

# Strategy for the Learner: A Student's Guide to e-Learning Success

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In its many forms e-Learning has become an integral part of the training and professional development services in a growing number of organizations. Whether e-Learning in your organization includes just a limited number of online computer courses, the year-around offering of international training courses delivered via satellite, or even simply after-hours programs that allow you to take online college courses, your participation in e-Learning is likely to be an expanding component of your professional development plan, both now and in the future. As a result, you must be prepared to successfully meet the challenges of learning through these high-tech, and often demanding, training opportunities.

Learning how to use the technology, while important, is not enough for mastering e-Learning. From adapting the critical thinking skills that you use when taking notes during a classroom lecture, to adopting new communication skills when working with virtual teams, you must now update the strategies that have led to your success in the traditional training classroom to ensure your equivalent success in e-Learning courses. By building on the techniques that you used in the past (such as group leadership, time management, and critical reading skills) you can improve both your performance in training courses as well as your ability to apply those skills in the workplace.

In this chapter we will provide guidance for how you can improve your e-Learning study skills through combining the most valued skills of the traditional training classroom with the modern capabilities of e-Learning technologies (see Figure 6-1 on page 64).

Use the tips, tools, and recommendations in this chapter to expand your study skills that take advantage of e-Learning technologies rather than letting the new technologies present obstacles to your learning and professional development.

## Plan for success

Before you venture into the world of e-Learning, it is important to take a few minutes and assess your strengths and weaknesses in this new learning environment. For areas where you identify weaknesses, you should be prepared to do some work so that they do not become a barrier to your learning experience. Given your past experiences, planning for success may be something that you are not accustomed to doing in a face-to-face training environment, yet it is nevertheless essential if you are new to online learning. When planning for

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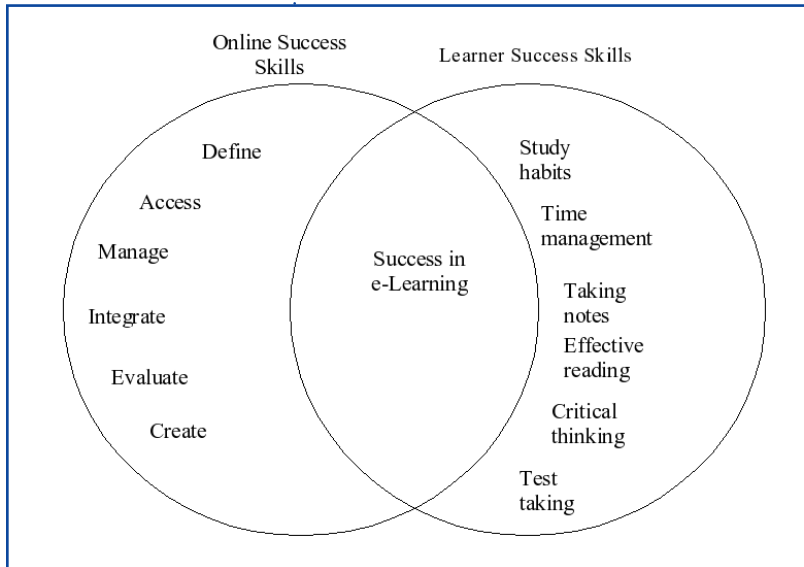
In Chapter 6 you will find information about:

- **Plan for success**
- **Update your study skills**
- **Tips for success**

e-Learning success, consider the following:

- *Technology access and protection* – Verify that you have adequate access to a computer and Internet connection. Make sure that your computer is new enough to handle any software you

may have to use in the course. Also, confirm that your Internet connection is fast enough for the learning materials presented. For example, if your e-Learning materials contain video, you should have a high-speed Internet connection. If you have a dial-up Internet connection, it will be challenging to get access to the necessary materials. Related to access is technology protection. Do you have up-to-date antivirus and spyware protection? If not, you need to get the appropriate software before you start your e-Learning experience. The only way to make sure you are ready for these types of challenges is to ask in advance. Therefore, before your e-Learning course begins, find out what types of software and materials the instructor expects you to use. This preparation will help you get off to a good start.



**Figure 6-1**  
**E-Learning success**  
(Watkins & Corry, 2004-2007)

- *Technology skills* – Making sure you have the technology skills required to succeed in an e-Learning class is vital. Start off by determining whether you have the basic skills required to operate a computer and navigate the Internet, since most e-Learning courses will use these tools to some extent. If you do, then assess your ability to download and upload software and files to the Internet. How about your ability to send and receive e-mail messages? Can you send them with an attachment and read an attachment sent to you? While some of these skills may seem simplistic, each one is important to master in order to be successful in an e-Learning environment.
- *Triangulation* – Do you have the necessary skills to evaluate the reliability, quality, and usefulness of online resources? One of the more complex skills is the identification and evaluation of quality and useful online materials. Just remember the rule of “triangulation.” If you find something on the Internet three times from different sources and it appears to say the same thing, then it is probably fairly accurate. This is not a hard and fast rule, but it can be helpful. When in doubt you can always contact the author or owner of the Website to verify the accuracy of their information.
- *Communicating online* – Effective communication is key when working in the same room with someone. However, communication becomes even more important in an online environment where non-verbal communications are limited. Communication can include e-mail, chat, or bulletin board exchanges. Can you express yourself clearly in these forms of communication? Could you work collaboratively with others using these tools? Have you ever tried using a chat room with more than two people? Can you carry on an in-depth conversation with multiple people in an e-Learning environment? Related to online communication is the topic of time management. Can you schedule enough time to provide timely and thorough responses? Do you really have time to successfully participate in and complete this online course? It is important to remember that online learning is like many things in life, you get out of it what you put into it. If you cannot communicate effectively online or manage your time wisely, your learning experience and the learning experience of others with whom you interact will diminish.
- *Motivation* – Learning outside a four-walled classroom is a new experience to many people. A

key to success is staying motivated. In many online learning experiences, you will never see your instructor or other learners. If you are in an asynchronous learning environment, you may also never have set times to meet with each other. With that in mind, do you have the self-motivation to participate in a course when you seem to be all by yourself? Can you complete work when the instructor is not there all the time? How about managing online distractions like e-mails, Websites, blogs, and such? How about offline distractions, such as the television, children, friends, and so forth? It is important to develop a plan for handling these distractions before you start your online learning experience. Set rules or guidelines for yourself. Develop a schedule of when you will be online and for how long. Also, ask your instructor for feedback on how you are doing. Ask questions such as, “Are my online postings thorough enough?” or “Am I providing regular enough communications?” Staying motivated and applying effective online time management skills are essential to e-Learning success.

## Update your study skills

Now that you have identified many of the skills required for success in an e-Learning environment, it is important to identify what skills you already have and which ones will require some additional work. Initially, you will want to focus on the important skills that are likely to present the largest obstacles to your success. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Your study skills from high school and college likely won't be enough. Most of you probably didn't take e-Learning courses in high school and college, and therefore you can't depend on the skills that helped you to be successful in a classroom as a student to lead to your success online. For example, you will need to update the note-taking techniques you used for college lectures for the new streaming audio and video presentations. Also, if you are into the high-tech gadgets, you may try to do your e-Learning over your iPhone or a similar device. Do you think you can take notes while watching or listening to a Podcast of your class lecture on your iPhone? How will the technology change the way you review material and prepare for assessments? You can do it, you can learn from content delivered by a variety of technologies, but you will have to modify your study skills or acquire new ones in order to ensure your success.
- The first way to be prepared is to take advantage of the technologies that you already use; apply the capabilities of software programs to modernize your study skills. An example is the technologies available in word processing programs. Without a doubt, at some point in your e-Learning experience you will work in a team on a written report of some kind. Since your team members could physically be spread out all over the world, keeping all the versions of your document in “sync” is essential. Luckily, word processing programs now allow you to track the changes made and who made them. Practice using this function and confirm that you understand how to track changes; this will give you an advantage when working collaboratively in an e-Learning team.
- Another way to update your skills is to practice taking notes while reading text, listening to audio, or watching video online. This is not as easy as it looks. When reading online, always have a paper notepad nearby (for example, on your desk) or toggle between your browser and an open word processing page (using CTRL+Tab on a PC, or Command+Tab on a Mac). Also, learn the shortcut keys used to copy and paste written materials directly into your word processing document (using CTRL+C to copy and CTRL+V to paste). When listening to audio or watching video, take advantage of the pause, rewind, and fast-forward buttons to improve the quality of your notes; they can make note taking much simpler. Practicing is essential since taking notes while watching online lectures is a typical study skill required for success in e-Learning courses.
- You can be an active learner by participating in optional activities that are available to you. For

example, don't be shy — try to participate in all discussion board and chat conversations. Not only does this give you additional exposure to the learning activities, but it gives you a chance to fine tune your e-Learning skills. As an added benefit, active participation in these areas helps to build an online community. Belonging to this community can improve your performance in the course, and can help alleviate any feelings of isolation that you may have when you are not in a traditional training classroom with your peers. This is an important item because feelings of isolation are high on the list of complaints by e-Learners.

- With this in mind, another way to be an active e-Learner is to develop online study groups. These groups can function synchronously, asynchronously, or both. Not only do these groups help you build a learning community, but they can develop into both professional and personal networks. Sometimes, the networks that you develop can form a powerful bond that will last for years and be a help to you in many ways.
- Choose the right type of e-Learning course that matches your skill set. Once you have identified your e-Learning strengths and weaknesses, you then should consider what type of e-Learning course will be best for you. Should it be a text-only course, or a two-way video course or something altogether different? Choose your course (or courses) carefully. For example, if you are not confident in your critical reading skills, an e-Learning course that is primarily text-based may not be a good option for you at this time. Remember, e-Learning is not for everyone and not every e-Learning delivery method is for everyone either.

### Tips for success

Once you have assessed your e-Learning strengths and weaknesses, made a plan for success, and updated your study skills, you are well on your way to being a successful e-Learner. To take you even further down the road to success, here are some tips that will help on your e-Learning journey:

- *Managing your files* – Each e-Learning class can generate a lot of files. For that reason, file management is crucial. One important tip is to create folders and sub-folders for each e-Learning course. The sub-folders can correspond to activities, assignments, lectures, or other components of the course. Along with the files themselves, develop a naming structure that you can apply consistently. A naming strategy will help you find files much quicker, and help you keep track of documents that may go through many versions before submitting them to the instructor. It doesn't matter what the strategy is, it just has to make sense to you and give you the opportunity to expand it as you get more files and folders.
- *Downloading software* – Downloading software is important, though some software can be harmful to your computer if you are not careful. The first thing to keep in mind is to know what you are downloading and make sure it comes from a reputable source. Also, make sure you have up-to-date anti-virus software on your computer to identify if what you are downloading is carrying a virus. There are many different types of software you will download. Some of the more common types include updates, plug-ins, trials, shareware, and freeware. More specifically, your e-Learning course may require you to download Adobe® Reader®, and “players” for multimedia such as Apple® QuickTime®, RealNetworks® RealPlayer®, Adobe Shockwave®, Adobe Flash® Player, or other software necessary to access course content. It is important that you understand what each of these software programs can do for you, and that you download them from the company that makes them. Therefore, spend some time on the Internet and go to the Web sites for each of these types of software and learn about them. Fortunately, most will offer some level of free or trial software that you can test out without purchasing the entire package. The knowledge you gain from practicing this before the course begins will help you succeed in

e-Learning and give you an advantage over others who don't quite understand these software applications and programs.

- *Using e-mail effectively* – Almost everyone knows how to use the basics of e-mail. However, here are some tips that will help you be more effective in your e-mail use. First, as with software downloads, be careful with e-mail attachments. Don't open an attachment unless you know who sent it and you feel it is safe. Also, make sure your anti-virus software is set to scan attachments. Second, pick one e-mail account to use for your e-Learning experience and stick with it. If you are constantly sending messages from multiple e-mail accounts, your instructor and classmates may not know which e-mail account to use to communicate with you. Third, decide whether you want to have Post Office Protocol (POP) e-mail access or Internet Message Access Protocol (IMAP). A consideration here is whether you will always use the same computer when you check your e-mail, or whether you will be using different computers. Usually, if you have a POP e-mail account, your e-mail resides on the computer you check it on (unless you change the setting). Therefore, if you check e-mail on another computer (say, while on vacation), the e-mail messages may stay on the other computer, and when you get to your home computer those messages will not be available to you. However, if you have an IMAP account, the messages reside on an e-mail server, not your local computer, and will be available to you wherever you check your e-mail.
- *Project organization for online groups* – More than likely you will participate in an online group project in at least one of your e-Learning experiences. To be successful, begin by reviewing the instructor's (or the school's) rules, guidelines, and policies for online group work. These may be different than the ones for face-to-face group work. They may present new challenges (as well as opportunities to take advantage of technology). Once you have the opportunity, introduce yourself to your team. In an e-Learning environment, you should share things such as the times when you are available, how you would like to communicate (e-mail, bulletin boards, instant messaging, chat, and so on), what roles you would like to have in the team (leader, note-taker, or something else), and your online contact information. The next step is to identify and assign group roles and tasks; use your project management skills to facilitate a virtual team and you will typically be quite successful. A good step is also to have each group member commit to being prepared for each meeting.
- *Project execution for online groups* – Once you have organized your online e-Learning group, it is time to perform your task(s). As you are doing this it is a good idea to maintain the role you have accepted and follow-up on tasks you commit to complete. You should also demonstrate and encourage good online working relationships. This is even more important in an e-Learning environment where time and distance separate people. For example, review your e-mail messages before sending them to ensure that other group members won't misinterpret your message or be offended. A great tip is to share online calendars so you know when you can get in touch with someone else in your group. Problems with the task always occur and it is important to know how and when you can assemble the group online. Keeping a backup copy of all your files is crucial. You don't want to lose all your hard work when your partner's flash drive decides to act up the day before the project is due. As a final point, be patient with your group members, don't over-analyze online comments, and remember to use the communication strategies agreed upon.

## Summary

E-Learning is a whole new world for most of us. It is important therefore to think of it as an innovative way of learning with new, and sometimes different, learning skills. If you approach e-Learning with a systematic mindset you can be successful. The key is to begin by identifying the necessary

skills, and then to assess your current skill set. Second, know your weaknesses and work on updating those skills. Lastly, to achieve ultimate success, study and adopt the tips from experienced e-Learners and those who have been down the e-Learning journey several times. In the end, remember that not all e-Learning courses are for everyone, so choose your online experiences carefully; match your skills with the course technologies. Success in e-Learning can add value to your professional development and, best of all, it can offer you a flexible and enjoyable learning experience.

## References

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