivery medium.

Simpler media present fewer design and development challenges,

expose fewer design weaknesses, and cost less to develop. Unfortunately, they typically have limited potential. They also can become the most expensive solutions because they waste the learner's time, fail to develop their skills, and do not improve performance. Any ineffective solution is expensive, but poorly designed e-learning ups the ante in wastefulness.

When organizational leaders sit down to analyze what a prospective performance improvement solution is worth, the resulting numbers often exceed, by dramatic amounts, budgets normally expected for the design, development, and delivery of e-learning

OUTSIDE THE BOX



By Michael W. Allen

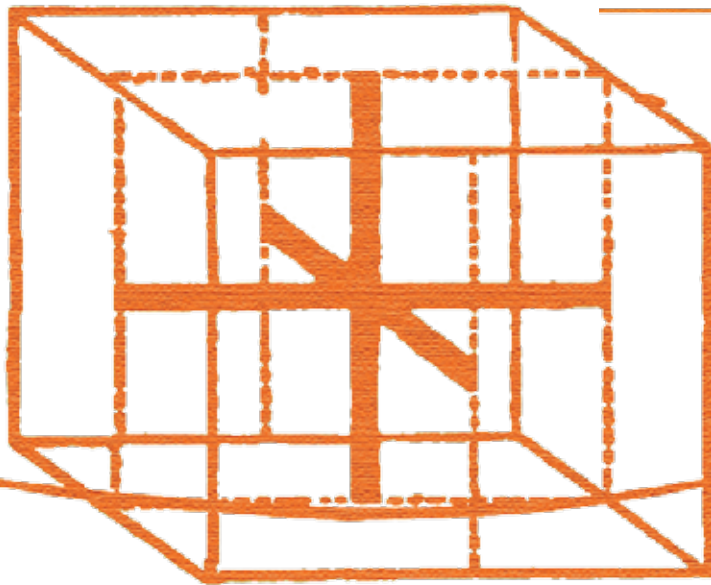
solutions. However, the expected return-on-investment can be much more than the necessary cost for a highly successful e-learning solution.

In contrast, when managers develop budgets based on traditional training costs or reasonable investments, funds customarily fall far below what's actually required to fulfill demands.

So what can workplace learning professionals do differently? Let's review a few unsuccessful traditions in e-learning design, and propose a plan for e-learning's future success.

Unsuccessful traditions

We often think too narrowly of our role as instructional designers, confining our work to defining objectives, organizing content, selecting media, determining learning events, and developing performance measures (tests). These



tasks become the boxes used to define and structure the components of a learning solution.

But our role as instructional designers isn't simply to apply design principles and hope for the best; it's to enable people to perform at higher levels of competency.

If learners fail in performance, we have failed them, even if they scored flawlessly on our posttest. We tell ourselves that learners would perform better if only they would complete all of our e-learning modules, if only they did their homework, if only they'd practice more, if only they'd take a chance and apply the new things we've taught them. But these are just excuses.

The bottom line is we've failed to reach the goal. Designing inside the boxes of an e-learning application, an instructor-led course, or even a blended learning solution is a traditional but narrow view of the design responsibility.

Inside these boxes, designers regularly give little attention to the practicality of learners actually performing on the job what they learned, as well as the level of practice that is necessary to sustain proficiency when performance opportunities might not occur for some time. In addition, designers often fail to address the fact that co-workers might misunderstand or even disapprove of the new practices being taught.

Instead, designers create a string of learning modules; each dependent

on the preceding one, each presenting more difficult concepts and tasks to perform, each designed to raise performance to a higher level.

There's an assumption that the learner is totally inside each box with the designer, committed to and focused on each module and approaching it with energy and enthusiasm.

E-learning designers need to get out more—out of these boxes, that is. There are many variables not typically seen as within the purview of instructional design that can sabotage instructional efforts or enrich them.

Success requires designers to think expansively about the real lives and influences on learners, including what they care about, what they are trying to do, and how they might perceive the learning solution. Then they can design both inside and outside the confines of the typical learning product.

Successful design

Before revamping the list of design responsibilities, we must first define what we mean by successful design. I do not think e-learning or any other educational program is successful if it results only in high posttest scores. I do not think success is reached if the targeted audience comes only to know things it didn't before. No one succeeds just by knowing things. Success comes from doing the right thing at the right time.

Success, therefore, is realized only if learners develop and apply appropriate behaviors. Success means learners can recognize real world situations for which they have applicable knowledge or skills and respond effectively. Successful designs not only impart knowledge, but also the propensity to act. They build the confidence necessary to perform well as well as the skill to perform at an effective pace.

But what must practitioners do for e-learning to succeed?

Three learning phases

Inside traditional boxes, instructional design has generally ignored not only what is happening in the lives of learners while they are trying to learn (conflicting role expectations, sick loved ones, fear of standing out or looking foolish, and so on), but also critical conditions and events that occur both prior to learning and subsequently. Designers need to look at the entire process before people can learn.

Pre-instruction phase. Learners are not a blank slate. They may not know much about the content and skills they are trying to learn, but learners approach learning with various levels of confidence, expectations, readiness, habits, and preferences.

They have a general disposition in each of these factors, as well as more specific dispositions with respect to the content (or whatever they know of it) and what they may know of e-learning and other instructional techniques involved.

The period preceding instruction is an important time for setting expectations, energizing learners, and preparing them to learn. Helping learners see that the prospective learning is about behavioral change is a good place to start.

Don't assume that learners understand this. Help them look at learning in a different and more useful way. It isn't about getting a good grade and then going back to business as usual. It's about changing what they

do and when they do it. Learning has a purpose for both them and their organization. It can change things for the better for everyone.

Change is a simple word. It sounds like progress and improvement to organizational leaders who think, “If we’re not improving (which means changing), we’re falling backward.”

But change strikes fear in the hearts and minds of many employees who have found a familiar if not effective routine of dealing with performance expectations and don’t want to be rooted out of their comfort zone. Neurologists have actually discovered that the brain is wired to avoid change. It senses a sort of pain even when change is being contemplated.

To get learners in the mode of thinking about change use exercises such as asking them to think about how things could be better and then describe how such improvements could occur. This is a first step. Then present specific problems and ask learners to evaluate possible solutions to help them move forward to understand the need for changes.

Eventually, pre-instruction phase activities should require that learners commit to changes they will make. Only then will learners be ready for skill-building exercises. When learners are psychologically unprepared for change, they’re also unprepared for the types of e-learning usually offered.

With unprepared learners, e-learning fails. Designers need to change before they can expect learners to change, and this means dealing seriously with pre-learning preparation.

Instruction phase. Instructional designers need to make changes as well.

In this phase, we need to focus on having learners actually perform work-related tasks, not just acquire knowledge and recognize correct answers. While there is general consensus that learning by doing is better than passive learning, it makes a great difference

on what learners are doing during the learning experience.

For example, learners often are taught performance skills, but not the ability to recognize situations that determine which performance skills should be used. Learners need to think about the consequences of alternative behaviors. They need to analyze situations to determine what they should do, then practice both the analysis skills and the performance until these skills become solid and learners develop needed confidence and eagerness to perform.

Informal learning is always at work among workers. Employees are continually gathering information and forming perspectives that may be helpful or detrimental to their performance—whether it is talking with peers about the behavior of others, experimenting on their own to see what actions yielded the greatest accolades or require the least effort, or searching the Internet for alternative ways of working.

To take advantage of informal learning activities and help connect learning to work, programs should challenge learners to use varied avenues of exploration to solve hypothetical problems and develop useful skills and habits for solving problems.

Performance phase. Designers often act like parental turtles, walking off the job when their eggs hatch and leaving their young to fend for themselves. But embryonic skills face a high fatality rate when support terminates at the end of formalized instruction. Just as only one in 100 hatchling turtles survive to maturity, designers leave much to chance if they view what happens to learners after instruction as something that is completely outside their realm of influence.

During the performance phase, designers need to keep in mind that training programs should provide learning experiences for at least two audiences: one set for the target learners and another for their managers.

Untrained supervisors, even if they are generally supportive of change, often unwittingly hamper changes because they have not developed mentoring skills, are unfamiliar with new processes being introduced through training, or do not recognize the challenges of change.

In addition, fledgling behaviors can be strengthened when learners have others at the same point in behavior development to compare notes. Facilitating ways learners can talk with each other as they transition learning to actual performance can help.

E-learning applications can help learners find each other online and team up with each other in the pre-instruction phase. These teams can continue to bolster performance improvement through learning and long afterward.

Finally, e-learning programs can provide continual opportunities to practice and review new skills. Through increasing intervals, learners can use refresher exercises to keep their skills honed in a way that is rarely possible when traditional learning applications conclude.

Again, because e-learning works in the e-environment, alerting learners to the need for practice and providing various reminders and performance aids at optimally spaced intervals is easy, effective, and inexpensive. **T+D**

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