Clive Shepherd
Training providers at the crossroad

Over the past 18 months, as in learning and development we have battled with almost unparalleled levels of uncertainty and pressure on resources, I have found myself engaged more and more often in discussion with training companies looking to reinvent their offerings.

Of course this is not the first time that training providers have had to struggle with tight market conditions. But this may well be the first time that customers are beginning to question the basis of the service offering. So what's changed?

First of all, customers can no longer afford for their employees to be off-job for protracted periods. That's because they don't have the spare capacity they once had to cover the time lost, and they need all hands on deck. They are also short on budget and, as we all know, external training is one of the easiest expenses to cut. We have to accept that fact and realise that training is typically a medium to long term investment, and many organisations have not been sure they are going to have a medium to long term.

Customers are also more aware of the environmental impact of excessive employee travel. A good proportion of those cars on the motorway or planes in the air are carrying people to training events, and not always in situations where face to face contact is essential to success. The environment may not be the biggest issue on anyone's agenda right now, but it will return as economic conditions improve.

Finally, there is an increasing awareness that stand-alone classroom interventions have a limited impact on job performance. However enjoyable they may be at the time, and however high the knowledge assessment scores might be at the end, these are no guarantee that what is learned will be retained, applied and then put to good use.

So what is the impact of all these changes? Well, one obvious result is that customers will be ordering fewer external courses. And, as any training provider knows, the real profits are made when classrooms are close to full, when all fixed costs have been covered and every additional participant makes a direct contribution to the bottom line. Half empty classes are the road to ruin.

The second effect is that the customers want their courses to be shorter, often much more so. This means less of a return for each sale made as shorter courses will obviously be cheaper than longer ones. It might also impact on outcomes, because only so much can be effectively taught in a given time and trainers are not miracle workers.

To cap it all, customers are also asking for more flexible, lower-cost alternatives that take advantage of new learning technologies. This is not unreasonable given the proliferation of new learning media and the opening up of bandwidth, particularly when the topic is IT-related.

Unfortunately, from my discussions it appears that some training providers are floundering in responding to these pressures. Sometimes that's because they have limited awareness of what new learning technologies have to offer, and typically much less than their customers do. And given that there is no shortage of information available, in some cases this could be put down to 'burying your head in the sand and hoping it will all go away'.

For many providers, their only experience is in providing classroom

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courses, typically from a catalogue of off-the-shelf options. Often they subcontract much of the delivery of the courses, typically to trainers who are used to being block-booked by the day and having no responsibility to their trainees once the classroom event is completed. It's not easy to shift to a blended model where parts of the programme are delivered in short chunks online in a virtual classroom or where trainers have to support learners as they apply their new skills back on the job.

If a training provider moves to a blended delivery model, then they are in a very different business. Within the team they need a much better understanding of the design of learning interventions as well as the ability to develop materials that are a lot more engaging than the usual handouts and PowerPoints. On top of this they need the development tools and delivery platforms, and the people who are willing and able to use them.

This is not an insignificant change. It will take time and it will be painful. The alternative, I fear, is a slow and inevitable decline and that will be much more damaging in the long term.