LMS e-Learning Implementation Podcast Transcript #12 *Selecting The Proper Training Solution for Your Company's Needs*

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Mary Kay Lofurno: Welcome to the next episode of the SyberWorks e-Learning Podcast series. I am Mary Kay Lofurno, Marketing Director for SyberWorks Inc., and your host today.

Today we are talking again with Mark Bower, president and CEO of Edge Interactive Inc., a learning and performance management consulting firm located in Colorado. In today's segment we will discuss how to select the proper solution for your company's training needs. Or to put it in another way, when to use a dessert fork and not the spoon.

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Mary Kay: Now we will begin our interview with Mark Bower, president of Edge Interactive Inc., a learning and performance management consulting firm.

Hello, Mark. It is great having you here today. It seems that one of the biggest challenges in learning today is choosing the right solution to address the learning problems at hand. In your many years of experience in business, what do you find to be the biggest challenge in providing learning and performance solutions?

Mark Bower: Thank you, Mary Kay. It's great to be back here again. Advances in learning technology, changes in worker demographics, and new thinking in instructional strategy, offer the learning professional an ever increasing choice of both individual and blended learning solutions, which is both good news and bad news.

Mary Kay: Oh, you are right, sometimes it is better to have fewer choices, Mark.

Mark: You know, that's a good point, Mary Kay. Although attractive, I guess as professionals I suppose it is never better to have fewer choices, and as we all know, this used to be a lot easier. There was a time when everyone was put in a classroom and told what they needed to know. We believed individuals had unlimited attention spans, and flying huge numbers of people around the country for classes made sense. I bet you remember those days, Mary Kay.

Mary Kay: Oh, I certainly do. In fact, I always was surprised, how many classes were held in nice vacation spots, [laughs] or close to a friend or relative I wanted to visit, you know.

Mark: So true, so true. But strange as it seems, this is the model which doesn't fit today's worker demographics or business environment. We must maximize the efficiency of our training resources more effectively, both in terms of business impact and the effective use of workers' time.

For our podcast today, I would like to focus on technology-based training solutions that serve as alternatives to the traditional classroom. There are numerous effective instructional strategies and techniques that are key to an effective training solution. But here I would like to focus on technology.

Mary Kay, would it be all right if I started with an example?

Mary Kay: Absolutely. You have great examples, Mark.

Mark: Thank you. Well, here goes. You are the director of training for a large multi-national company. And you were called to a meeting by the executive vice-president of sales. When you entered the room, you see there are a number

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of executives, already around the table. So you get the feeling that this is an important meeting. The VP of sales begins to speak.

"As you all know, we had an important product introduction this spring that would give us an important but short strategic advantage over our key competitors. We set aggressive sales goals for this product, but we are not reaching what we believed were even conservative sales figures. We have identified the problem and need some help getting it fixed.

"The managers and sales reps are struggling and don't have a clear understanding of how to position the new product and articulate the value that it provides. We are 30 days away from the end of the quarter, and we need to do something to meet our quarterly sales objectives. Do you have any ideas?"

For many people their first idea would be that: "I need to start looking for a new job." But you decide to make that choice. You like a challenge, but this is not a trivial task. You know the audience is 500 sales managers and reps, dispersed all over the world. And since you are the director of training, and you were invited to this meeting, you suspect that the VP of sales may believe that there is a training solution to his problem.

I think, Mary Kay, I guess the good news is that you are invited to the table to provide a solution, and the bad news is you are invited to the table to provide a solution.

Mary Kay: Yes, a Catch-22 thing. But I suppose, this is a pretty common challenge for most training leaders, wouldn't you think?

Mark: Well, you know it is true. It is a challenge. Let me describe my process for building training solutions. The first question you need to ask is this, "Is this really a training problem? And if you develop a training solution, will it be successful?"

For simplicity, let's assume that the sales force is competent and motivated. Let's also assume that the new product is a good product, addresses a market need, is competitively priced, and will be successful if sold effectively. So that leaves us with a training solution to develop.
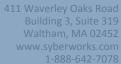
But where do we start? Here are some general suggestions. In crafting a training solution, we need to look at the business factors associated with our objectives. Here are some business factors I always look at. The first is budget. I have been in the training business for over 20 years, and I found that when I am crafting a solution, that budget is always the biggest factor in determining the overall solution. In this situation, I am assuming budget will be plentiful for an effective solution.

Second is sense of urgency. The urgency of the business objective will impact your solution. There are a number of technologies available that can deliver training very quickly to a very large global audience. To me, and it comes to mind first, is the virtual classroom. The virtual classroom has fast development, similar to classroom courses, and very quick speed of deployment. In fact, in one project, we trained 1,500 technicians across the globe in three weeks.

Finally, the third solution is infrastructure. When evaluating technology-based solutions, it is important to look at the infrastructure available to support the proposed solution. That is, do you have the classrooms, instructors, training developers, bandwidth, or workstations to get the job done? A technology-based solution won't be very effective if there is not technology to support it. These are all simple things, but important.

Mary Kay: Well, it seems like there is a lot of factors to think about. Are there any more?

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Mark: You know, yes, there are. The next factor I'd like to discuss is audience. A well-crafted training solution must fit the audience it is addressing. Here are some of the things we should know about our audience. What is their existing knowledge and experience? What prerequisite knowledge do they need and what is the best way to deliver that knowledge?

Second is demographics. Factors such as education, familiarity with technology, age and gender are important. In many cases this will influence their comfort with technology. The third is size of audience. Larger audiences may lend themselves to technology-assisted solutions to save costs and increase speed to deployment.

And finally geographic locations. A geographically dispersed audience also lends itself to technology assisted solutions, but may introduce cultural and language challenges.

Mary Kay: Okay. This sounds like we have got a good list so far. Are there any more?

Mark: Yes, there are. The next important factor is the type of content we are developing. One important factor is knowledge- or skills-based content. In most cases, knowledge-based content lends itself more appropriately to self-paced distance learning. On the other hand when skills or behavior must be developed and demonstrated, it is often better to utilize classroom-based training.

Another aspect is the amount of material. With large amounts of training content, self-paced learning can typically take half as long to complete as traditional classroom training.

Mary Kay: Learning content is always important. Anything else?

Mark: Yes, there are; and before we get back to our solution, I would like to briefly discuss some of the more important technology-based training solutions in use today. Here is a quick overview. The first is e-learning. Here, the training is delivered over the Internet or company network, and the student completes the material at their own pace.

This is the most common kind of e-learning. Development cost and duration required for e-learning can reduce its effectiveness but many times this is overcome by its consistency and 24/7 availability.

The second is the virtual classroom. The virtual classroom has become one of the most popular and effective new technology-based training solutions. Sometimes called a webinar, a two-way visual and audio connection is established between the instructor and numerous students through the students' desktop workstations. It is quick to develop and deploy.

The third is blended solutions. Blended solutions are optimized combinations of multiple types of training. For instance, if we are developing a sales training class, we might put the prerequisite materials online for student review before the class and cover the key sales skills in the classroom. This approach can be used to reduce overall classroom time and ensure students come to class with a common knowledge base.

And fourth is collaboration. Collaborative learning has become a modern electronic water-cooler. With collaborative learning tools, co-workers can spontaneously discuss business issues and potential solutions.

Mary Kay: Wow. That's a lot to think about. I dare ask the question, "Is there anything else?"

Mark: Just a couple more. There are a number of factors impacting the modern workplace that make technology-based training solutions a more effective solution. First, the organizational view of training and worker demographics has changed. In the old style of thinking, the organization was responsible for the learner's training.

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Learners were passive, and time and productivity were not as critical as they are today. In the new style of thinking, the learners are responsible for the learners' training. Learners are active and time and productivity are everything. These factors make the modern learner more receptive to self-directed technology-based solutions. We've also learned a lot about technology-based training, since it's inception over 40 years ago and taken steps to improve its acceptance and effectiveness.

Here are some of the things we've learned about e-learning. There was a time when everyone thought e-learning had to have the production values of a Hollywood production to be effective. We have found that is not the case. We have found that learner engagement is the most important factor. Production values and interactions can be both simple and effective. Blended learning is a very effective optimization of old and new solutions. This doesn't seem like a hard idea.

Why not use classroom training where it is most effective and e-learning where it is most effective, blending the two approaches for maximum impact?

Mary Kay: Well, you know that makes a lot of sense, and these are really great things to think about. But you know what, you left us hanging with the solution for our new product introduction. And I'm going to hold your feet to the fire on this. So...

Mark: Oh, you know what, Mary Kay, I almost forgot. But you are right. Based on what we know now, I can go back and identify the key factors in developing an effective training solution to support our new product introduction.

First and foremost is the identification of the knowledge and skills the managers and sales representatives need to effectively market the new product. We will assume that this has been identified and developed.

Second is, how do we transfer that to the field in a way that will meet our business objectives? As we heard from the VP of sales, time to deployment is an important factor. The global distribution of the managers and sales representatives is also a factor. A very effective solution here would be to deploy a number of classes utilizing a virtual classroom.

A virtual classroom solution is quick to develop, quick to deploy, addresses a geographically dispersed audience effectively, and is an accepted solution for the audience. For the business factors and constraints we are working with, it is clearly an effective solution.

Mary Kay: Terrific. That's a great solution, Mark. Something many training organizations might not consider.

Mark: I think we all prefer the tried and true solutions we are used to, but in our dynamic business environment, we all need to stretch out a bit. Hopefully this presentation has made us all a little more comfortable with technology-based learning solutions, as well as how and where we can effectively utilize them.

Mary Kay: That's great, Mark. You've given us some very useful information today. It's really been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

Mark: Thank you, Mary Kay. It's always great to talk to you.

Mary Kay: This is Mary Kay Lofurno, Marketing Director at SyberWorks. I wish to also thank you for listening to our interview today with Mark Bower, president of Edge Interactive, a learning and performance consulting firm.

In our next installment of the SyberWorks e-Learning Podcast Series, we will talk with Mark about developing and implementing your company's training program, or to put it another way, making sure we don't put the cart before the horse. See you next month.

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