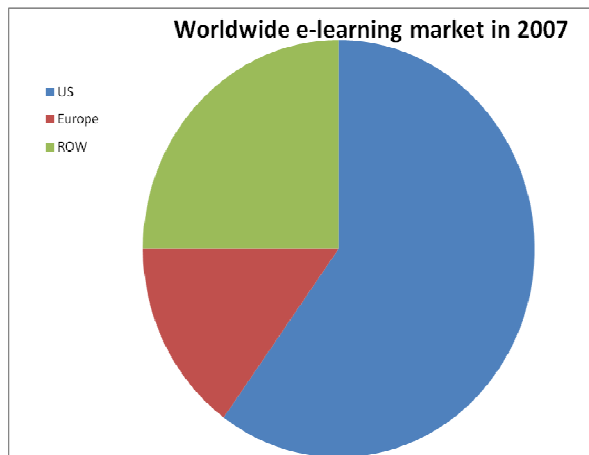


### Straddling the Atlantic

According to Global Industry Analysts Inc, the global market for e-learning is currently around £9bn, however the US share accounts for 60% of that, at £5.4bn, whereas Europe's share is only 15% at £1.35bn. Of this, UK's share is estimated at £250m, which is less than 3% of the worldwide market.



Given that the number of people living in the US compared to Europe is about the same, the uptake of e-learning in the US does look massive compared to the UK and Europe. Of course growth comes from developing your home market and neighbouring markets, so UK e-learning suppliers tend to concentrate on UK and European customers. However tapping into the US market can also be a valid strategy, given the huge market, the common language and the US's increasing comfort with purchasing from non-US suppliers.

#### *If the US only spoke Swahili...*

The famous quote to describe the relationship between the US and the UK is 'Two nations separated by a common language'. It alludes to the fact that the common language can beguile us into thinking we are exactly the same and so it comes as a big shock when a misunderstanding arises. Whereas if people living in the US only spoke Swahili, British people would approach them with more sensitivity to the possible differences in their culture.

So what are the cultural sensitivities that British and European e-learning suppliers should have when approaching potential US clients?

#### *Working with Americans*

I have spent the last 15 months working for a US e-learning client and so was intrigued to attend a half-day seminar called 'Working with Americans' run by Allyson Stewart-Allen, who is American but spent the last 20 years in France and the UK. Unlike other cross-cultural seminars, which can fall into the easy trap of offering a 'what not to do list' as the recipe for handling another culture, it offered a series of results-focussed strategies for building your sales in the US.

One of her house rules was 'no defensive reasoning'. So she didn't allow the participants to draw her into an attack-defence argument about which behaviours (e.g. British behaviours)

are more valid and effective than other behaviours (e.g. American behaviours). She just said 'that's the way they think' without passing a value judgment on it.

### *Risk-taking and innovation*

Firstly, there is risk-taking; American businesspeople often find it hard to understand the lower risk-taking behaviour of Europeans. Most Americans believe that 'new and improved' will always be better than what has come before. This stands in stark contrast to a common European attitude of 'that's the way we have always done it', sometimes conveyed with a European shrug and open hand gesture. So culturally, Americans tend to be comfortable about releasing a new product onto the market, even though it is only 80% complete, so they can be the first to capture market share, gather any customer feedback and use that feedback to improve the product as they go along. A tip for European businesses wanting to offer products or services to the US is to always stress their 'newness' and 'innovativeness'.

### *The cake can always be made bigger*

In terms of business strategy, Americans tend to see the business world as full of 'win-win' situations waiting to be uncovered to mutual benefit of both parties. Whereas the most common European view is that business is a zero-sum game; where someone wins, the other loses. In other words, the size of the cake is fixed and so if someone wants a bigger slice, everyone else has to take a smaller share. Of course, with limited resources, this is true. However most Americans believe that cake can always be made bigger so everyone gets bigger slices.

### *No sarcasm please*

Americans tend to focus more on immediacy; 'do it now' and 'let's make it happen'. There is a strong belief that 'we can craft our own future', rather than the more European attitude of 'that's the way it is, I'm afraid'. And most American businesspeople believe this future will always be better than the past. This means European businesspeople who want to work with Americans should be optimistic, positive and quick to action, even in difficult situations. It is important to avoid the standard British standby of sarcasm; Americans believe that negativity is corrosive and non-productive.

### *Quick to transact, prompt to communicate*

In the US first approach tends to move into the transactional phase quicker than in Europe. In the UK the first approach is mostly relational; finding out who your potential partner is, who do you know in common, what is their career history, what is their company history. Whereas in the US, all that history is often irrelevant. It is more about what our two businesses can do for each other right now. To that end, it is important that Americans know how to quickly and easily reach you. Email and telephone conferencing has shrunk the world in terms of business communication. The US landmass is very wide. London to New York may well be a 7 hour flight covering 5 time zones, but New York to Los Angeles is not much less at 6 hours and 3 time zones. US businesspeople won't necessarily meet regularly face-to-face with their US business counterparts anyway, so having suppliers and consultants who speak English and are only 5 time zones away from New York is not a big deal.

### *Lawyers*

Apparently, 3% of the entire US workforce is lawyers, so the litigious nature of business is to be expected. So it is quite acceptable to ask potential customers to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) before disclosing information that could be used or copied to their benefit. Allyson recommended having them sign an NDA that has been drafted by US lawyers in order to fully protect your organisation. And don't be surprised if the deal has been done, but it takes another 3 or 4 months for the American side's 'legals' to come through to make it legally binding.

#### *Directness and low-context language*

Communications from US businesspeople, whether in voice, email or letter, are usually made up of language that has been stripped of all its nuances. It is 'low context' English, which doesn't use euphemisms or reference well-known sayings, famous quotes and UK media celebrities. There are, of course, sporting analogies in American business that reference American sports such as baseball, but otherwise British businesspeople should speak without all the 'extra stuff' or 'padding' that we usually use to express ourselves. If Americans don't like something they say so; if it is great, they say so. There is no 'beating around the bush' that is common in the UK; British businesspeople often don't say exactly what they mean but expect their audience to appreciate 'what they are really saying'. At first, I found this directness hard, but now I find it refreshingly straightforward.

Richard Naish  
Independent e-learning consultant

Previously published in e.learningage magazine May 2008