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Now, E-Bridge the divide

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There is a quote attributed to Edward Deming, an American business advisor and author of the early last century that goes, "Learning is not compulsory... neither is survival". In the knowledge economy of the 21st century, this statement should act as a gust of icy wind in the face of anyone who refuses to acknowledge the importance of learning constantly to stay ahead.

The irony, however, is the complete dearth of time for a busy knowledge worker who is inclined to continuously upgrade herself. On the other side of the table is an organisation that spends millions of dollars on training and loses precious productive hours by getting its employees into the classroom. Both entities, the knowledge worker and the training-driven organisation are waking up to the power of e-learning, which saves them time and money respectively.

As per one estimate from IDC, the e-learning industry is about \$10bn. According to a recent feature in The Economic Times, the domestic e-learning market in India is touching Rs 90 crore.

A few years back, John Chambers, CEO, Cisco Systems remarked, "The next big killer application on the internet is going to be education. Education over the internet is going to be so big it is going to make e-mail usage look like a rounding error." Currently, this may sound like an overstatement, but signals from recruitment agencies clearly indicate that the e-learning industry is buzzing with action and needs lots and lots of people.

So, whether it is IBM or Microsoft, specialist US and Indian e-learning outfits like Lionbridge, Tata Interactive or NIIT's Knowledge Solutions business unit, all seem to be gaining business as large banks and other training-focused institutions and universities worldwide invest in converting their traditional classrooms into web-based classrooms for induction, refresher and academic courses. Very simply put, e-learning companies are experts at transforming the paper-based learning content of their clients into highly interactive, meaningful and learner-friendly web-based courses.

E-learning enables training-intensive organisations in industries like retail banking, financial services, large airlines and military establishments as well as universities to empower their employees and students in taking product- and processes-related training as well as academic courses in a 24x7 mode.

This is something more aptly defined as anytime, anyplace learning. It also allows profit-driven organisations to avoid having employees stay away from their desks and instead spend days at a time in the classroom. The result is a better bottom line through savings on the recurring costs related to travel, classroom delivery and productive time lost away from work.

Of course, all this does not include the effort that goes into planning and organising such periodic sessions. Last but not the least, e-learning helps the training and HR department to keep track of a learner's progress by managing her learning history through dedicated learning management software, specifically deployed for the purposes of delivery and record.

Going by a benchmark, any organisation that has an excess of 10,000 employees and a training department that is busy all

year round in either induction or refresher training, seriously needs to look at making investments in e-learning systems and content.

Career Options

For obvious reasons, India is already becoming a hotspot for specialist e-learning companies to set up base as it offers a labour cost advantage in e-learning design and production. Let's understand what an e-learning company does and what kind of roles it offers employees?

It may not be wrong to say that amongst all outsourcing businesses and next only to software development, e-learning offers perhaps the most creative opportunity to a skilled professional. The various positions that are offered are those of instructional designers, content creators or course writers, reviewers, graphic designers and graphic visualisers, programmers and LMS integrators and subject matter experts. Each of these positions requires people with a specific skill-set, background and qualifications.

Instructional Designers: Top US universities as also our own Symbiosis in Pune offer courses in instructional designing (ID) skills. ID is one of the fastest growing fields in the e-learning industry worldwide. As an ID professional, you are the most important team member of an e-learning project.

You will be responsible for giving shape to raw content using a systematic process that results in learning modules that are effective in meeting learning objectives. You will be required to understand learning theories, learning styles and how effective learning needs to ride technology. You need to be adept at mapping an organisation's learning needs and fitting it to personal (employee's) learning needs in your learning delivery plans. You will ideally have a good academic background and be a quick learner.

Industry seniors will summarise your job as "your ability to understand a client's needs, objectives of learning, and audience profile; leverage capabilities of your programming and graphics team; and skilfully manage projects using appropriate tools."

Graphic Designers: You will be a qualified and skilled person who knows the application of visual design rules for transforming the information framework into functional user interface pages. If you are a good graphic designer and also have an understanding of authoring tools, you can command a fantastic salary as you go along.

You will be required to have skills of embedding audio, video and graphics to the web-based courses in addition to having an ability to create interactive simulations that give complete insight to the learner on the topic of learning. You need to have knowledge of tools such as Photoshop, Flash, Captivate and Flashscript.

Programmers: E-learning is all about human-machine interactivity at its worst and human-machine-human interactivity at its best. As a good programmer, you are responsible for achieving the latter by adding various kinds of features like quizzes, certification tests, games, virtual coaching plus instructor and peer feedback into the courses.

You are also responsible for making sure that the web-based courses are compliant with international standards of reusability among different Learning Management Systems. You need to have good skills in HTML ASP, databases, PHP, DHTML, XML and Flashscript.

Visualisers: As a visualiser, you need to understand design principles, the concept of colour, principles of mass communication, and of course technology as a carrier of learning. A degree in fine arts helps. You work along with the ID team and the subject matter expert to arrive at an effective and functional graphical user interface (GUI) and all the other interactive elements required for a course. Normally, a graphic designer is expected to be a good visualiser.

Content Writers: There are set techniques in writing content especially for the internet. If you have a flair for writing and assimilating written material, you are a good candidate for this position. Assimilation essentially involves using the style sheets or guidelines given by the subject matter expert. A large number of freelance content writing positions get advertised in the UK and the US.

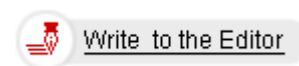
QA Experts: Quality assurance could be a lateral movement or an independent opening. Ultimately all content and code needs to be reviewed before it gets delivered to the client and finally reaches the target audience. You may be assigned to a QA team with reviewers who have a good understanding of the English language (content editors), principles of instructional design and software navigation. You may be one of them.

Project Managers: This is a man-management function and a position of growth for all the above professionals. You need to be a good planner and resource manager who can use tools like MS Project for effective results. You need to understand motivational issues, as also the concepts of risk management. Finally, you will be accountable for successful delivery and closure of a project. Patience and the ability to quickly solve problems are some of the personality traits of a good project manager.

Subject Matter Experts: Almost all courses require the help of a subject matter expert (SME) in putting the relevant content in place. A SME is normally a person who is an insider as far as business is concerned. For example, the functional head of a loan processing department in the retail banking industry can be termed as a process SME as she knows the process areas her trainees need to learn before they hit the telephone at their desk and start answering customer calls. Most projects get a SME assigned from the client's side.

Salary Norms: Such is the short-fall of skilled and experienced personnel in the e-learning industry, especially in India, that a professional with one or two years of experience can easily command a per annum salary of Rs four lakh plus. All in all, this is an exciting time to join the e-learning industry.

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