When it comes to successfully planting and growing e-learning, Information Transfer seem to have green fingers. For the last two years, Information Transfer clients have won E-learning Awards for securing widespread adoption. This article provides tips on how their clients have produced such fantastic results…

? HOW AND WHY

### How does your e-learning garden grow?

If casting seeds upon the soil were all it took to yield a bumper crop, we'd all be reaping the harvest this autumn.

Why do we think it's different for e-learning?

Getting real results from your e-learning efforts requires the careful planning and discipline of a seasoned horticulturist.

Two companies, one a leading provider of mental healthcare and education services and the other an Irish supermarket, have produced outstanding e-learning results working with Information Transfer. The UK's Priory Group and Ireland's Superquinn achieved internal success and external recognition for the high level of adoption of e-learning within their organisations.

They achieved this success by applying the simple, yet effective, formula described over the following pages.

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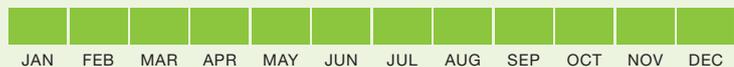
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Step 1. 'pH-test' your plot

Gardeners who produce award-winning results know the value of understanding the soil. Left uncorrected, poor soil will yield poor results.

A crucial stage in every e-learning project is an audit of your environment. It's no good thinking, "We've created the course materials, now how do we encourage people to use them?" That's like saying, "I've planted my grove of pineapple trees in Scotland, now how do I make them grow and produce fruit?"

Superquinn and Priory recognised that there were very significant challenges implementing e-learning and ensuring adoption, with limited technical infrastructure and low levels of PC literacy among colleagues. In Priory's case, a negative perception of e-learning, due to a bad experience with some off-the-shelf courseware, was also an issue.

How to 'pH-test' your e-learning plot

Rudyard Kipling reminds us, "Gardens are not made by sitting in the shade". Neither are successful e-learning projects. It's time to get your hands dirty…

Understand your business

It's difficult to gain leadership support for your initiative or to achieve worthwhile adoption if your e-learning is not aligned with what the business is trying to achieve.

For Superquinn, providing the best possible service and having excellent operational standards was the overall business focus.

Tune in to what the senior leadership is trumpeting. Understanding that focus will help you build a programme to deliver on their objectives (and it won't hurt when you're building your case for the budget, either).

Listen to staff and managers

Both Priory and Superquinn sent training people out onto the 'shop floor' to meet staff and survey their readiness for e-learning, assess their perception of e-learning, and to learn how it could be accessed. They spoke to local managers about how time away from the hospital ward or supermarket shop floor could be handled.

Make a friend in IT

Your IT department shouldn't be running your e-learning project, but their support is key to enabling it. Involve them early. Make a friend if you can. Waiting until you've selected a supplier and you're ready to roll out is a recipe for disaster.

Write a communication plan

After you've gathered enough information on the key drivers of senior leaders, line managers, IT leaders and employees, it's time to write a communication plan. This plan will have a section for each of your key stakeholders and set out their current objections, their interests, and how messages from your office and elsewhere might be co-ordinated to influence their attitudes, awareness and support.

Run a pilot

Sometimes the quickest way to find out what works is to try it on a limited scale. Be careful, however – a poorly conceived and implemented pilot can reinforce negative perceptions of e-learning and deliver disappointing results. Choose business-critical needs, keep the pilot short, make sure users are supported and communications are clear.

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JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC

CONCEPT SUITABLE FOR CULTIVATION ALL YEAR

Content 6 pages
26 03 08

Step 2. Prepare the ground

After gaining a clear understanding of their environments, both award-winning organisations began to make adjustments and prepare the ground for the coming e-learning implementation. Content creation hadn't even started yet. The focus was still on ensuring the organisation was ready to train using e-learning.

You're going to spend a good amount of time and money on your e-learning implementation. Now is the time to make sure your efforts fall on good, receptive soil.

Many organisations find they need to make minor changes to IT infrastructure to enable e-learning. Others find they need to work to change staff attitudes to e-learning and to ensure it will be well-received.

PREP. THE SOIL

Tips for preparing the ground

It will pay to remember the old American adage: "Never plant a ten-dollar tree in a two-dollar hole." Preparation is everything. It was for Superquinn and Priory.

Create a working party

Priory and Superquinn both formed working parties made up of people from key parts of the business. Priory's working party was 19-strong and comprised everyone from chefs to consultants. The members of the working party brought to the table a knowledge of local user needs, experiences and culture that informed the content creation process and learning management choices. They also served as ambassadors in the later stages, championing the project throughout the organisation.
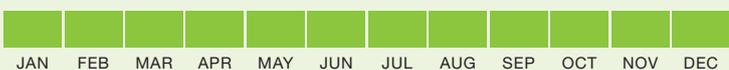
Involve your IT friend

Remember the friend you made in IT? Keep her informed. Make her a part of the working party if she has time. Take an interest in the IT infrastructure planning and roll-out schedule. Without bandwidth and PCs, your e-learning will wither on the vine.

Build key stakeholder support

Your working party and your IT friends are a good start, but now might be the time to dust off the communication plan and see if you can take advantage of any existing events or channels to increase the receptiveness to your initiative. Are there any scheduled managers' conferences or sales team meetings? Can your managing director begin mentioning the initiative in internal speeches? Is there space in the internal employee newsletter?

Get yourself a brand identity

A strong and memorable identity to raise the profile of the learning programme was an important part of both implementations. Priory developed the 'Foundations for Growth' brand and Superquinn created 'iLearn'. Each learning and development brand carried a logo and colour scheme that adorned every component of the new materials and online systems.

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JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC

CONCEPT SUITABLE FOR CULTIVATION ALL YEAR

Content 6 pages
26 03 08

Step 3. Sow the seeds

By this point, your senior leadership and your working party will have informed many of your decisions on what the objectives of your e-learning are to be. Now you must decide how to meet those learning objectives.

Within e-learning, there is a range of options: off-the-shelf content, Do-It-Yourself authoring tools, and bespoke content partners who can assist you in developing content – just to name a few. You then have delivery choices, including online learning management systems, CDs, intranet, mobile phones, and stand-alone PCs.

Priory and Superquinn both chose the bespoke content route, with a mixture of other approaches where appropriate.

SOW THE SEED

Tips on sowing your e-learning seeds

You've analysed the environment and prepared the ground. Now you have an opportunity to deliver relevant content to your staff.

Make it local
Priory and Superquinn both built local procedures into their e-learning modules. For example, Priory had generic procedures for infection control, but those that apply to a particular member of staff, and the way they are implemented, will depend on the site where he or she works.

The e-learning modules link to offline learning activities which the users complete at their local site, often working with a line manager.

Make it personal
At Priory, the engagement of more sceptical users was critical. By ensuring the materials contained Priory's content, related specifically to Priory's work, and were illustrated with relevant examples, the learning and development team made the training inherently relevant.
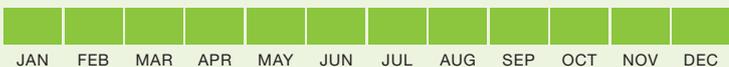
Align it closely
Almost by definition, content that is local and personal is going to be bespoke. One of the great advantages of bespoke for Superquinn and Priory is that they were both able to infuse corporate culture, vision and values into the content. They never missed the opportunity – even within a compliance course – to make clear the "way we do things around here".

This is not to say that there are no relevant e-learning courses available off-the-shelf. In fact, for a few topics, this is a viable option. But Priory and Superquinn found that for the price, they were able to deliver more e-learning – and deliver more company-specific messages – by choosing a bespoke content model.

Embed it in other systems and processes
If you can, embed access to your e-learning into other online systems like the front page of your Intranet. See if there are other well-trodden processes already in place that you can piggyback on. Try to avoid creating new administrative processes and bolt-on systems that will be difficult to maintain in the long-term.

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JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC

CONCEPT SUITABLE FOR CULTIVATION ALL YEAR

Content 6 pages
26 03 08

Step 4. Feed and grow

You've diligently prepared the ground for your initiative and you've launched relevant e-learning content for your organisation. Sit back and wait for the harvest, right? This is the lazy gardener's approach. But keep this in mind: your seed is only the plan. The work you do now will ensure it flourishes.

For Priory and Superquinn, feeding and nurturing the e-learning initiative meant ensuring opinion leaders and ambassadors were active in their support, post-launch.

Both companies also saw their learning design and content creation approach come to fruition as well. The links they built with offline activities ensured the learning took hold in the workplace, where it is needed.

Perhaps most importantly, both organisations did an exceptional job keeping senior leaders on board. Learning and development leaders kept the momentum going by communicating survey results, compliance figures and completion statistics to the board.

FEED AND GROW

How to feed and grow your e-learning

Communicate continuously
It's time to kick your communications into overdrive. We too often underestimate how much communication is necessary. Don't forget, your initiative is competing against a cacophony of information noise.

Release your ambassadors
Your opinion leaders and ambassadors are like fertiliser for your new programme. To stimulate support, Superquinn created a module for all managers on how to help out on the shop floor during the Christmas rush. The module delivered an important quick win and built managers' confidence in the e-learning medium.

Blend it
The local references you built into your content will not only ensure greater relevance for your training, but will also help to embed the learning for your trainees. Contact with peers, an on-the-job element with line managers, both serve to 'feed and nourish' the learning messages planted in the e-learning course. Having access to some post-learning follow-up or blended learning activities has a positive effect on the level of learning achieved and the eventual business results.

Report, survey and address issues
Your e-learning management system should be producing post-course survey results, completion statistics, quiz scores, and more. Make sure you are gathering these stats and using the results to reinforce the positive messages to senior leaders, including return on investment calculations.

Build in a survey of line managers – those who have a member of staff who has completed the induction programme or new e-learning course. Ask them if it has made a difference. Feedback from this level is often overlooked, but can be a good indicator of whether the training is having the desired effect in the workplace.
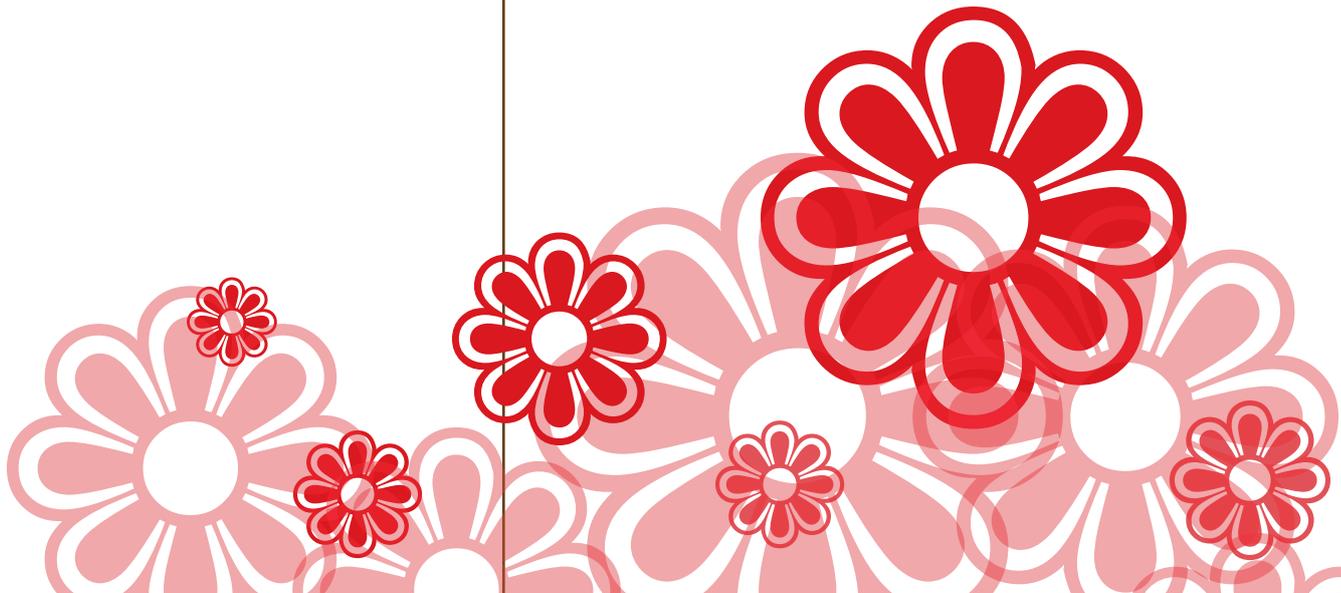
If issues arise – and they probably will – make sure you 'weed them out'. Make changes to content, if necessary. Enlist your friends in IT to help overcome unexpected technical glitches. If you've done your work building your coalition of supporters, you will have an easier time if things need 'tweaking'.

Keep senior leaders informed
Continued senior management support is like sunshine and rain for your fledgling e-learning initiative. Communicate the quick wins, positive line manager and user feedback you're receiving and ROI figures. It's your responsibility to keep senior leaders informed so that they continue to lend the top-level support your initiative requires.

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC

CONCEPT SUITABLE FOR CULTIVATION ALL YEAR

④

Content 6 pages
26 03 08

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Learn by doing

The formula for success outlined above might seem a bit daunting, especially for those just starting out on e-learning. Priory and Superquinn each invested serious time and energy in making their e-learning initiatives achieve award-winning results, internally and externally. But you don't have to go from breaking ground to the Chelsea Flower Show all in one season. "As the garden grows so does the gardener."

Most of the ideas in this paper can be scaled down to fit any size of project. In fact, most pilots end up being small versions of the eventual project, complete with internal marketing and communication work, just on a smaller scale.

Perhaps the most important parallel to be drawn with gardening is that a successful e-learning project of any size requires a holistic approach. No one step can make the implementation yield great results. They must be working together in harmony to ensure a plentiful harvest.

| JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC |

CONCEPT SUITABLE FOR CULTIVATION ALL YEAR

Content 6 pages
26 03 08