

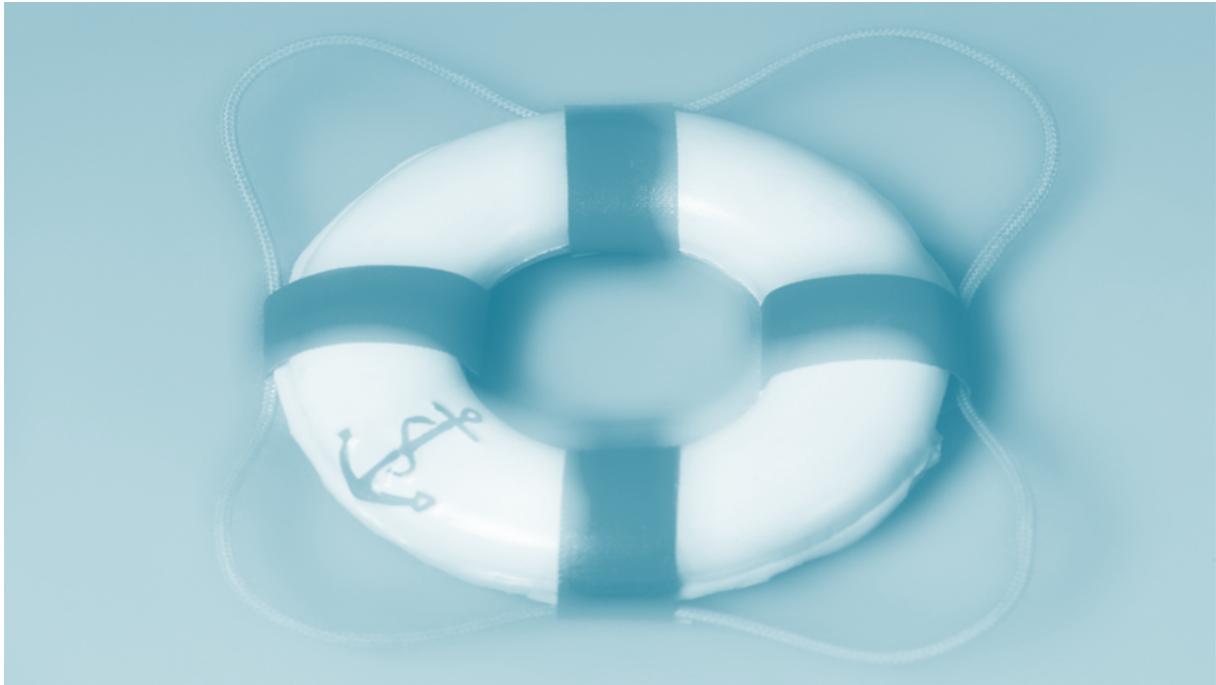


# Why do e-learning projects fail?

## 33 causes of failure (& what to do about them!)

A Towards Maturity Briefing Paper

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## Introduction

Far too many work place learning technology projects fail, far too frequently. Everyone has an unofficial war story of 'where it all went wrong' but very few are willing to talk about it. When national projects fail, we may get to hear about it, but mostly the failures get swept under the carpet. Few lessons are learned as a result.

New technologies come and go and still the full benefit of e-Learning is not adequately exploited by the majority. In the CIPD 2009 learning and development survey, 74% of participants were using e-learning, 42% were using it more than the year before yet only 7% 'deem e-learning to be one of the most effective learning and development practice'.

For some time, Towards Maturity has been looking at why we are not achieving the full potential of e-learning in the workplace. We have been researching the behaviour organisations that are successful in their use of learning technologies to help others deliver similar results. However we feel that as much can be learned from failure as success.

This short paper is our attempt to bring those failures out in the open, to identify some warning zones and highlight how to avoid them using some examples from our bank of independent case studies.<sup>4</sup>

### Finding the causes of failure

In preparing this paper we looked at two sources of information:

1. Information was collected online from a number of prominent e-learning experts and practitioners who were asked the following questions:
  - Please tell us about the top things that prevent organisations gaining benefit from their investment in learning technologies.
  - Please provide a brief description of the most negative workplace e-learning implementation that you have been involved with. What was the organisation trying to achieve? What did it achieve? What went wrong?
2. We also completed some desk research to look at causes of failure within large scale implementations. The major study that we drew on was the [Megatrends in E-Learning Provision](#) a pan-European study completed as part of the Leonardo da Vinci research programme.

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<sup>4</sup> All case studies referenced in this paper can be found in appendix 1 or can be accessed by clicking on the hyperlink in the main text.



## 33 causes of failure

From our investigations, we identified 33 reasons why e-learning initiatives fail in the both public and private sectors:

Poor alignment to needs	1. Failure results from wrong priorities for content; typically driven from within HR or L&D who execute training because it is a “good thing to do”
	2. No strategic match between eLearning activity and business goals and targets. ELearning does not support the change agenda of top management; no formal sponsorship of top management.
	3. Lack of focus on business outcomes, there is no clear measure of targets for projects
	4. The e-Learning project competes with alternative providers instead of enhancing their product and delivery method. Typically it competes with a face-to-face training provider delivering to the same community
	5. Previous poor experiences of eLearning that is boring or not relevant to individual and business needs.
	6. Cost and volume benefits of online delivery do not influence tactical decisions on implementation or content choice.
Communication	7. No marketing approach both with learners and line managers. L&D professionals ill-equipped to get out there and sell.
	8. Recognition and publicity not given to early adopters or enthusiasts who might become champions at a local level
	9. E-Learning project teams don't manage the expectations of business managers.
Lack of implementation skill	10. Weak or ineffective ICT competency in the e-Learning project management.
	11. Content creation by teams who lack an understanding of learning processes and design issues. Content creation by teams who lack an understanding of the potential of IT and web resources.
	12. Over estimation by the project team of their own expertise, leading to inappropriate (or bad) choices of development partners and system solutions
	13. Involvement of training teams who are inadequately trained in either on-line content development or formal on-line collaboration support
	14. Errors in key administrative tasks which give a bad impression to learners, insufficient or inadequately trained staff or badly executed systems
	15. Resistance from Trainers. Existing trainers do not integrating ICT into their educational practice and have difficulties adapting to new requirements of technology.
	16. Course content and delivery is too rigid, fails to give individual learners choice and flexibility and fails to respond to sudden business change; the syllabus is too rigid and too difficult to change.
	17. Not learning from other's experience (no benchmark comparison of success taken against other organisations elsewhere).



Poor Implementation Process	18. Over reliance on synchronous events after the early stages of introduction
	19. No pilot process for step-by-step development leading to large scale roll-out.
	20. There is no in-built e-assessment, usage measurement, record keeping, evaluation recording, and links to competency measurement or business evaluation.
	21. Development and deployment too slow for the business who finds other solutions perceived to be faster.
Management Commitment	22. Senior management do not sponsor projects and fail to encourage and lead adoption
	23. Users of social networks and collaborative learning tools run out of enthusiasm and there is a lack of senior organisational sponsorship.
	24. Project driven (and sometimes managed) from the wrong place, for example from IT or HR
	25. Changes in personnel at key stage of project development leading to lack of continuity/vision of the original goals
	26. IT departments who fail to understand and manage the issues of web use, IT policy, location and support leading to access and firewall problems.
Scalability	27. Early content implementations are heavily customised and insufficient attention paid to the future amendment and updating leading to rigid course content that is expensive to change.
	28. Scalability and robustness of technology is not considered at an early stage development.
Support	29. Introduction can result in unplanned increases in workload of existing training staff; i.e. e-tutoring, content development, lesson preparation (virtual classrooms), learning to use LT tools or providing a help desk
	30. There is no plan for the substantial human support services that are needed to blend e-learning into the mix of delivery options. Too much reliance is placed on e-learning as a stand-alone solution.
	31. Resistance by line managers and other key stakeholders for whom the learning technology imposes apparent increased responsibility or workload.
Technology	32. The use of bespoke or experimental software rather than tried or tested tools can result in failure.
	33. Over reliance on the technology tools alone with insufficient attention paid to getting the right blend of learning methods and learning tools.



## 6 Warning Zones and How to Avoid Them

If we take a closer look at the 33 reasons above, they break down into 6 warning zones that any project needs to consider:

### Warning Zone 1 – Poorly defined business need

This is by far the most common cause of failure with:

- projects not matching to business need;
- no targets for successful outcomes(or targets poorly defined);
- abdication by senior management (who don't wish to get involved in something they may not understand or feel is peripheral to the business)
- Activity often 'a cottage activity' driven by local enthusiasm for technology rather than centrally by top management.

Lack of alignment does not just occur at a local level - tragically for many publically funded initiatives early investment is also directed at technology without adequate strategic market analysis.

### How to avoid this

In business - a very senior line manager must endorse each course or series of courses (as Richard Branson did for [Virgin Atlantic Airways induction training](#)). Ideally senior managers should be users themselves (as Richard Hammond of [Hammonds Furniture](#) is).

Successful e-Learning projects should have objective targets for learning outcomes and report on them, as [Doctors.net.uk](#) did for training doctors in hospitals in Infection Control.

L&D must engage with senior line management and challenge them to define what they need to achieve. This leads to the essential setting of targets without which success cannot be measured.

In the publically funded sector, successful e-learning initiatives tend to be those with strong links to employers, the ultimate customer. Good examples include [Hibernia College](#) and [Walsall College](#), both of whom have used technology to deliver learning solutions that are more closely aligned to their customers' needs. These links provide the business direction to the content whilst the education provider contributes the required academic rigor and qualification structure.

Professional and academic institutions can also provide the same rigor and standardisation ensuring alignment between the needs of the employer and the solution of the provider. For example the [Institute of Revenues, Ratings and](#)



[Valuation](#) helped to ensure that the provider was better aligned to needs of local government did with local government and the [Royal College of Radiologists](#) ensured that a online new qualification delivered results within the NHS.

### **Warning Zone 2 – Lack of hybrid skills for learning professionals**

Successful outcomes of good e-Learning include improved staff performance; a change in behaviour. Project developers have to grasp issues related to learning, to technology, to marketing, to change management and to design. Many of the experts we consulted gave examples of projects where one or other of these facets was misunderstood, creative teams who fail to grasp IT issues, developers who failed to understand that learners would not rush to use their course unless attention was paid to marketing and change management.

The lack of hybrid skills also shows up in poor relationship with other internal departments, particularly IT where IT policies may limit access to websites critical to learning.

There are projects attracted to new untried technologies that cause endless problems in implementation; project teams who did not know what they didn't know and learnt by their mistakes instead of seeking advice or benchmarking their approach with others.

#### **How to avoid this**

For business, much can be learned by working in partnership with good suppliers. For example, staff within the [Yorkshire and Clydesdale bank](#) worked in partnership with their suppliers to build the hybrid skills needed for their e-learning projects. Organisations (such as [Xerox](#) and [AXA](#) ) radically re-engineering their traditional approaches to learning by building new skills within the team.

### **Warning Zone 3 – Poor Project Planning and Management**

Although this cause of failure is linked to poorly defined business need (a good Project Manager would force the sponsor to define targets before any initial investment) it also contributes to failure even when the business need is clear.

Examples described to us included :

- *'projects set up to be competitive with the very functions whose co-operation is required to be successful';*
- *'early development focused on what is most interesting, not what will make the most difference, projects that fail to plan for success (being overwhelmed when demand shoots up – either the technology can't cope or the people in support can't manage the volume of demand)';*



- *‘Short term initial choices for learning outcomes are selected on the basis of what’s interesting and not what will make the greatest difference’.*
- *large scale interventions are not piloted so any initial teething problems are magnified across the whole target group of learners;*
- *Support staff not adequately trained leading to minor administrative errors that put learners off.*

Many project management causes of failure can be seen in hindsight; too little attention is paid to:

- risk analysis;
- force field analysis;
- influence strategy; and
- communication/marketing plans.

Many projects are managed by those who understand performance problem analysis and training needs analysis or the detail of the content, but fail to grasp the need to spend time considering straightforward project risks.

Although an understanding of learning is vital to success, e-learning also fails when the learning blend is unbalanced with too much reliance placed on technology.

Typically a project starts with high hopes with a team of learning specialists who become excited by the project and lose sight of its positioning either in the organisation or within the wider market place.

### **How to avoid this**

Allocate responsibility and authority to an individual for overall project management ([Coventry Building Society](#) is a good example of this). Choose wisely; someone who will challenge the sponsor, build cooperation with stakeholders, manage costs, encourage creativity and understands marketing, IT and learning.

Spend time analysing risk. This a key point made by [SabMiller](#) who were new to e-learning. They emphasise the point that understanding risk is not enough *“Identify risks up front so that you can build proactive strategies to mitigate against them”*, plans must be in place both to reduce the probability of an adverse event but mitigate against its effect.

The top tips from the [Care Management Group](#)’s successful implementation of e-learning provides a list of contingency plans for many of the generic risks of e-learning projects.



## Warning Zone 4 – Lack of involvement with key stakeholders

Whilst many groups of stakeholders may unintentionally sabotage e-learning classroom trainers can have the biggest negative impact (and may do so deliberately), “Oh it’s not real training” is so often the refrain. They may influence learners to the view that e-learning is “only for the masses”, “cheap because that’s all the learner is worth”, ineffective” and generally disliked as it is lonely. This will make learners dissatisfied with the experience even when they were enthusiastic originally.

Line managers are excluded both from the content and the launch. They are unable to add value to the learning experience. The training department (or whoever is responsible for delivering learning) side tracks the line manager.

Projects do not take advantage of early success, they do not promote early adopters and publicise individuals and departments who have gained real success from e-learning. They do not use pilots as a means of influencing a wider take up; a key element of successful marketing.

Projects fail because senior and line managers are unwilling to support them, not only do they regard it as peripheral to their business but they resent the increased workload as it appears to take the training responsibility out of the learning centre into the work place – of course it does!

### How to avoid this

There is no substitute for involving trainers, as designers and subject experts during the development phase and as facilitators and operators at the launch and implementation phase.

At [BUPA](#) trainers had a key role to play in quality control of the e-learning and were able to heavily influence the design.

[e-Learning for Health](#) involved both line managers and classroom trainers as designers during development and then gave additional support to classroom trainers so they could use the e-learning as a tool.

The Irish supermarket chain, [Superquinn](#), provided launch packs for line managers with advance information so they launched the e-learning in branches and took the credit for its success.

[The Royal Naval School of Marine Engineering](#) used e-learning as direct support to classroom trainers, a tool that made engineering principals much easier to understand and enabled both remedial and advanced study available outside the classroom. Giving tools to trainers that supports the e-learning is a proven method of turning detractors into advocates.



## Warning Zone 5 - Failure to understand the learner's environment

We heard one example of e-learning supposed to provide 24/7 learning supported by trainers with employment contracts for a normal five day week and a project designed for home study where line managers gave no time off or credit for learning. The modern digital world conflicts with employment contracts designed for a traditional workplace and entrenched working practices prevent the flexibility of technology being fully exploited.

Frequently e-learning project teams, even internal teams are disconnected from the work environment of the learners they are supporting. Learning design and launch implementation fails to take account of the need to be interrupted, that PCs are shared, that delivery systems are old and slow. or that managers are not supportive.

Social Networking is a prime area for growth. Our own research predicts that peer-to-peer and informal learning will grow significantly. However, one of our experts in outlined concerns voiced by many *“the vast majority of social networks will fail through a) lack of organisational legitimacy b) lack of incentive to contribute.”*

It is clear that we will have to understand learners (not just the generic learner but the individual that the learning is designed for) and appreciate their personal context in terms of motivation, opportunity and available support.

Frequently e-learning is designed as “the teacher teaching” and not “the learner learning”. This leads to a rigid design that directs the learner along a specific path. We found that e-learning designed in this way can fail for two reasons; 1) the business need changes and but the learning intervention is too rigid to respond; and 2) the learner would prefer to learn in a different way or already has acquired some of the knowledge, they feel alienated and patronised by the didactic.

### How to avoid this

At [Kirklees Metropolitan Council](#) when a new IT system was rolled out personal support available to employees for more than the standard working day.

[UKI](#) partnerships, when rolling out a new programme to improve retention and productivity of their contact centre staff, predicted and managed the risk of providing support outside normal working hours.

[The Priory Group](#) took time to understand the work situation of learners, set out to make sure it was supportive and created e-learning that fit into that environment.

[e-Learning for Health](#) designed over 600 hours of learning to be flexible in its use and flexible in updating. The development team took full account of the fact that learners used different learning strategies, were at different stages of knowledge, , and had a variety job roles and different working conditions. They took account of the



fact that the body of knowledge learners studied was constantly changing and evolving and the e-learning had to keep pace with that change.

As regards social networks, [BT](#) and [IBM](#) have both started to demonstrate how facilitating peer to peer learning can really add value to the business by creating frameworks and structure to allow learners to interact with each other.

### **Warning Zone 6 - Failure to demonstrate value**

It may seem ironic but a significant cause of failure is attributable to not reporting our successes.

We found that the outcome of an e-learning project is often nebulous and therefore too easy for sponsors to feel worried that it shows no return or is not hitting targets. Once that happens, it then becomes vulnerable to cut backs or cancellation by those controlling the budget.

Demonstrating that learning has been successful learning can be difficult but technology has made it possible to gather information and measures that can act as indicators of success.

However some of the causes of failure were linked back to a lack of e-assessment, usage measurement, record keeping, evaluation recording, and links to competency measurement or business evaluation. Recording and reporting hard numbers it seems is challenging for many<sup>5</sup>.

#### **How to avoid this**

Build in measurement and assessment systems into the project at the outset. [Xerox](#) provides a good example of how this can be done.

Look for natural opportunities to demonstrate quick wins. [Boots UK](#) had a rolling programme to provide e-learning to all of their stores and were able to demonstrate the impact of the programme by comparing the customer and employee satisfaction scores of staff

Use other companies' success stories to help build management buy in - the Towards Maturity [Evidence for Change](#) initiative is an ongoing programme to bring together case studies that all report quantifiable and objective benefits. Becta's [Delivering Results](#) report summaries the business benefits of 48 private and public sector organisations.

Use the metrics in the independently researched [Towards Maturity Impact Indicator](#) to help you identify how your solution may add bottom line value – metrics include

- Reducing time to proven competency
- Increasing volume of learning

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<sup>5</sup> Reluctance to record hard numbers was backed up in Towards Maturity Impact Indicator research with over 200 organisations [www.towardsmaturity.org/indicator/](http://www.towardsmaturity.org/indicator/).



- Decreasing cost
- Decreasing time spent learning
- Decreasing rollout time for new products, services, systems and processes
- Increasing revenue

## Learning from failure – building on success

We have concentrated in this paper on the causes of e-learning failure but over the past 6 years, we have been investigating what successful organisations are doing to deliver results. The Towards Maturity Model (see below) outlines 6 strands of activity that consistently help projects to deliver business impact, staff motivation and take-up of e-learning.



You can find out more about how to benchmark your projects against this proven model at [www.Towardsmaturity.org](http://www.Towardsmaturity.org).



## Appendix – case studies and resources

### Case studies

<b>AXA</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/06/15/harnessing-team-strengths-and-ld-evolving-axa/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/06/15/harnessing-team-strengths-and-ld-evolving-axa/</a>
<b>Boots</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/01/04/increasing-sales-improving-business-performance-e-/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/01/04/increasing-sales-improving-business-performance-e-/</a>
<b>BT</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/03/20/bt-dares-share/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/03/20/bt-dares-share/</a>
<b>BUPA</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/02/04/blended-cheers-programme-brings-good-health/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/02/04/blended-cheers-programme-brings-good-health/</a>
<b>Care Management Group's</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/12/14/award-winning-e-learning-care-management-group/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/12/14/award-winning-e-learning-care-management-group/</a>
<b>Coventry Building Society</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/09/08/coventry-improving-efficiency/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/09/08/coventry-improving-efficiency/</a>
<b>Doctors.net.uk</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/11/30/doctorsnetuk-deliver-infection-control-training/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/11/30/doctorsnetuk-deliver-infection-control-training/</a>
<b>e-Learning for Health/ Royal college of Radiologists</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/03/10/nhs-expanding-training-radiologists/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/03/10/nhs-expanding-training-radiologists/</a>
<b>Hammonds Furniture</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/03/05/impact-leadership-hammonds-furniture/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/03/05/impact-leadership-hammonds-furniture/</a>
<b>Hibernia college</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/08/18/master-class-hibernia-college-and-pfizer-breaking-/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/08/18/master-class-hibernia-college-and-pfizer-breaking-/</a>
<b>IBM</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/12/31/improving-sales-delivering-value-and-managing-tale/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/12/31/improving-sales-delivering-value-and-managing-tale/</a>
<b>Institute of Revenues, Ratings and Valuation</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/10/16/professional-institute-irrv-improves-local-authori/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/10/16/professional-institute-irrv-improves-local-authori/</a>
<b>Kirklees Metropolitan Council</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/01/17/kirklees-metropolitan-council/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/01/17/kirklees-metropolitan-council/</a>
<b>Royal College of Radiologists/ E-Learning for health</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/03/10/nhs-expanding-training-radiologists/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/03/10/nhs-expanding-training-radiologists/</a>
<b>SabMiller</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/06/18/introducing-e-learning-sabmiller/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/06/18/introducing-e-learning-sabmiller/</a>
<b>Superquinn</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/04/11/superquinn-new-skills-">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/04/11/superquinn-new-skills-</a>



	<a href="#">irish-supermarket-staff/</a>
<b>The Priory Group</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/09/25/building-foundations-growth-priory-group/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/09/25/building-foundations-growth-priory-group/</a>
<b>The Royal Naval School of Marine Engineering</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/11/12/royal-navy-revolutionises-engineering-training/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/11/12/royal-navy-revolutionises-engineering-training/</a>
<b>UKI Partnerships</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2007/05/13/uki-partnerships-introduce-envqs-contact-centre-st/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2007/05/13/uki-partnerships-introduce-envqs-contact-centre-st/</a>
<b>Virgin Atlantic Airways induction training</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/03/03/virgin-atlantic-airways-excellence-induction/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/03/03/virgin-atlantic-airways-excellence-induction/</a>
<b>Walsall College</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/07/21/local-employers-benefit-walsall-college-workplace/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/07/21/local-employers-benefit-walsall-college-workplace/</a>
<b>Xerox</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/02/17/re-engineering-ld-effective-performance-xerox-euro/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/02/17/re-engineering-ld-effective-performance-xerox-euro/</a>
<b>Yorkshire and Clydesdales bank</b>	<a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/03/13/clydesdale-and-yorkshire-banks-save-compliance/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/03/13/clydesdale-and-yorkshire-banks-save-compliance/</a>

## Additional resources

<b>Delivering Results</b>	<p>An independent study by Becta that consolidates existing evidence and case studies that demonstrate the impact of learning technology to support business priorities</p> <p><a href="http://www.becta.org.uk/feandskills/employerefficiencies">http://www.becta.org.uk/feandskills/employerefficiencies</a></p>
<b>Towards Maturity Impact Indicator</b>	<p>A study with 200 organisations to understand how technology is adding business value and improving efficiency.</p> <p><a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/03/12/towards-maturity-impact-indicator-looks-e-learning/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2010/03/12/towards-maturity-impact-indicator-looks-e-learning/</a></p>
<b>Evidence for Change Programme</b>	<p>Ongoing collection of case studies highlighting how employers have successfully implemented learning technologies</p> <p><a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/09/12/evidence-change/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/09/12/evidence-change/</a></p>
<b>Driving Business Benefits</b>	<p>Detailed study with 300+ organisations looking at how they use and benefit from different types of e-learning, it identifies critical success factors for e-learning success, and considers future trends.</p> <p><a href="http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/01/28/driving-business-benefits-towards-maturity-research/">http://www.towardsmaturity.org/article/2009/01/28/driving-business-benefits-towards-maturity-research/</a></p>



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Through Next Generation Learning in the workplace, Becta aims to support employers who are under pressure to up-skill faster and improve business agility with fewer resources.

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Find out more about Becta's Next Generation Learning in the workplace at [www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/work](http://www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/work)



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