

PART ONE  
**The learning  
technology  
landscape**

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# A learning utopia?

# 01

*Most people know nothing about learning.* THOMAS MORE, *UTOPIA*, ENGLAND, 1516

*I get that we have to do this, but why do they gotta make doing it so hard?* 'SALLY', STARBUCKS, NEW YORK, UNITED STATES, 2013

In January 2013, David Kelly, a technology-focused learning and development specialist in New York visited his local Starbucks to get some work done. It was a crisp winter's day, and he was enjoying getting into the rhythm of work with his favourite large tea at his side when his concentration was broken by the person sharing his table making a call on her mobile phone (Kelly, 2013). She was staring with annoyance at her computer, open in front of her.

'No,' she sighed in exasperation into her phone, 'I'm able to sign into the laptop. I just can't get signed into the training.'

Once her colleague had talked her through accessing the training system, she sat at her keyboard, staring at her screen, mostly bored, occasionally frustrated, as she repeatedly clicked the 'Next' button, which moved her e-learning course on.

After about 90 minutes, she called her colleague again. She had to leave the café and wanted to know whether it was possible to leave the course halfway through, because, as she put it, 'I don't wanna have to go through all this again'.

David felt he had to know more. As soon as she had finished her conversation and shut her laptop, he introduced himself, explained who he was, and asked what was going on. Her initial reaction was to put some distance between herself and someone who came from the profession who had made her life hell for the previous hour and a half. Assuaged by a caramel macchiato and the promise of

anonymity, ‘Sally’ explained that she was taking a mandatory course. It was almost the same course as the previous year.

‘Maybe you can explain to me why I have to take the same course year after year?’ she asked in understandable frustration.

Every year her organization updated the course to reflect changes that employees need to know, and updated the test, too, to include those changes. Sally appreciated the need to be aware of the changes, but not the way the information was conveyed. ‘I know they want us to take the whole course,’ she said, ‘but wouldn’t it be easier to also tell us what’s changed so we can be on the lookout for it?’

It was not only the content of the course that had riled her – repetitive, with the important changes buried amid the familiar and trivial; it was not only the nature of the course itself, which consisted of reading screens of information and clicking the ‘Next’ button to progress; it was also the process of getting to the course, through a system that needed a separate login, different to her regular login for the company systems. On top of all this was the frustration that this ‘training course’ had nothing to do with learning. ‘We don’t learn anything from these,’ she said, ‘and everybody knows that. They just want to know that it’s done.’

A committed employee just trying to do her job, Sally summed up her frustration in a single question: ‘I get that we have to do this, but why do they gotta make doing it so hard?’

Sally’s experience is not unique. Too many employees experience the combination of a tedious course with non-intuitive software. Too often the content they are exposed to seems neither relevant to their job, nor to have much to do with learning. And too often it seems to have little to do with the business, either.

It doesn’t have to be this way. At the 2014 Learning Technologies Conference in London, a case study from major UK healthcare provider HC-One included a short video of care worker Kate Cairns, who had been through the company’s *touch* programme. This programme, which we’ll hear more about in Chapter 9, was designed to support an ambitious cultural change programme and relied heavily on e-learning. The reaction of those in the programme, in contrast to Sally’s, was overwhelmingly positive. ‘E-learning has been great for me,’ Kate said in a matter of fact way, ‘but also great news for the

residents. I don't have to leave my shift to do my training. It gives me more time to spend with the residents, which is why I'm here.'

Other staff agree. Well over 95 per cent of a survey of 4,244 employees said that *touch* had given them new knowledge and understanding, and over 90 per cent felt the programme had given them more control over their learning and development. In addition, over 90 per cent of managers said that the programme had increased competence and not just compliance ratings (Innes-Farquar, 2014).

We will see other, similar examples in this book where learning technologies have been implemented well, in ways useful for employees, help learning and add to the value of the organization.

Most adults have always understood the value of learning (Thomas More, whose quote opens this chapter, did when he wrote *Utopia* 500 years ago). The vast majority of employees certainly understand it, and know its importance for their work. Learning technology offers a promise of easy access to engaging, accessible learning content. The frustration for employees, therefore, is that our understanding of learning's importance and the promise of learning technology too often does not translate into anything effective. On the positive side, the use of learning technologies does seem to be improving, but inconsistently and slowly. This book is an attempt to identify and spread good practice more widely, and so protect people from Sally's frustrating experience. Employees deserve better. They deserve a learning utopia, not the dystopia it too often turns out to be.

In writing this book, I talked to many people who use learning technologies well. I looked back over 16 years of case studies from the Learning Technologies Conference. I explored case studies from other sources, too. In the course of all this, it became clear that successful learning technology implementations are not a matter of chance. By the same token, failed implementations usually happen for reasons that are predictable and preventable. To understand why these errors are so common, and so often repeated, we need to travel back in time to 1999, to the height of the dot-com boom, when learning technologies were in their infancy, and one influential man in particular was predicting a great future for them.

## References

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