

# Ten ways to thrive in a downturn

*A presentation given by Clive Shepherd on behalf of the eLearning Network at Learning Technologies 2009.*



Last year, Jay Cross warned us to ... “be aware that the magnitude of the financial meltdown is almost beyond comprehension. I can foresee training departments being eliminated almost entirely.”

Now, you might argue that Jay is presenting too gloomy a picture. Even so, the evidence is undeniable that training budgets are being cut and that, as a result, jobs are being lost.

Anyone who works in learning and development needs to be doing all they can to ensure that they come through this period relatively unscathed, hopefully with their job intact, and still providing a valuable service to their employer or customers.

This short presentation provides ten ideas to get you thinking. Obviously I don't claim an exclusive right to good sense, so be on the lookout for ideas from as many other sources as you can find.

## 1. Engage with the technology



Now if you're already engaged with learning technologies, then you might as well skip on to point two. If you're in the majority – that is, a learning and development professional who's at least partly in denial about the whole idea, then stick with it.

Now, educational and training methods, (that's the use of techniques such as discussion, assessment, games, simulations, lectures, prescribed reading, practice sessions and so on) are relatively timeless. Although we make different choices from these options based on current thinking about how people best learn, the options themselves stay pretty constant.

The same cannot be said for learning media, where the options are growing exponentially, along with new technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones. Twenty years ago, every trainer would make sure they were competent in using flip charts, whiteboards, overhead

projectors, VCRs and all the other options available at the time. Somewhere along the line since then, a startling proportion of trainers simply gave up, leaving e-learning to specialists. Big mistake.

As a result, many trainers now feel alienated because they have no involvement in the application of new technology. Somehow they have to overcome this because

- technology reduces travel, saving tons of money and the planet as well
- technology connects people with ideas and other people
- technology increases accessibility and flexibility
- technology is what Gen Y wants and expects

So every trainer needs to embrace technology or risk becoming increasingly marginalised as employers look to cut costs. As Jack Welch warns, “When the rate of change outside exceeds the rate of change inside, the end is in sight.” He does have a point.



## 2. Use the language of business



Employers are not really interested in learning – that’s a job for schools and colleges. What interests them is performance. Your job is to convince the holders of the purse strings that the learning interventions that you offer are likely to generate increased performance – more so, perhaps, than investing the same money elsewhere.

When confronted by the finance director, there’s no point trotting out the same old clichés, like the idea that employees are our greatest asset. You may be right in your organisation, but don’t be surprised if he or she presents you with a long list of examples where this doesn’t hold true. As for me, I don’t like being regarded as an asset. Employees really aren’t an organisation’s greatest asset – they’re much more important than that.



Of course, you could plead with the finance director to look at the training budget as an investment, not a cost. But be prepared to talk hard numbers, because you won’t be the only one asking for money at the moment.

And concentrate your proposals on interventions that will address short-term business issues. Right now, no-one's interested in projects that might pay off in the medium to long term.

### 3. Promote your brand



This is no time for modesty, false or otherwise. The best way to look after number one is to actively promote your brand, inside and outside your organisation. There are plenty of ways to do this. Here are a few suggestions.

You can add credibility to your professional status by touting your membership of associations and professional bodies. If you're in any way involved with technology, I'd obviously suggest you start by joining up with the [eLearning Network](#).

You might also take the opportunity to upgrade your qualifications. As far as e-learning is concerned, in the UK you can take a masters course (although this certainly isn't a short-term solution), obtain a certificate from providers such as the [CIPD](#) or the [Training Foundation](#), or take one of quite a few short courses now available.

If you fancy yourself as a bit of a leader in your particular specialisation, you should look out for the new skills awards which e.learning age magazine and the eLearning Network will be offering later this year.

If you're never short of an opinion, then perhaps the cheapest and most immediate solution is to start a professional blog. If your blog's any good, believe me, it will get read.

### 4. Be proactive



I'm sure this doesn't apply to you, but I reckon that learning and development professionals are not the most assertive of people. But this really is not the time for sitting back and waiting to see what happens. Sitting ducks will, unfortunately, be shot.

The key is to be proactive in coming up with solutions that will help your organisation get through the current crisis. If you leave it to senior management, they'll make daft decisions because, after all, they're not the experts on learning and development, you are.

As Jay Cross warns us, "Survivors must write new agendas, while they still have desks to write on." This really is a time for action, not for rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

## 5. Learn from others



Now you don't really have to be reminded of the benefits of stealing – for any trainer it's engrained behaviour. We're always on the lookout for good ideas that we can adapt to our own interventions, and that's just how it should be.

If e-learning's your thing, then in the UK you could do no better than to check out the [Towards Maturity](#) website, where there are dozens of case studies of successful projects. These will be shared even more widely through the [Next Generation Learning at Work](#) initiative, which has been launched this year by Becta.

Another good source of case studies, now that the Learning Technologies show has passed, is the one-day events and webinars run by the eLearning Network. And if you're aiming high, why not check out those organisations that were winners in the 2008 [E-Learning Awards](#). They must be doing something right.

## 6. Take advantage of bargains



As you'll no doubt have experienced when you've been shopping recently, this is a great time for bargains. To keep busy, suppliers will be more willing than usual to cut margins – but you do need to ask.

There's also an increasingly impressive array of free and open source tools out there. Check out Jane Hart's [Centre for Learning and Performance Technologies](#) website for all the gen.

## 7. Become more efficient



Efficiency is about doing more for less and that's a pretty popular strategy at the moment. First step is to get rid of all those nice-to-have interventions, which have been running for years but which may not anymore be addressing a current need. The best way to do this is to budget from the bottom-up. Don't simply take what you have and make minor changes; start with nothing and build up, focusing on the value that each intervention brings to the organisation.

If you develop e-learning content, question whether you have too elaborate and slow a process. Think about more agile, rapid processes, which get a solution out there in days not months. Try to work with small chunks of content, not monolithic courses. And make sure you exploit every asset – whether that’s an image, an animation, a video or a 3D model - as fully as possible, by reusing it in multiple online courses, as well as in the classroom and for performance support.

## 8. Maintain quality



Being efficient is not about sacrificing quality, it’s about getting the job done more quickly and cheaply. If you put out a poor quality product, then you may put your learners off, permanently.

But remember that quality isn’t about glitz; it’s about fitness for purpose. As long as an intervention is relevant, timely and does the job, then ‘good enough’ is a reasonable level at which to aim.

If you’re planning to enfranchise your subject matter experts as content developers, then don’t forget that they’ll need some training. The [60-minute masters](#) is a good solution; it’s free and it takes only ... well 60 minutes.

## 9. Harness people power



With the best will in the world, no I&d department is going to be able to meet all needs, particularly with resources so tight. Even if you engage subject matter experts to help build rapid solutions, there are going to be far more needs out there than you can begin to address.

Of course, there have always been informal learning processes in place to meet these needs, which usually means employees helping each other out by answering questions and demonstrating skills. The difference is that now we have software available that makes it much easier for expertise to be shared within an organisation - you’re probably already using it out-of-work – software like social networks, wikis and forums.

Your role is simple; just give people the tools to help themselves. And remember that with informal learning, what Harold Jarche calls the ABC rule applies – that’s Anything But Courses.

## 10. Get networked



Now you were probably expecting this. After all, this presentation is brought to you by the eLearning Network. But there really are some pretty convincing arguments for getting yourself networked.

George Siemens explains the benefits of networking: “Instead of the individual having to evaluate and process every bit of information, she/he creates a personal network of trusted nodes: people and content, enhanced by technology. The act of knowledge is offloaded onto the network itself.”

The days when you had to try and know everything relating to your area of expertise are long past. In fact, it’s an impossible task, because there’s too much to know and it’s changing too quickly. Networking gets you in touch with trusted sources of information that you can call upon when you need it, whether those sources are human or digital.



The eLearning Network exists purely to enable those working in e-learning, whether users or suppliers, to interact with each other and to enrich their personal networks.

It’s not-for-profit and run by volunteers working part-time. If you’re interested in e-learning, we’d love to have you in our network.

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