



e-Learning for GIS: benefit from the 'e'!

Debbie Soloman promotes the advantages of technology-enabled learning in consolidating proficiency in GIS

There are many definitions of e-Learning. One definition – “e-Learning is the use of technology to enable people to learn anywhere and anytime” – captures the ‘e’ part of e-Learning aptly. It’s learning facilitated by the use of technology. In this era of increasing usability of the internet and an increasingly IT literate society it makes sense to make the most of these resources. Being able to watch a video presentation that’s interesting and informative, when it suits you, is an advantage.

The focus of ‘e-Learning’ though is the learning part. The material has to be accurate, well written, engaging and alive to draw each person in so that they absorb knowledge effectively that can then be applied in the workplace. When well constructed and presented, e-Learning offers distinct advantages: flexibility, repeatability, thoroughness, self-paced nature and convenience ... all of which makes it cost-effective.

Flexible

The flexibility of an e-Learning approach is two-fold. The first is its on-demand nature, whether at work or at home. The second is that each person can choose the training material and path that suits them. While a Beginners level may suit one person, a Mastering course may be more suited to another.

Repeatable

In terms of consolidating training, this aspect of e-Learning is invaluable. This is a clear realisation by anyone to have experience both traditional class based face-to-face training and e-Learning. A face-to-face course is delivered only once and then the delegate is largely on their own; even if armed with a full course manual and data to re-do the exercises. What they do not have is the ability for the trainer to repeat all the information that has been covered.

An e-Learning approach solves this as the training can be repeated, in its entirety or just

a section of particular interest. With recorded presentations, it means that each person has repeated access to the trainer as often as they want.

Quality e-Learning presentations should be socially scripted and recorded, not be rehashed webinars or ad-libbed seminars. To ensure they are engaging, e-Learning presentations should also be enhanced with visual graphics and video of the software being used (at GIS247 we call them InVision presentations), thus resulting in the trainee not relying on the trainer having a ‘good day’ to remember to mention everything. With recorded presentations all the key technical aspects of using the GIS software and the useful tips and tricks that seasoned users adopt can and should be included. The recorded nature means that the watcher gets the best from the trainer every time. Users of e-Learning report that watching presentations two or three times is of great value.

Any decent GIS software trainer, who is experienced at providing face-to-face courses,

will know that there are two key problems of delivery with this approach; attention span and a 'head down' attitude. These are resolved with e-Learning delivery.

Attention spans vary greatly between individuals. Who has not found their mind wandering to something else during a presentation from time to time? Particularly at 2pm after a nice lunch! Recorded presentations can be paused and 'rewound' to a particular section or repeated in their entirety. Pause and rewind also caters to interruptions, e.g., a phone call, so nothing is missed. It also has advantages when a person needs to visit the toilet or wants a break to get a hot drink!

The inclusion of hands-on exercises for GIS training is a vital component. Without such opportunities, it would be like trying to learn to play the piano without actually having a go!

On a face-to-face group training course there is invariably the distraction of 'not being the last to finish'. With this head-down mentality, delegates may just rush through an exercise and feel they have no time to think about what they are trying to achieve, or even why they are undertaking a technical solution in a particular way.

With e-Learning this self-imposed pressure is totally removed. Individuals download the data and exercises and work at their own pace. They then tend to think more about what they are doing and why. This repeatability of exercises without a time constraint also links back to the repeatability of the presentations. Users often comment that being able to re-watch the training presentations after doing a specific exercise crystallizes things for them.

Clearly, this repeatability underpins the consolidation of learning.

Thorough

It can be argued that e-Learning presentations are much more thorough for, with no time constraint, they can be more extensive and detailed. Important technical functions can be fully addressed and greatly enhanced with engaging visual aids, graphics and video of the software in action.

Again, with no time constraint, hands-on exercises can cover a range of technical steps to a more extensive degree. Obviously, there is a limit, but when designed as discreet sections, people can save their progress and return as and when time permits.

Self-Paced

The benefits of e-Learning providing a self-paced approach are, again, two-fold. The first is that users assimilate knowledge and develop understanding at their own pace. As such, learning becomes a positive and enjoyable experience and the knowledge gained is more likely to be applied. The second is a specific benefit to users of the GIS247 e-Learning service: with follow-on training available for a full 12 months at no extra cost, those who wish to develop their skills further have the opportunity to



access to as much material as they want.

Many e-Learning users have gone from GIS novice to highly competent software users in about six months, thanks to the opportunity to progress through a range of training courses. Such individuals are now strategically important to their organisations. Without access to e-Learning, it is highly unlikely they would have progressed so far and so quickly.

Convenient

It's obvious that access to training as and when required is incredibly convenient, both in terms of time and location. It also obviates the need to wait for a conventional group course to be timetabled and co-ordinated. Those who want and need training can simply get on with it.

Cost-effective

As e-Learning is technology enabled it also offers considerable cost savings. Often the cost is considerably less than that of attending a face-to-face course and makes the investment in follow-on training more attractive. Its affordability also lends itself to individuals who may not otherwise have had training opportunities. It avoids the potential pitfall of an organisation having insufficient proficient GIS users due to a lack of investment in training.

After reading this article, it should be clear that the 'e' part of e-Learning as the delivery mechanism in no way detracts from a persons' ability to learn. In fact, its distinct and invaluable benefits enhance the learning experience and – importantly – the ability to consolidate knowledge gained through the process of GIS training.

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