The digital blackboard

by Richard Bray

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IT fuels a lifestyle change

"**T**HIS IS GOING TO be one of these things that changes the workplace overnight," says Stephen Downes, who is a senior research officer with the National Research Council Canada. He specializes in e-learning and believes the evolving capabilities of new communications technologies will have an enormous impact on education – and soon.

Downes says there are some early indicators, such as the emergence of online testing facilities separate from educational providers and the increasing financial pressures on colleges, universities and training programs in general.

"The big driver for e-learning in the corporate sector of course is the savings. There is an immediate return on investment because they aren't paying travel and materials costs and so on. More and more, we are seeing that governments and institutions aren't willing to pay these costs," Downes says.

"At some point, we are going to see some government, somewhere say, 'we're just not going to fund these universities any more, because we have come to realize that what we are funding is not learning, what we are funding is a lifestyle'."

Whatever lies in the future, managers are struggling with training budgets today. As president of Ingenia Training, a Vancouver e-learning consultancy and vice-chair of the Canadian e-Learning Enterprise Alliance, Ramona Materi helps institutions design and implement training solutions.

"One of the biggest mistakes people make, and I've seen this in companies and organizations, is they go whole hog on the technology without being clear about 'why are we doing this'," Materi says. "It has to meet organizational objectives."

The executive in charge of training must have a good sense of where and how e-learning technology fits in the organization, Materi says. "There are technological issues. In big organizations, will your e-learning technology fit in with your enterprise management systems? Are things compatible and will different software programs be 'happy' with one another?" Despite vendors' claims, Materi warns, there are still problems implementing e-learning in the context of big applications.

Dave Watchorn, president of Training Solutions Group in Ottawa concurs. "You have to ensure that the platforms are compatible with whatever platforms your employees work on. That is usually where the largest glitches come from, especially if you are custom designing something."

Since technology changes every six months, "to try and maintain the legacy of whatever system you build and still be on the cutting edge is a difficult balancing act," says Watchorn.

Beyond the technology, an e-learning solution might simply be the wrong choice. "If you have a culture where people don't use computers, and don't even train that often, and you try to introduce something using computers, the system may work but people may not want to use it. Introducing something like e-learning is change management – a different way of doing things," Materi says.

In Ottawa, Watchorn worked with Elections Canada on training materials for deputy returning officers and poll clerks for the June 28, 2004 general election. E-learning solutions were carefully considered – and rejected.

He says the temporary employees are typically retired people with the time to work on a one-day basis. "Many of them don't have computers, so we had to come up with paper manuals, a face-to-face classroom training course for fairly large numbers, a self-directed program with a video base and a self-directed learning manual for people who lived in remote areas and couldn't attend the classroom sessions." There was one concession to new technology. "We sent the videos in DVD format as well as tape."

On the other hand, e-learning has the potential not only to eliminate cost and distance, it can transform education. Indeed, many young people now live in an e-learning world. "They are already doing it," Stephen Downes says. "This has actually permeated into the workplace to a fair degree. If you go on the Internet looking for learning, you find that the Net abounds with learning opportunities that are informal, non-institutional, self-taught and self-directed."

Downes says that 'self-directed' or 'informal' learning will eventually become the dominant model of learning. Without formally registering for courses or programs, people will search through what is available on the Internet and take what they need, when they need it.

"As the size of the network increases, the value of the technology increases exponentially. It's called the 'network effect'," he says. "We're going to see the same thing in learning. The tipping point happens when education changes from something done for us to something we do ourselves." ⌇

Note: Watch for more on this topic in future issues of *Summit*.

Richard Bray is an Ottawa-based freelance writer specializing in the IT sector. He has been published in magazines and newspapers in Australia, the US and Canada. Before freelancing, he worked as a producer, reporter and senior writer for CBC in Toronto.