

# Experiential Learning - Business Benefit or Fun and Games?

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Change and complexity are the few constants that can be relied upon in IT. The amount of information directed at IT in the form of technologies, standards, guidelines, tools etc. is considerable and ever-increasing. Look for example at the last five years and the number of standards and best practices introduced which have had significant impact on enterprise IT organizations. These include (but are not limited to) Web 2.0, Learning 2.0, the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) V3, Software Asset Management (SAM), ISO/IEC 20000, ISO/IEC 19770, Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX), COBIT, Environmental Sustainability and Green IT - the list is endless.

*Industry analysts Gartner suggest that in the last 5 years that information has grown at more than 30% year on year* - meaning that organizations are under considerable pressure to continually learn and understand new information, procedures, and application updates on an ongoing basis.

This presents a number of significant challenges:

- Understanding which changes are **relevant to the business**
- Filtering out the changes irrelevant to the business
- Gaining an appreciation of the **impact and the benefits to the business** relating to the changes
- **Educating the business**/rolling out related cultural change programs

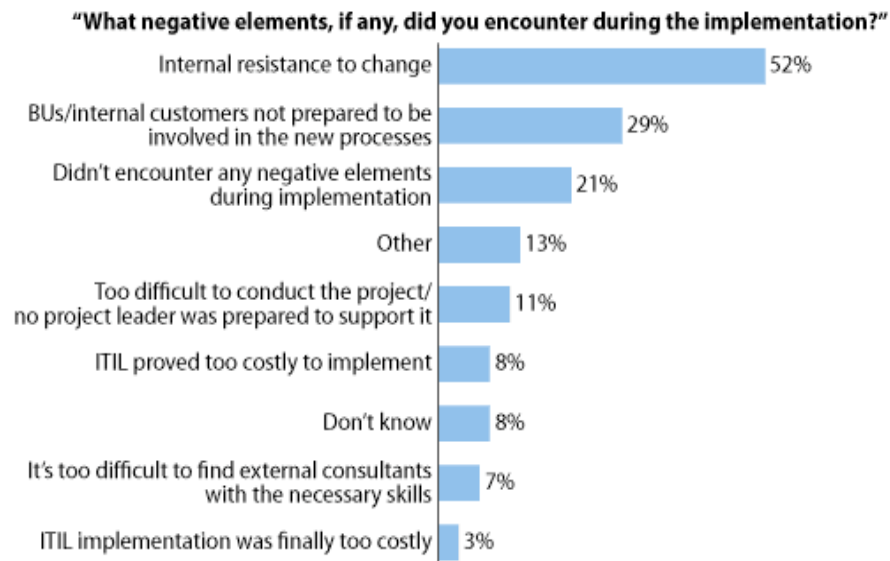
In the majority of organizations, any education relating to new information and cultural change tends to be performed through formal education or classroom instruction, but is this the best way? Does this sufficiently address the cultural aspects of the change? **Does this help people going through a change process understand the 'bigger picture'?**

## Quantifying the barriers to change

Organizations undergoing a new information or cultural change based initiative tend to come up against a number of barriers to change during the implementation process. The most anticipated and well known barriers to change include limited budgets, limited time, increasing complexity, unavailability of resources and many others. As well as these more 'expected' barriers to change, there are also the more 'people-related' and cultural influences such as resistance to the change and a limited willingness to learn.

A recent survey from the Industry Analyst group Forrester looked at these barriers to change in more detail and sought to quantify them. To do so, European organizations who had **undergone an ITIL implementation were asked what barriers or negative elements, if any, did they encounter during the ITIL implementation/change process.**

The implementation and rollout of a service management best practice framework such as ITIL within an organization is particularly interesting due to the overall impact it has across the organization as a whole. **Moving an IT organization from a collection of ad hoc service management processes developed and honed internally over time to one developed on a set of formal structures and procedures such as ITIL, requires commitment on many levels throughout the organization.** Virtually everyone in the IT organization as well as many representatives from the business need to be aware of the benefits of implementing ITIL, as many will be required to change their thinking as well as the way they do their jobs to suit.



Base: 62 European firms  
(multiple responses accepted)

Source: March 14, 2006, Trends "Firms Must Take ITIL Beyond IT Operational Goals."

40252

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

As you can see from the results detailed above, the results of the Forrester survey were surprising. It was not the more 'expected' barriers to change discussed earlier, such as money, time and resources that were most significant. Among these organizations who were implementing ITIL, **internal resistance to change occurred in more than half - and in nearly a third, the business and internal customers were simply not prepared to be involved in the new process.** These people and cultural elements overwhelmed all other barriers to change including financial and resource by at least a factor of 6, showing that the most significant barrier to successful cultural change is people.

The challenge in cultural change situations such as these is to **overcome the cultural and people elements of the change and educate IT and the business on the reasoning and benefits for the change in order to create a cohesive team pulling in the same direction.** To successfully do that we have to explore new ways of learning and creating positive cultural change. Before looking

at new ways of learning, it is helpful to better understand how learning has evolved to where it is today.

### The evolution of learning

The way people learn has **changed significantly over the last decade.** The speed and continuity of business change combined with today's rapid work pace have made formal training inappropriate and simply too slow for many people.

Many organizations have attempted to keep pace with this and have increased their investments in and expenditures on technology-enabled learning to try and address the changing needs of global multiple audiences and preferences. This has resulted in many innovative and excellent technology-based learning initiatives over the last few years, for example Computer Based Training (CBT), e-learning, virtual classrooms etc. For the purposes of this white paper these e-learning initiatives, as well

as traditional classroom training will be referred to as 'traditional learning'.

The key challenge for learning though should not be trying to best exploit the technology available but instead how best to capture learners attention and ultimately show improvement in organizational performance.

Traditional learning in the form of classroom learning, **tends to focus too much on content** and is extremely one-way in nature, with information being thrown at the learner through non interactive mediums such as Powerpoint. Traditional learning in the form of **e-learning tends to focus too often on the process of how content is managed** and the technology through which it is delivered and not enough on the content itself.

Traditional learning can be summarized as having the following drawbacks:

- Little interaction or interactivity with the learners
- One-way in nature
- Lack of immersion
- Often expensive
- Time-consuming
- Poor retention (memory) rates - on average the retention rates associated with traditional learning methods are 5-10% at best

Traditional learning however **cannot be dismissed, as up to 90% of education is undertaken this way in the majority of organizations.**

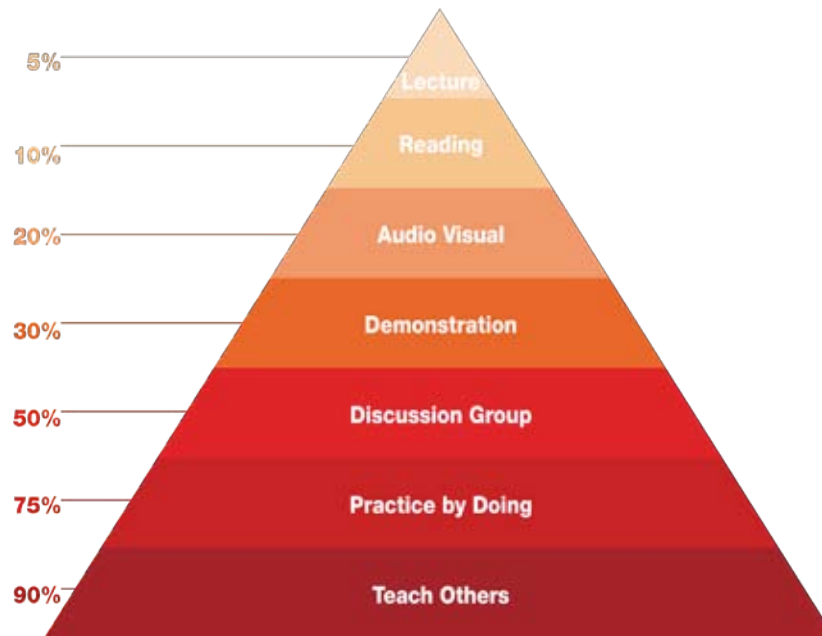
### Experiential Learning - A 'new' way of learning

Experiential learning is a highly effective alternative to traditional

learning and is defined as **'the process of practically engaging learners in an authentic experience that has 'benefits and consequences''**.

Experiential Learning has the following characteristics:

- It creates **meaning from experience**.. it's about creating that 'a-ha' or 'eureka' moment when everything sinks in and becomes clear.
- It allows participants to **make mistakes without fear in a risk free environment** thanks to real time feedback
- It **breaks down** silos and demonstrates the benefits of cross-organizational communication and teamwork
- It practically shows the importance of IT and business alignment - encouraging the setting of shared goals and accountability
- It is a highly effective enabler of change, making change irresistible to the participants as they now fully understand the reasoning for the change
- It makes learning memorable - in comparison to traditional education the retention rates associated with Experiential Learning are considerable. **The average retention rates for experiential learning solutions are high, in the 80-90% area.** These statistics are proven by third party research shown below.



Source: National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine

This is the learning pyramid - a well known piece of research from the National Training Laboratory in Bethel, Maine.

Traditional learning tends to encompass the top 2 elements of the pyramid - lecture and reading - and as mentioned earlier, the longer-term retention rates of traditional learning (typically lecture and reading based) fall into the 5-10% retention category.

Experiential learning effectively encapsulates all areas of the pyramid - from lecture to reading, from discussion to practice - which is why the retention rates are so high at 80-90%.

***“By 2012, high-performing enterprises will shift 50% of development spending from training to experiential learning programs to boost people’s effectiveness” - Gartner***

### Why does Experiential Learning work so well?

Experiential learning is an extremely effective learning medium for the following reasons:

- It is a highly practical way to learn... you don’t learn to drive by reading the highway code - no - you practice, practice, practice and use theory to complement the practical elements, with all the consequences and benefits that come with practical learning.
- It is highly immersive - it allows participants to fully engage in a role (often unfamiliar to their own for realization purposes) and immerse themselves in a practical situation - only then will they achieve authentic understanding and experience real instincts and reactions.
- It is contextual and highly relevant to the job - good experiential learning solutions are based around realistic scenarios.
- It is dynamic and emotionally engaging - it catches peoples interest and is a lot of fun.
- It is memorable - people who participate in experiential learning initiatives find they never forget them or the lessons they learnt.

### Learning by experience - Why Games?

***“Games based learning can significantly accelerate the transfer and application of knowledge” - Walder Arevalo, Gartner***

In terms of delivery methods, one of the most effective methods of delivering Experiential Learning programs is through games and simulations. Despite the ongoing growth and popularity of this approach, there are many organizations who consider bringing gaming into the workplace inappropriate, and view gaming and simulations as frivolous and out of place.



BUT - learning and fun in the form of entertainment *should not be mutually exclusive*. The *allure of entertainment can inspire motivation and innovation in people* and it can also *break down silos/barriers and create a level playing field* for all involved. In a business game or simulation scenario, a CIO may be playing with someone from the Help Desk, working together with a shared goal in mind. That is why so many training organizations use games as short ice-breakers at start of training/team-building days.

The challenge is to break down misconceptions about gaming by understanding the potential benefits it can bring to ensure successful acceptance to the workplace. From a business perspective, games should be considered a set of challenging and practical activities, such as planning, problem solving, co-ordinated interaction and analysis. Think of the way children learn - it is mostly through play - they immerse themselves into their games, work together, learn and have fun at the same time.

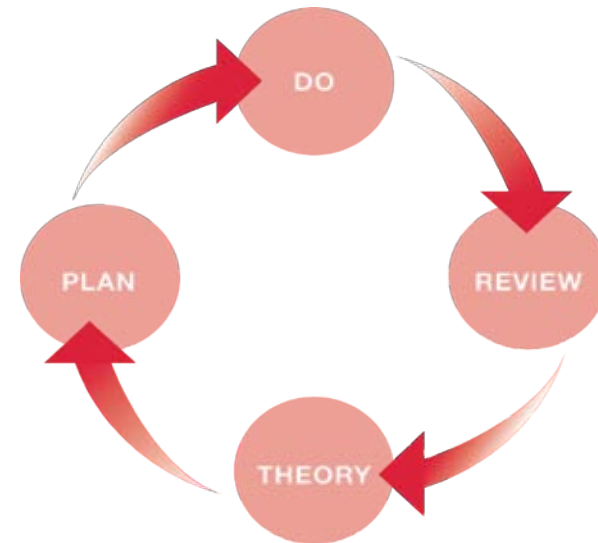
However, before you rush off and roll out a program of Doom or Monopoly across the business - think carefully about what games work, as not all business games and simulations are created equally. *The best, the strongest simulations are based around authentic and realistic scenarios to which people can relate to*, can understand, can *totally immerse themselves in*. Although tempting to consider games with high hypothetical and out-of-reach content such as space or war games more interesting, this can be a mistake. If participants cannot see how the learning applies to their lives then they are much more likely to forget. *For maximum impact, games and simulations have to be contextual and relevant*.

#### Iterative Learning Cycles - Kolb

The theories relating to the success of experiential learning are certainly not new. In 1984 a professor of learning called David Kolb published a ground breaking book called 'Experiential Learning - experience as the source of learning and development'. This book

was the first to expose that adults learn best through discovery and experience.


Kolb provides one of the most descriptive models of the adult experiential learning process - known as the experiential learning cycle.



Kolb suggests that there are four stages of experiential learning:

The first stage is 'DO' or 'CONCRETE EXPERIENCE' - in other words, it means performing a task as an individual or a group and actively participating in a practical exercise. In Kolbs model, one cannot learn by simply reading or watching: to learn effectively, one must actually 'DO'.

The second stage is 'REVIEW' or 'REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION' - This means taking time out from doing and stepping back from the task to review what has been done or experienced. This could be feedback, quiet thinking etc. At this stage lots of questions are asked during the learning process and good communication is vital.



The third stage is 'THEORY' - this is the process of making sense of what has happened, interpreting the events and understanding the relationships between them. The facilitator will draw upon theories and facts to help make sense of the progress.

The final stage of the learning cycle is to 'PLAN' - this is where the learner considers how they are going to put what they have learnt into practice. Planning enables taking the new practical and theoretical understanding and translating it into predictions as to what will happen next. Kolb believed that for the learning to be most useful most people need to place it in a context that is relevant to them - if one cannot see how the learning is useful to ones life then it is likely to be forgotten very quickly.

#### When to use Experiential Learning

- To convince people of the need for change. Cultural change is much more likely to be successful if the hearts and minds of the majority are won over. Experiential programs do just that through all the techniques we've described and thus acts as a highly effective catalyst for change.
- To educate people from a process perspective, in a fast, effective and cost-effective manner. Rolling out traditional education can be lengthy and expensive, but Experiential Learning programs can be rolled out rapidly across entire organizations, ensuring the message is heard and understood in a risk free, realistic environment
- To support the successful implementation of cultural change, processes and tools through achieving multi-level and cross-organizational buy-in to the message - as cultural change is much more likely to succeed with everyone on board.
- To make complex initiatives simple - because many cultural change initiatives are based around best practice frameworks and standards which are highly complex, Experiential Learning uses practicality to help break down the complexity into digestible bite sized chunks, creating clarity from complexity. The following are just some of the areas where EL programs

and simulations can be useful.

- ITSM and all it's related standards and processes such as ITIL and ISO/IEC 20000 work extremely well from an experiential learning perspective. Simulations and games can practically demonstrate the benefits to organizational performance of the application of good service management.
- Project and Portfolio Management and related standards such as PRINCE2 and PMBOK tend also to work well with experiential learning.
- Other complex technology related areas such as Service-Oriented Architecture (SOA), Risk, compliance, business continuity management and environmental sustainability - work well in the context of experiential learning.

#### Experiential Learning Example 1 - Using Simulations to accelerate acceptance of ITIL V3

***"ITIL simulations result in better management buy-in for an ITSM project and its benefits and an implementation team with a better understanding of the value of the end state of the initiative" - Forrester***

The long awaited launch of ITIL V3 this year has generated a significant amount of interest. Many organizations are keen to better understand the changes to the ITIL framework as well as understand how these changes can benefit their own organizations.

The interesting aspect from an educational and awareness perspective is that the enhanced and extended scope of the ITIL framework to envelop a more strategic business focused approach means that the ITIL sphere of influence has widened to include departments perhaps previously directly impacted by previous versions of ITIL.



One thing that all experts agree on is that successful transition to ***ITIL V3 requires commitment and understanding at all levels, from the Help Desk all the way up to the CIO.***

The problem that many organizations may face is that they have invested significantly in ITIL V2 education, and a migration to ITIL V3 presents them with a significant education and awareness challenge. A widespread traditional ITIL V3 education program may be impossible to implement quickly across the ITIL V3 sphere of influence, due to budgets, availability and other organizational constraints. In addition, it may be overkill to formally educate many impacted by the new standard.

**The best way to accelerate understanding of ITIL V3 is to experience it.**

An experiential learning solution in the form of an ITIL V3 simulation is a high-impact, energetic and practical way to accelerate understanding and acceptance of the new features of ITIL V3 across an organization.

As previously mentioned, the most effective simulations are based on realistic, easy to relate to scenarios. The optimal number of attendees for these simulations is approximately 15-20 people. Each participant within the simulation would be allocated a role within the game, most likely a role for which they are not familiar, in order to extend their appreciation of the roles and challenges faced by other departments.



The ITIL V3 simulation itself uses iterative gaming techniques based around the Kolb learning cycle in the form of rounds. This works well in the terms of experiential learning theory as the participants progress through organizational maturity through the rounds - starting at chaos in round 1 and progressing to full maturity and value in round 5.

In addition, the ITIL V3 experience continues between rounds through defined transition phases which require the participants engagement in planning for strategic and operational service improvements, promoting an ethos of continual service improvement.

Key ITIL V3 concepts and terminologies are introduced throughout the game, ensuring a high degree of familiarity with the new standard by the end of the game.

Organizations taking part in an ITIL V3 simulation or experiential learning program will realize the following benefits:

- Fast acceptance of v3 across large audiences - given that a simulation can run over 3 rounds for half a day or 5 rounds for a full day and train 15-20 people at a time, an organization can very quickly get all staff impacted by V3 trained and familiar with the v3 terminology and processes.
- A highly practical understanding of the new features of v3 and how it facilitates alignment of IT and the business.
- It breaks down barriers, and brings people together in a fun interactive activity.
- And as previously mentioned, the retention and engagement rates are significantly increased - meaning that the information is in peoples minds to stay!



## Experiential Learning Example 2 - using simulations to drive successful Project and Portfolio Management

Project and Portfolio Management is often a much overlooked area of IT - however, ***improving IT projects has been the number 1 priority on the Gartner CIO agenda for the last 3 years in succession.*** This may well be because metrics from the Standish Group CHAOS report show IT project success runs below 50%.

IT projects face multiple challenges - creating a shared understanding of goals, achieving results within organizational constraints, defining and managing scope, reducing resistance to change and creating happy and successful project teams.

Most organizations would only consider traditional learning in the area of Project and Portfolio Management, but an experiential learning simulation applied to this area can reap many benefits.

***A Project and Portfolio Management simulation is an exciting and energetic way to help create cross-organizational understanding of successful project management tools and methodologies.***

This would be recommended again for approximately 15-20 participants, across all areas of the organization impacted by IT projects - from business representatives through to the Project Management Office (PMO) and the management team.

Normally delivered over 3 rounds over the course of one day, the Project and Portfolio Management simulation is designed to introduce ***key Project and Portfolio Management components through gaming dynamics.*** This simulation can be delivered over more or less rounds, dependent upon the organizational challenge.

Using the iterative learning cycle suggested by Kolb, project delivery improves through the successful application of Project Management tools and techniques allowing the group to deliver projects of increasing interdependency and complexity. The first rounds starts with the group roles working very much in silos, the second round is focused on working together and by the third round all groups share the vision.

The benefits of experiential learning of this type are immediate and long-lasting. It creates a shared understanding of successful Project and Portfolio Management best practice and tools as well as creating happier, energized, more efficient staff.

### The true value of Experiential Learning

Experiential Learning does much more than contribute to the success of cultural change - it drives it. It creates:

- Accelerated achievement of business goals
- Increased buy-in, take-up and compliance for cultural change initiatives
- Improved relationships, performance, communication and co-operation
- Shared cross-organizational understanding of goals
- Cost-effective, faster and better rated education