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Digital learning for leisure

Rob May of YMCA Awards explains how digital-enhanced learning is enabling greater access to courses and why distance learning might offer opportunities for the leisure industry.

We are in an age of digitalisation with virtually every industry having been shaped, in one way or another, by innovation and technology over the past few years. Even our government is calling itself 'digital by default'.

As we move into an ever more digitalised world, it is hardly a surprise to see technology having an impact within the spheres of education and training. Increasing numbers of courses are now available and accessible online via e-learning technologies, changing the way training is delivered.

By reaching a generation of determined but time-restricted learners, digital learning and its associated technologies are changing education and training as we know it. But it seems not everyone is as receptive to the idea of digitalising education and training, particularly in the leisure industry. It seems certain factions within the sector have been somewhat slower on the uptake when it comes to the training sector's digital revolution. So what is stopping some within the industry from embracing e-learning and other digital methods of training delivery?

The leisure industry's *raison d'être* is in the physical – being physically active and physically fit – so questions have been raised over whether physical activity can be truly conveyed when training is delivered solely online. This in turn has led to fears as to whether technology will one day replace the jobs of human tutors, as well as doubts over whether online platforms can truly uphold the quality of delivery.

In the first instance it is important to make it clear that tutor contact is still a central component of any digital course. It remains a focal point of training; only the method by which the contact is delivered has changed. Learners still have contact with their tutors but it might be on the phone, via email, an online classroom or video technology rather than face-to-face communication. As the education and training sector shifts towards wider digitalisation, it is important that tutors, lecturers and teachers are quick to broaden their skillset so that they are equipped to help support their learners in innovative ways.

When it comes to addressing fears around a subversion of the quality of training, we must realise that few reputable training providers will be willing to compromise their reputation just to cut a few corners and save a few pounds. In a similar vein, staff within awarding organisations are being trained on the processes and measures introduced to ensure effective quality-assurance of those training providers offering learners digitally-enhanced training courses.

Some within the leisure industry have found it difficult to see how we can guarantee high-quality training and proper measurement of the quality of assessment. Thankfully there have been innovators racing ahead and introducing technologies and platforms to tackle these questions head-on and ensure that online training can deliver physical outcomes to a high standard.

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With assessments, cheating is a possibility no matter the format. However, with eProctoring the opportunities to cheat in theory exams are greatly reduced. This platform uses a secure browser on a PC which shuts down every programme except the system in which the assessment is being carried out. It is up to the candidate to find a quiet and secure environment that is under exam conditions and to prove this is the case – by sweeping the webcam around the room – proving they are alone and there are no notes or contraband. The whole exam is also recorded.

When it comes to day-to-day course management, there are platforms such as ePortfolios which see learners assigned tutors who can be contacted directly around the clock for help and support. For practical assessments students are able to upload videos of themselves performing an activity securely online, which is then marked by an assessor at the assessment centre.

So what does the future look like for the leisure industry? Across all industries the number of digital and e-learning training courses on offer is increasing. This is due in no small part to the unrivalled access to learning that such courses grant learners.

At YMCA Awards, ensuring we can deliver the highest standard of training while making it accessible to all is crucial. In striving towards this goal we can work to help more and more people to understand how their lifestyle choices impact their overall health and fitness, something that is really important to us.

We want to be able to reach more people therefore we recognise the value in digital learning courses and how these can tap into a whole body of learners who may be otherwise missed owing to such challenges as time constraints and childcare issues. We are providing our centres with more e-learning products and technologies to support the delivery of our qualifications. As part of our commitment to distance learning we have also established a partnership with ICS Learn to help us deliver qualifications such as our Level 2 Certificate in Fitness Instructing. ICS Learn's experience in online delivery means the user experience remains an integral part of the learning process while we ensure our qualifications remain of the utmost quality.

Of course, e-learning and digital courses won't be for everyone. Offline courses will still have their place and importance but, in an age where more and more people are changing careers and having to retrain, giving these people flexible options when it comes to training is increasingly important. In recognising this we need to ensure our processes are sufficiently robust to maintain quality while also agile enough to move with the times. E-learning and digital courses have a future in the leisure industry so now is the time to embrace the digital age.

Rob May is director at YMCA Awards.

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