Cameron Bentley explains how eLearning is able to provide an invaluable tool for educating for the security industry

eLEARNING: CHANGING LANDSCAPE

On the face of it, eLearning might not seem like the most effective way of communicating potentially life-saving information – better suited to avoiding trip hazards in the office than kidnappers in Aleppo. However, it's becoming increasingly popularised as a low-cost, high-efficiency training method rolled out across both the military and the private sectors.

As with many technologies, the military has blazed a path with eLearning. In Britain, this began with the Defence Learning Portal, which was estimated to have 300,000 users, and is now replaced by the Defence Learning Environment, providing eLearning courses for MOD staff in the UK and on-deployment across the world. Similar systems are in use with militaries in many countries – such as CAMPUS in Australia and Skillport in the US – and have become a ubiquitous part of the modern military training package.

This has also been carried over to many private companies that provide security training for their clients or staff. Examples of this vary from Pilgrims Group training 300 security guards in Nigeria up to Lockheed Martin providing travel security training for its 98,000 geographically dispersed staff. Indeed, the preparatory nature of the defence industry provides a fertile ground for eLearning, which has proven itself even in difficult topics like defensive driving and hostage survival as well as less-critical subjects such as travel bugs.

At its core, eLearning offers a more flexible, adaptable, and cost-effective training environment for learners. This is particularly valuable for companies in the defence and advisory sector, which are often relied upon for this very same flexibility and speed.

Increasingly, learners preparing for hostile environments need to be trained how to think and how to respond. This is not only true of soldiers operating in complex war zones, but also for civilians that need to understand how to navigate various dangerous situations abroad. eLearning is uniquely suited for this kind of instruction as it allows for multiple scenarios to be shown through film or animation, and the user's responses to be individually tested by adaptive questions. Learners can, therefore, be directly engaged by the content and have their responses tested for every scenario – something that would not otherwise be possible in an instructor setting.

This reactive testing is particularly helped by the realism found in eLearning, which often far outstrips that of a classroom environment. If you've ever been subject to 'death by PowerPoint', you're likely to agree that there are some fundamental problems with engagement, and efficiency, in classroom training. eLearning, on the other hand, makes use of film, animation, music and sound effects to create a more compelling learning environment that drives home important information and skills. An example of this is the Lockheed Martin SECOND NATURE Security Skills for the Traveler course, which trains staff in preparing for an international trip, techniques to anticipate and reduce personal safety risks, defensive driving, hostage survival and hostile environment awareness training (HEAT). Filmed at the simulated Afghan village in the Stanford Training Area, the HEAT course allows learners to visualise dangerous situations, and to interact with them in a far more direct manner than

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a classroom environment can provide. This, therefore, provides a cost-effective middle ground between scenario-led training, as practiced by militaries around the world, and the dry PowerPoint presentations that have traditionally dominated corporate training.

With modern courses that are web-based and compatible with personal laptops and even smartphones, staff are able to access training on-demand, in-country and when it is most valuable. This is of particular value to staff being sent overseas, who can access information such as cultural advice, basic local phrases, and country-specific safety practices all while on the plane. This information can be revisited repeatedly, allowing them to refresh their knowledge as necessary, and to gain further insights once they are in-country and actually dealing with the situations that they are preparing for. This on-demand delivery is particularly appealing to the security sector where flexibility and speed are vital to keeping staff and clients safe.

Furthermore, since information can be pushed to all users simultaneously, training can be updated on the fly in response to developing threats – something that is particularly useful for the security sector where risks are constantly evolving. The business consultancy Towards Maturity discovered that eLearning enabled a 24 percent faster rollout of new products and processes, a considerable saving when compared with traditional training. This means that mission-critical information can be rolled out as quickly as possible, ensuring the safety of staff who are constantly up to date.

In addition to providing considerable training benefits, eLearning can also make a considerable business case, leveraging technology to achieve improvements in efficiency and decreases in cost.

A major factor is the innate scalability of eLearning courses, meaning that adding further learners doesn't incur an additional cost. Although eLearning courses are likely to have high initial costs, over their lifetime they can actually realise considerable savings from not needing to repeatedly hire venues and instructors; transport, house and feed learners; nor take them off of more productive work. Similarly, the costs for updating learners' knowledge are drastically reduced, since it simply entails updating the existing course rather than completely retaining all staff.

As such, many organisations have begun to realise serious savings through eLearning. Lockheed Martin found that it was able to train its global workforce for a fraction of the cost of face-to-face training while the US army experienced $330 million in cost avoidance during a single fiscal year.

This is particularly valuable for courses that experience scope creep, and for the kind of large-scale mobilisation that we are beginning to see in response to terrorist threats. One example of this is Project Griffin, intended to train 100,000 military and emergency services staff how to respond to an attack, which would benefit from being able to deliver low-cost training that can change as fast as the security threat does, keeping staff up to date with the latest risks and responses.

Similarly, eLearning allows for far greater organisational efficiency. In addition to saving time

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in actual training – Towards Maturity suggests that eLearning can reduce delivery time by 22 percent – eLearning platforms also allow for a number of other complicating factors to be avoided. In particular, the associated organisation for many courses – requiring timetabling, travel, and compliance paperwork – can be avoided, saving not only the learner time, but also the entire management.

Indeed, arguably the most important aspect for the security and advisory sector is compliance. Compared with traditional courses where learner engagement is rarely measured and feedback is rarely provided, eLearning courses offer far more adaptive functionality. With most courses accessed through a Learning Management System (LMS), analytics can be accessed for all users, creating a digital paper trail that ensures completion and compliance. As such, compared with traditional courses, eLearning is far easier to manage while ensuring total compliance, protecting the company from legal risk.

Admittedly, as a technology still in its relative infancy, eLearning still has a number of teething problems to overcome. One of the greatest of these is its upfront cost. Compared with traditional training, which can be spread across several years, eLearning has two substantial fixed costs: developing the course and providing access to it. In particular, organisations such as the military that do not currently have the hardware capacity for supplying eLearning can face considerable expenses. However, this is less problematic in an office setting, and is largely being overcome through adaptive eLearning courses that are useable on personal electronic devices such as smartphones and tablets.

Another key area of concern is cultural friction. Certainly, a number of studies focused on eLearning in the military have pointed to the new, unusual, and occasionally unpopular, nature of the training, particularly for non-'digital natives' – older users who are less comfortable with technology. However, as with any new technology, this is an expected part

of the adoption process. In fact, in the longer term, this is likely to become a benefit as younger users are already used to consuming huge amounts of digital information via their devices, meaning that eLearning will comfortably slot in alongside Youtube tutorials and web articles allowing for relatively seamless adoption among new entrants to the workforce.

This will also become increasingly noticeable as eLearning becomes more embedded in our working lives. The traditionally accepted approach of training taking place in addition to work, whether in the form of offsite training days or seminars away from the desk, means that continuous learning has not yet been introduced to many companies. As a result, the main benefit of eLearning – that it can be carried out whenever necessary and repeated at will – has yet to be realised. In the future, there is likely to be a shift towards embedded learning, enabled by increased cultural adoption coupled with ease of access via new technology.

eLearning is likely to continue to evolve as rapidly as the technology that supports it. Developments such as virtual and augmented reality offer substantial promise in an eLearning context, helping to improve the aspects that it already excels in: immersion and adaptability.

Certainly, with technologies such as augmented and virtual reality on the rise, we should expect to see eLearning applied to increasingly innovative subject matter. In particular, the most exciting aspect of eLearning will be to re-create hostile environments to produce even more immersive, realistic training. While current solutions entail building replica Afghan villages in Caterick and hiring amputees to simulate casualties, advances will allow for highly realistic simulations to be carried out in a responsive environment that will adapt to the unique geographies and scenarios of future conflicts.

Coupled with increasing support for eLearning, both from within businesses and among learners, it is likely that as technology improves more and more subjects will be covered by training, leading to classroom training becoming the exception rather than the norm.

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