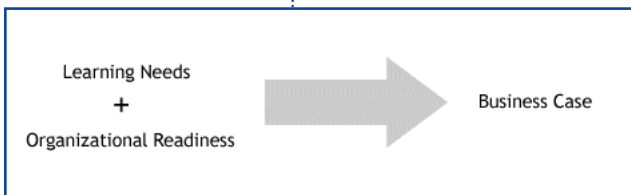


As an organized opportunity to network, share ideas, and collectively develop best practices, the conference has been another formative influence on the development of synchronous e-Learning technologies and practices. I use “conference” here to imply an opportunity for exchange and collaboration that might range from small and closed (internal, conference room) to large and open (public conferences and industry expositions). For most organizations, the internal conference refers to something more formal than a meeting or discussion, designed to generate ideas or disseminate information among a group or division. Hence, the early adoption of audioconferencing and videoconferencing as a means to reproduce that face-to-face interaction.



**Figure 1-2**  
*The business case for your selection of delivery mode arises from the combination of organizational needs and organizational readiness.*

But while it is indebted to the classroom, the media, and the conference as forms of influence, synchronous e-Learning is its own form of communication, collaboration, and education. Anyone who attempts to simply reproduce instruction from the classroom, imitate styles and genres from the media, or recreate the conference environment will fail to excel. Synchronous e-Learning is most fundamentally about connecting people through technology to enhance competencies and promote understanding. Used appropriately, synchronous e-Learning tools permit instructional designers and facilitators to create truly engaging learning experiences. Designed effectively, synchronous e-Learning energizes and enables participants to enhance competencies and develop their skills, attitudes and behaviors.

## The learning needs for synchronous e-Learning

Before you consider building a business case for synchronous e-Learning in your organization, you should determine whether a “learning need” exists and whether your organization is ready to implement this approach. Your needs assessment and learning objectives should drive the selection of an appropriate delivery approach and align more generally with your business case. (See Figure 1-2.) Implementing synchronous e-Learning approaches might generate some short term economic savings, but long term targets won’t be achieved if they are used inappropriately: learning effectiveness will decrease, training objectives won’t be realized, and you’ll be forced to re-evaluate your delivery systems. Chapter 3 addresses the issues of delivery approach selection and design, including conversion of existing classroom materials for use in synchronous e-Learning.

With this caveat, there are plenty of great reasons to adopt synchronous e-Learning approaches. Determining whether a learning need for synchronous e-Learning exists is rooted in its core definers. Synchronous e-Learning is live, real-time, interactive, collaborative and participatory, versatile, multi-modal (combining text, audio, video, graphics, etc.), and, most importantly, fun and effective. Some of the key advantages to using synchronous e-Learning include:

**Connecting dispersed learners:** Synchronous methods are especially well suited to organizations with geographically distributed learning populations. For instance, you may have a nationwide audience of regional sales representatives who need updating on product features and enhancements. Or you might have global franchisees requiring orientation around standard customer service skills. Firms with telecommuters and remote learners will also realize tremendous advantages by reaching these employees at their own locations.

**Real-time interaction and collaboration:** Synchronous tools allow us to engage with other people in real time, a very natural process that permits a spontaneous and flowing learning session. Answers to questions are immediate and clarification can be provided directly. Synchronous tools also lend themselves well to structured collaborative assignments. The social dimension of synchronous tools creates a learning synergy.

**Sense of immediacy and co-presence:** Synchronous tools are ideal for conveying late-breaking and time sensitive information. Since the human presence is so “front and center” when using these tools, the warm learner experience that is generated allays anxieties about the mechanical or depersonalized nature of technology-enabled learning.

**Fostering a learning community:** Learners benefit from sharing ideas and experiences with their colleagues. A major advantage to synchronous e-Learning tools is the development of a sense of connectedness and community among learners. Long term impacts can include better teamwork and collaboration skills, improved employee retention, stronger morale, and the formation of a collective identity. Adult learners, in particular, respond positively to peer support and opportunities to bond with their colleagues. Polling tools and other synchronous features can be utilized to build a sense of consensus, or to identify a respect for the diversity of ideas among a workforce.

**Balancing learning dynamics:** Synchronous e-Learning can reduce imbalances and create a more egalitarian learning experience. It can avoid the power dynamics of the face-to-face learning environment, where extroverts can dominate and where gender and other personal identifiers can impact group activities. Used effectively, synchronous e-Learning tools can overcome some of those barriers and level the field (although technical literacy can create imbalances among learners if not accounted for correctly). The use of anonymous feedback tools (such as polls and surveys) can increase the comfort level of online participants by reducing the fears that adult learners often have around answering incorrectly in front of their peers. On the other hand, the use of tools that do identify the originator (such as text Chat) can permit participants to shine in front of their colleagues and create a healthy competition. More generally, the variety of tools and communication choices available in synchronous e-Learning (text Chat, audio, polling, etc.) provides numerous options for connecting with diverse learners with different learning styles.

**Unique functionality:** Many synchronous e-Learning tools include features and functionality that offer unparalleled opportunities for fast and effective learning. Whiteboarding and markup tools can permit class exercises that can be easily saved and recalled. Application sharing allows for rapid and easy group work. Web tours can guide learners to specific points of interest.

**Extending application demonstrations and Web safaris:** Organizations that provide software and desktop training can benefit tremendously from the real-time application demonstration features of synchronous tools. Many tools also provide integrated virtual lab components, permitting supervised simultaneous practice sessions and “online sandbox” learning.

**Synthesizing materials and concepts:** Process-oriented tasks and information-heavy materials are best taught through asynchronous, on-demand training or reference materials. But the collaborative nature of synchronous tools makes them well suited to permitting learners to synthesize complex ideas and address “grey” areas. Synchronous e-Learning provides an online means for group learning techniques through discussions and dialogue, problem-solving exercises, and thoughtful reflection.

**Access to valuable Subject Matter Expert resources:** Many training organizations face the challenge of accessing subject matter expertise from highly experienced (and incredibly busy) senior members of the firm. Synchronous tools permit firms to tap into the deep knowledge and sharp minds of SMEs without significantly disrupting their schedule. These SMEs are usually the ones who are most aware of recent and emerging developments in their market area, and synchronous training provides the opportunity to rapidly convey that information. Large scale events ensure that a consistent message is delivered by senior management to all levels of the organization.

**Train the Trainer:** Synchronous e-Learning is especially well suited to training dispersed instructors (who might oversee regional training centers) and ensuring standardized training for all trainers. It provides numerous opportunities for reciprocal training, mini-challenges, fishbowl exercises, etc.

**Informal learning:** Once adopted by an organization, synchronous collaboration tools create points of exchange in everyday workflow behaviors that generate moments of informal learning.

**Avoiding conventional pitfalls:** The versatility of synchronous e-Learning allows trainers to avoid the pitfalls often associated with conventional face-to-face training. Often the cost of travelling results in marathon residential training programs where knowledge retention suffers. By focusing on facilitated learning and short, timely sessions, synchronous e-Learning is typically more learner-centric than many conventional training programs.

## The business case for synchronous e-Learning

Having established the learning need, let's consider some of the economic and productivity advantages to using synchronous e-Learning:

**Cost effective:** Synchronous e-Learning is usually far more cost effective than face-to-face instruction. This is especially true for larger organizations that require participants and/or instructors to travel to central training locations. But it's increasingly true for medium and SOHO (Small Office and Home Office) businesses as well, since numerous lower-cost options targeting non-enterprise clients have entered the market in the last few years. Remember that ROI should be measured by learning effectiveness, not driven by short term cost savings. Most organizations are moving towards a blended learning approach, optimizing face-to-face, asynchronous and synchronous online delivery methods.

**Productivity and workflow benefits:** Synchronous e-Learning improves employee productivity by reducing travel strain, eliminating unnecessary time away from home, and connecting with learners at their point of work (rather than in unfamiliar classroom environments).

**Recordable and replayable:** Most synchronous training sessions can be easily recorded and played back. Many offer increasingly sophisticated opportunities for editing and repurposing (into portable and/or offline formats). Make no mistake; the true value of synchronous e-Learning is its live, real-time delivery. But the availability of playbacks (for those who missed the live session, or as an on-demand refresher) expands its reach and long term ROI potential.

**Scalability:** Many synchronous tools thrive upon smaller learning groups with a high level of interactivity. But some methods (Webcasts, for example) are typically less interactive and can scale up to large volumes of simultaneous learners and realize significant cost-per-user savings.

**Extending the reach:** Synchronous tools are especially effective for expanding into new markets and generating new learning communities. Organizations can reach new prospects and build an extended client base through Webinars (collecting contact information on attendees that feeds into a Customer Relationship Management database). Internally, synchronous tools can also contribute to improved knowledge sharing across departments and functional units.

**Competitive business advantages:** Synchronous tools permit rapid training development and delivery, providing competitive business advantages for organizations concerned with shorter production cycles and faster time-to-market rollouts. Organizations experiencing frequent employee turnover and workforce changes (through mergers and acquisitions, etc.) will recognize advantages in bringing new workers up to speed quickly. Synchronous e-Learning can improve Quality of Service benchmarks by ensuring a consistent standard of content and instruction. Benchmark your competition and see where you stand in relation to their use of these approaches.

**Timely delivery and reusability:** Synchronous sessions can provide relevant and succinct just-in-time training for employees when coordinated with the business calendar (e.g. seasonal training initiatives, end-of-year HR updates, or compliance deadlines). Most synchronous e-Learning tools permit reusing the same content in a series of sessions aimed at multiple learner groups, thus reducing

redundant design and development time and encouraging easy customization. Some tools provide opportunities for seamless integration with Content Management Systems and learning content authoring processes.

**Automated learner recording and reporting:** Many synchronous e-Learning services track learner attendance and participation. This automated reporting reduces administrative inefficiencies and can typically be integrated with other internal record keeping systems (such as Learning Management Systems, Performance and Talent Management systems, certification assessment programs, etc.).

**Extending training budgets:** Organizations invested in face-to-face learning typically spend about 70% of total training costs on travel, lodging, and catering. Synchronous e-Learning also eliminates meeting space requirements and numerous fixed and variable costs (which can range from property overheads to catering to projector rentals).

## Integration points and challenges

When developing a business case for synchronous e-Learning, there are clearly a multitude of factors to take into account. Your cause will be made significantly easier if you can persuade senior management to champion the transition. Change management is crucial, and a clear projection of mutual benefits will help to build support from the various constituencies that will be affected by a synchronous e-Learning roll-out plan: curriculum designers, course designers, instructors, HR, IT, and other stakeholders.

Common sense and practical reality usually mandate that a phased transition is more effective and less disruptive than a major overhaul of your delivery methods. Identify advocates and pilot projects that will adapt well to the new approach. Develop a program around a series of synchronous events — it takes a few sessions before instructors and participants really start to feel comfortable with the new tool. Adult learners have a low tolerance for technical problems and time-wasting during training, and you'll want to eliminate any kinks during a trial period. Solicit feedback and support along the way. Ensure that your strategic objectives are achievable and can illustrate real and measurable advantages that reinforce the projections in your business case.

It's crucial not to consider synchronous e-Learning methods in isolation from the rest of your organization's needs and operations. Significant economies of scale can be realized if you can leverage the demand for these tools outside the training department. It'll also save you enormous headaches in the long run if you achieve consensus among all stakeholders with an interest in supporting and utilizing these technologies: typically the IT department, the Communications and Marketing departments, Sales, Human Resources, and quite possibly a number of other interested parties depending on the size and structure of your organization.

Our focus in this handbook is on e-Learning, but these tools provide significant opportunities and benefits for improved teamwork, improved productivity, virtual meetings, mobile workforce connectivity, and a host of other business functions. For example, videoconferencing is frequently mobilized for board meetings, interviewing, coaching/mentoring, remote management presentations, project kick-off sessions, and a myriad other uses. Most Web conferencing vendors provide a suite of products that range from supporting instant workflow collaboration meetings, through classroom sessions, to larger-scale scheduled events.

A number of options exist around selecting and implementing synchronous e-Learning technologies. The first decision is whether to use an existing service or product or build one yourself. Some organizations with specialist needs have created their own custom solutions. Given the complexity of these systems, this is not a decision that should be undertaken lightly. But the growing availability of freeware, shareware, and open source software in this area does make it a viable option for organiza-