

Digital learning holds key to economic recovery

In the last ten years **learnirect** has helped millions of people learn new skills. In this article Deputy Chief Executive Pablo Lloyd looks at what has been achieved and plans for the future.



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Next year will mark the tenth anniversary of **learnirect**. In that time, I have seen the company realising its original ambitious idea: to use the power of the web to deliver learning in the 21st century. We were beginning to see, ten years ago, how the internet would alter people's everyday lives, bringing services directly to their homes and offices in a way that seems common now, but that would once have been difficult to imagine. Since October 2000, more than 2.65 million people have been involved in digital learning through **learnirect**. On any given day, some 10,000 people will log on to learning through our website, making us the largest provider of skills in the country.

Some of the most significant beneficiaries have been those individuals who really needed an innovative approach to learning: people out of work and people who have not succeeded at school. In the academic year 2008/2009 more than 65,000 people achieved their first ever Skills for Life qualification in English or maths with **learnirect**. And more than half of the people who enrolled on courses with us in 2008/09 were unemployed.

Behind each of those statistics is an individual who has better equipped themselves for the world of work, a person who has gained recognition for their skills, someone who has found new confidence – and a more efficient, effective employee supporting their business in a difficult economic climate.

learnirect has pioneered digital learning for our times: no longer are people restricted to fitting their studies around the term times of traditional learning. People who lead busy lives, perhaps working and balancing family commitments, may not be able to commit regular times each week to attend a class, but why should that prevent them from improving their skills and their job prospects? Today we are the only organisation in the world bringing the best of online learning on a national scale.

“The need for high quality skills provision, delivered in flexible, effective ways, is as great as ever”

Given all the progress we have made in the last decade, and the increasing number of people with access to broadband internet it seems clear to me that the web will play a major role in the future transformation of our public services. The potential is huge. **learnirect** has shown how technology can deliver on a mass scale. Commercial businesses have already made it work in their markets, just look at Amazon, Monster or First Direct.

So where do we go from here?

Everyone knows that unemployment has been rising as the global economic slowdown continues to take its toll. Some of

the jobs that have been lost will not return. Some skills will become obsolete, and some industries will experience restructuring. Yet this is the first recession where we have the power of the web at our disposal – to deliver efficiencies and provide the lubrication for a faster, more responsive system for supply and demand. To beat a recession we have to train through it and equip our workforce with the new and emerging skills required.

Yet even if the recession had never happened, it is now three years since Lord Leitch, as part of his roadmap to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice, set out the long-term targets for skills that were then adopted by the government. It included targets for increasing adult numeracy and reducing the number of people with no qualifications by the year 2020. Current predictions suggest that those targets will be missed unless there is further action.

The need for high quality skills provision, delivered in flexible, effective ways, is as great as ever. Learning from ten years of innovation and experience, benefiting from our highly recognisable brand and using emerging technologies and opportunities, **learnirect** is uniquely placed to play a major role in meeting the skills challenges of the coming decade. And we will continue to innovate to deliver the best possible services to meet the needs of learners:

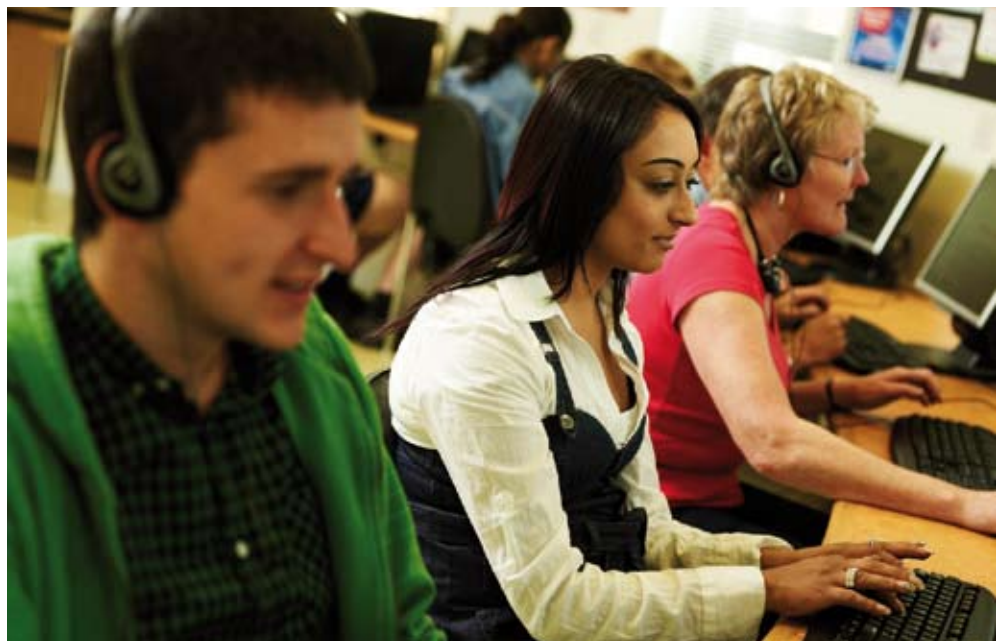
- In 2009, for the first time ever, use of mobile phones was more prevalent than



the use of landlines. **learndirect** has launched a number of courses which can be delivered just in time to mobiles, when the individual needs them.

- Up to 50 per cent of the UK population uses some kind of social networking site. At **learndirect**, we have introduced learning communities where people can help each other with their courses and discuss aspects of their learning.
- Whether it's online games, using gaming terminals like the Xbox or Wii, or training their brains with the Nintendo DS people are, perhaps unknowingly, 'learning' using the latest games technology. At **learndirect** we have looked into how we can use gaming to deliver other types of formal learning – such as maths or English – to make it fun, interactive and challenging.
- With the increasingly media-rich environment broadband can deliver, there is no longer the need to have a tutor or teacher in the room whilst someone tries to learn a new skill – all the learning can take place online. Tutoring can then be done remotely. At **learndirect** we are developing a service centre which learners can use as and when they need it.

It isn't enough for policy makers to pay lip service to new technologies. Technology can provide an effective and accessible space for learners, tutors and practitioners to come together, opening new avenues



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to allow people to develop their potential. A good diverse range of employment and skills services, widely open to competition, helps to give learners the best choice for their own circumstances.

Indeed the whole focus of employment and skills services must be on the customer not the provider, meaning that public funds are targeted at the needs which are most important to the future of the economy. Payment should follow outputs, not inputs, to place emphasis on the effectiveness of the service. Finally, the integration of skills and employment should be accelerated. In a context of relatively high unemployment, there is no room for duplication of effort or conflicting priorities.

Our aim is to 'liberate learning and talent' – removing traditional constraints of time and place to allow people to achieve their potential through supported learning online. In the right policy environment, with the opportunities to exploit new technology, focussing on the needs of customers not providers, and accelerated integration of employment and skills, our learners will succeed. ■



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