e-Learning - What is it all about?

Alan Nelson gives an insight into e-Learning by asking what is e-learning, how does it work and what benefits does it bring?

What is e-Learning?
Professional bodies in all sectors are increasingly turning to e-learning to extend the reach of the educational services they provide for their members. The term e-learning refers to a wide variety of different experiences, all of them broadly involving the use of technology to help people to learn remotely. It has been around for longer than we realise. As soon as computers were widely available, an industry grew up to provide what was generally known as CBT - “computer based training”. In time big floppy disks gave way to little ones, and then to CDs and DVDs. Nowadays almost all e-learning is accessed over the internet, which is why we increasingly hear the term “online learning” rather than “e-learning”.

I am an educational publisher by background and what really excited me when I first got involved was the way the web broke down the distinction between information and learning. I had always published textbooks. I didn’t publish encyclopaedias. That seemed like a completely different skillset. By contrast, the web provided a place where professionals could go and find stuff out. Whether that made it a reference resource or an educational one seemed like an irrelevant question.

The blend of information and learning enabled us to create learning resources that worked for diverse groups of people.

That’s a mouthful though, so we just say “e-learning” and hope we are talking about the same thing!

What is e-Learning Used For?
Most professional bodies are now using e-learning to extend the reach of a range of educational services they provide for their members. These can be broadly categorised as follows:

1. Qualifications
There are strong reasons for moving paper based distance learning materials online. Removing the cost of printing and storing study manuals and distributing them to newly enrolled students is attractive in its own right, but there are also positive reasons for going online. Study materials can be presented more interactivity and the student can be put in touch with other students and with their tutor, reducing the sense of isolation that often leads to unacceptably high drop-out rates. Good online provision can:

Alan Nelson is MD at Nelson Croom Ltd, a leading developer and publisher of online professional development courses.
• increase enrolments as students are attracted to a modern flexible approach.
• reduce drop-out rates as students stay in closer touch and receive better support.
• improve exam success rates through the provision of more interactive materials and better exam preparation and practice resources.

2. Continuing Professional Education (or Development)
Qualified members of a wide variety of professional bodies have to comply with CPE regimes. For CPA Ireland members, in common with other accounting bodies around the world, this is a mandatory requirement. Most professional bodies offer a range of activities and events to help members to stay up to date and complete their hours and online courses play an increasingly significant part in this. Indeed for some groups, online provision can be particularly attractive:

• Part time workers:
  More professionals are opting to work part time, balancing their professional life with other interests and commitments. Some women, for example, return to work part time after having children, balancing work commitments with family. For these people attending face to face events may be a non-starter, but signing up for an online course that you can complete after the children have gone to bed is ideal.

• Practice:
  For accountants working in practice it can be particularly difficult to commit to attending an event at some date in the future. You risk parting with a significant amount of money, only to have a client call and ask you to attend a meeting on site on the day of the event.

• Young people:
  It is a generalisation but it tends to be broadly true that young, more recently qualified accountants, tend to be more comfortable learning online than their older, more distinguished colleagues. Indeed they have probably experienced online learning as part of their formal education, at school, at college or in their professional studies, whereas for older members it is more unknown.

All of this is borne out by real experience. We work with a wide variety of professional bodies who offer our online courses to their members. Each of the groups listed above are disproportionately represented among purchasers.

3. Compliance
There are some topics that professional bodies require members to demonstrate they have understood. e-learning can be effective in this regard because it can combine learning and assessment and can provide an audit trail – evidence that people have attended and achieved the requisite knowledge. An example might be the fact that all accountants in practice need to understand the money laundering regulations and their responsibilities with regard to their clients. Where a situation arises that requires every member to demonstrate compliance, it can be extremely cost effective for the professional body to create something for all to use. That doesn’t of course mean that it has to be provided free as a member service, but with large numbers needing to comply, the argument for good online resources becomes compelling.

So What Does Good Look Like?
There is a line of thought put about by my colleagues in the e-learning world that I think it is worth dispelling, or at least putting into context. It goes like this:
1. Education is broadly a good thing.
2. E-learning overcomes barriers to access and make education available to more people.
3. E-learning is a good thing.

To my mind this overlooks a more important fact: lots of it is rubbish. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think it is inherently more rubbish than any other kind of professional development – there are lots of face to face events that are pretty awful too – but I am very wary of any attempt to shroud e-learning in a cloak of goodness. When it is good it is a really useful part of the mix; when it is ill-conceived – often just a poor substitute for a face to face event – it can be dreadful.

What is good and what is bad? A useful guide is to remember that it is called e-learning, not e-teaching. It is your professional development and you know what you need to find out and learn and how you’d like to do so.

So look for resources that put you in charge, learning at your own pace. Whenever you are leaning forward and taking part, completing activities or communicating with your peers, that’s good. Whenever you are leaning back, passively listening or watching, that’s bad.

What Does the Future Hold?
Two things do seem clear:
1. E-learning is here to stay. It will play an increasingly important part in the educational services provided to members by professional bodies.
2. Collaborative technologies – or Web 2.0 as they are commonly known – will become an increasingly important part of professional development.