

Lessons in e-engagement

e-learning Specialist Fiona Leteney explains how the often misunderstood teaching medium of e-technology is being implemented to great effect at Cheshire Police Constabulary...

The police forces of England and Wales are in an enviable position; a national e-learning portal is available at their fingertips from the Home Office, free of charge. It is a learning management system that launches and tracks high quality, purpose built police e-learning content created using Adobe Flash. However, until recently, Cheshire Police were unable to make use of this valuable resource available over the internet.

Barriers to e-learning

Many organisations will be able to equate with the position in which Cheshire Police found itself. These were the barriers:

- Internet access was not available to everyone;
- There was insufficient bandwidth across the force;
- Adobe Flash was not available on the computers;
- Cultural acceptance of e-learning was not yet known.

To use this 'ready made' resource, the first three had to be tackled before it would even be possible to test the final one.

This would require policy alterations, finance, along with hardware and software changes. However, in the meantime, there was an urgent need looming that could not be tackled any other way except via e-learning. Therefore, internally hosted non-Flash content would have to be used.

Drivers for e-learning

An urgent need

In February 2007, Cheshire was to replace a mission-critical database with a new system known as Atlas. Most police officers and many police staff would be expected to use the new software on a daily basis. On the 'go live' date, they must be capable of switching to the new way of working; without training, they would not be able to record crimes or create intelligence reports.

The classroom training could only be made available for priority users because there was insufficient time or training resources to train 1,600 people in three classrooms with eight computers each.

Cost saving

In August 2006, myself and Nick Moseley as experienced e-learning specialists were contracted to ensure that the e-learning could be created and rolled-out on time. The



Police officers and many police staff across England and Wales are learning how to use and adapt to new software on a daily basis

two to three hour e-learning replaced a one day classroom course. 1,600 officers and staff successfully completed it, which saved the force approximately £320,000 in abstraction time. Additional Atlas training courses have been completed since and more are in the pipeline.

Refresher and new starter training

As with many IT projects, the 'go live' date was delayed. The planned classroom training had been completed by the original date in early December; however, because the e-learning was available, anyone needing a refresher or new starters could access the online course when they needed it.

Feedback on e-learning

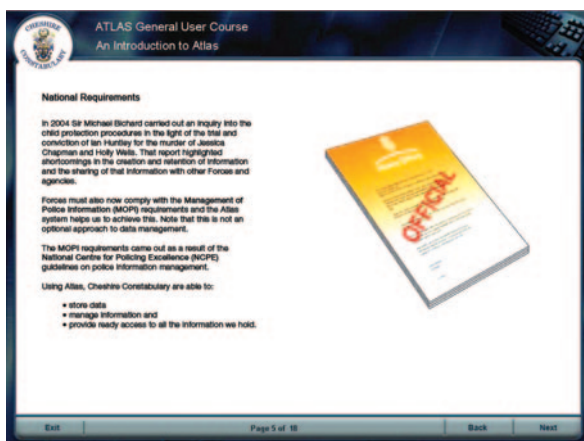
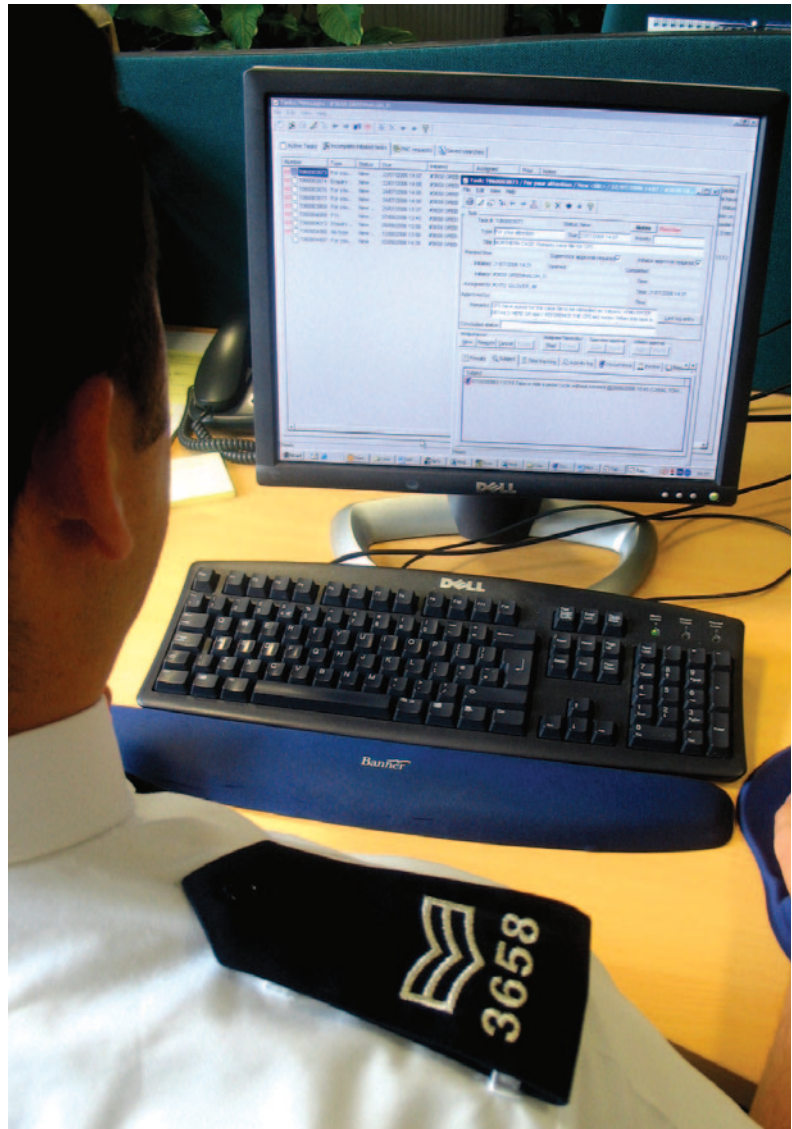
So will the culture at Cheshire Constabulary lend itself to e-learning? How was this new way of learning received? The initial feedback was excellent, but came from the early adopters whose learning style you can assume lends itself to e-learning.

“Can I congratulate you on the e-learning course,” said Sgt Robert Fennah of the Case building Unit at Crewe. “My staff and I found it easy to follow. It also allows people to learn at their own speed, rather than trying to keep up with a class where things can move too quickly for some people to absorb. I hope we see more of this type of distance learning, which also helps to reduce abstractions force-wide.”

However, learning software is hardly the most engaging of content and certain learning styles can be hindered by simulations, which did cause frustration: “It makes you think you are in Atlas, although it doesn’t allow you to hop about or experiment,” said one anonymous respondent. “It is only devised for one learning style – not activists who learn by making mistakes; this meant I lost marks.”

Conclusions

e-Learning is here to stay in Cheshire Police but it will not replace classroom, role play, books, journals, and the peer to peer training that already exists. If it is deemed to add value when the training needs analysis is completed, it will be used.



The barriers mentioned initially have now been removed, so Cheshire Police can use the free resources provided by NCALT (National Centre for Applied Learning Technologies). The talented NCALT developers are creating new engaging styles of content, like the 3-D ‘Room Search’ course built using games technology that is currently in progress.

Cheshire has shown its commitment to e-learning by taking on a permanent developer, Sheila Welsh, who will create the content that is particular to local needs, rather than national ones.

The implementation of the NCALT Managed Learning Environment is now complete. I will continue to advise Cheshire on e-learning best practice as long as they need me, but will be moving on to new organisations to assist in the roll-out of this wonderful, but often (initially) misunderstood, technology.



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