e-Learning vs. e-Reference
A vital distinction

The KiFi™ model

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Maybe this paper will fundamentally change your thinking, or maybe it will confirm that you are on the right track. In either case, it is worth the few minutes it takes to read it.

e-Learning vs. e-Reference

If you are involved with selecting a computerised system to provide information to people so they can do their job better, or you are seeking better usage of a system that is already in place, understanding the difference between e-learning and e-reference could affect your ROI by thousands of pounds. Not only in set-up cost, but also in employee time spent on-line.

Many people put these two different genres of product into the same box and that single misunderstanding can lead to whole projects failing, budget wasted on the wrong system and frustrated users who cannot use what they have been given in a way that suits their real needs.

You have probably come across e-learning, mobile learning, Computer Based Training (CBT), Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS), Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), reference ware, toolkits, online classrooms and many other labels created by companies seeking to stand out within the market place.

Let's ignore the labels for a moment and look at the function these products are designed to do. At its simplest, it is about transferring information to the end-user (employee) so they can do their job more efficiently. (I can already hear cries of anguish from system providers saying that their system does far more than this.)

Actually, ignoring the labels is important because they often mean different things to different people. For example, I have yet to see an agreed upon definition of e-learning; what it is and what it isn't. This can make the labels misleading and inconsistent, and besides that, they are also often made up purely for marketing purposes. Instead, think about what you want, and then what function is required from a system to help you get what you want.

So let's take a couple of steps backwards and think about what outcome you want for your users from such a system. It is probably something like...

- Users can do their job
- Users can do their job better
- Users have better interpersonal skills
- Users can pass an exam for regulatory purposes
- Users can get information in the moment to solve problems
- Users can handle conflict and disagreement better
- Users can diagnose and troubleshoot the new XG105 product

Your outcomes will be specific to your organisation, to each user, and probably dovetail into much wider change initiatives within your overall employee learning and development plans.

Now consider how the users would use an online information system in order to achieve your outcomes. You will find that the style of use will fall into two broad camps, or somewhere on a continuum between them.

1. **Know It:** Absorb information and ***"learn it"*** so that it is available via memory recall in the future without recourse to the original information.
2. **Find it:** Access information that will help solve a problem ***"now"***, so they can complete a task assigned to them

One catchy way this fundamental difference in function has been described is 'just-in-case' vs. 'just-in-time'.

This, in a nutshell, is the simple KiFi™ model.

> ***"This model has a number of implications which are vitally important to anybody specifying, designing, purchasing or promoting the usage of a computer based information resource."***

Form follows function

Consider the old design adage that "form follows function". When designing something, be it a building, a vehicle or an online system, you need to first consider the function, and only then create a design that will enable the product to fulfil its purpose, its function.

Think of how a car differs from a truck. They are both motorised transport, but they are different in form due to the differences in function. They are different in size, style, shape, power and also have different human/machine interfaces i.e. the controls that the driver uses. There are many similarities, but also key differences because the principal function of each is different.

In the same way that you can look at a truck, and recognise it as a truck rather than a car because of specific aspects of its design, you can do this with **Know it** and **Find it** systems. There are no naming conventions that system suppliers will follow so you need to be able to do this for yourself.

You also need to recognise systems that have been designed without adequately considering their function, or designed without a clear function in mind, or have ended up being some kind of hybrid that does neither function well.

So, given their functions of **Know it** or **Find it**, what does the form of a good system look like?

More importantly, how will they look different if they have been designed well to follow their function?

There are many ways they will be similar, in the same way as both a car and a truck have steering wheels. Similarities for good systems will be things like highly credible content authors,

A good **Know it** system will	A good **Find it** system will
• be interactive • thoroughly engage users • offer the content in digestible chunks • have 'what did you just learn' tests with corrective feedback • guide the user through a subject area in a logical and sequential way • probably have audio, video and extensive graphics to make it 'attractive' • cater for different learning styles • have other mechanisms for embedding learning such as repetition • set expectations of content and time required at the beginning	• be easy and intuitive to navigate through all the content • have an easy search feature and full indexing • have a wide breadth and depth of content (encyclopaedia approach) • have practical content that is immediately useable • be extensively hyperlinked between content sections • probably be mostly text based with diagrams, visuals and audio only where they are needed for clarity • style is more like a handbook or manual in format with an obvious hierarchical structure

appealing on screen design, fonts and colours designed for readability and high comprehension, available both on and off line and across different platforms, simple and quick navigation and so on. Ignore these similarities for the moment and concentrate on the differences.

So when you look at a system, what are you looking at? A **Know it** system or a **Find it** system? Or one that has been built without following that age old design maxim of form follows function?

User motivation

One area where the form of a system must be congruent with the function is user motivation; a very hot topic for these types of systems. Now that you have the KiFi™ model to help, it is much easier to sort out what is going on.

When users need to go through online modules to embed information and learning (**Know it**), and there is no clear and immediate need perceived *by them* to learn the information, results are typically poor. It's an accepted learning theory that adults learn best when there is some urgency and that they are motivated to learn through their own need rather than an imposed need.

It becomes obvious that the online course itself must provide motivation and user engagement if it is to be in any way successful. Good courses cater for this with lots of "seductive augmentation" extras to engage the learner, and then keep them engaged throughout a module. This is often done with games, extra pictures and "eye candy", video stories with interesting scenarios, and more recently full blown participatory games that follow the style of games available on gaming consoles.

But even with all of this, busy users with full in-trays will not willingly invest time in learning something just in case they might need it one day. They will, however, invest time in finding information that will solve a pressing problem or question and help them deal with their full in-tray. That information might be pure data, like a tax code, or it could be a principle of something like employment law, or it could be how to do something, or how to apply the data they just found.

A user will typically only access a **Find it** system when they actually need some information right now. Before they even click the mouse, they have an *intrinsic motivation* to use the system and find out what they need to know. Thus there is no need for any of the extras that have the role of seductive augmentation to engage and motivate, and in fact, if they are there, they often get in the way of finding the information needed.

Think of your own experience when trying to find information on the internet. Which sites offer you the best experience when you are simply looking for information?

I am sure you can relate to this quote from Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the Internet.

> ***"Web users ultimately want to get at data quickly and easily. They don't care as much about attractive sites and pretty design."***

Define your ideal KiFi™ positioning

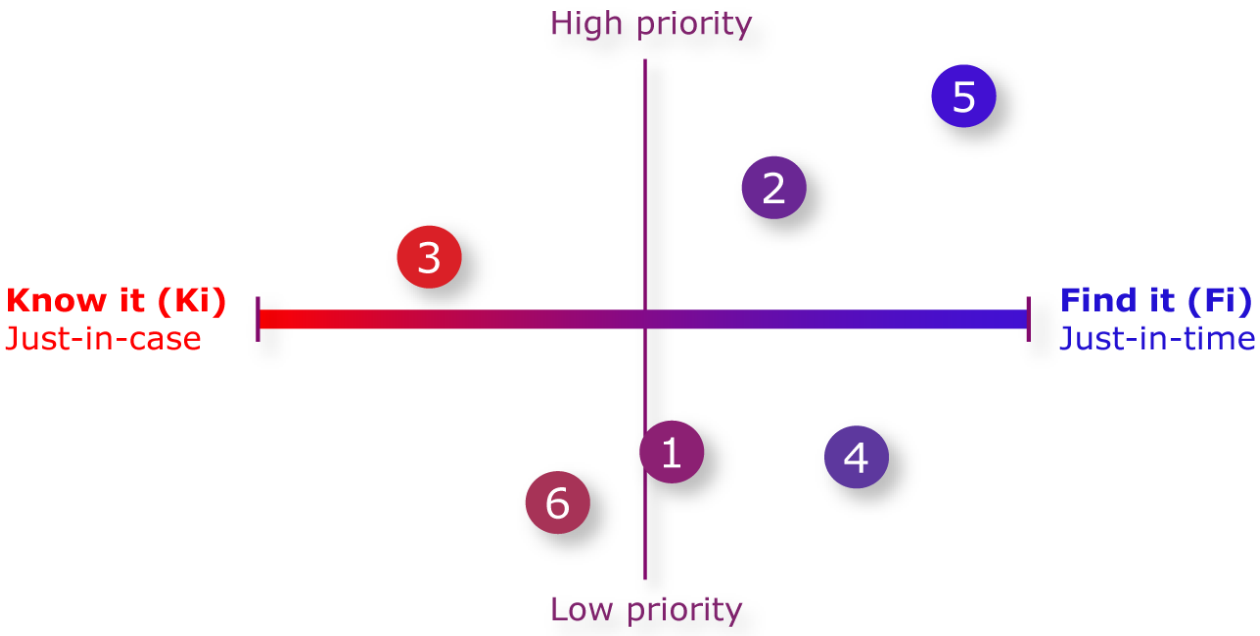
If you bought a car to do a truck's job, you would probably fail to do your task. The same logic applies with **Know it** and **Find it** systems. If you buy the wrong system to do a job, you will probably fail to get the job done.

You need to decide, given your outcomes, which genre of system will be needed; **Know it** or **Find it**. And note that this is not an either/or decision. You may end up deciding that you need both types of system to fulfil your outcomes. There is nothing wrong with having both a car and a truck.

Your first step is to define what you want in terms of function, and to do this you need to start with a list of the outcomes you expect or want from a system. This needs to be a numbered and prioritised list. If you do not yet have a list of outcomes, then you MUST start by making one, either on your own, or preferably with other stakeholders, including the proposed end-users.

Now plot on the KiFi™ line where each numbered outcome would fall in terms of its need for a **Know it** solution or a **Find it** solution to achieve the outcome. One way you can think of this is that the closer in time you bring the use of the system to the point at which the information is required, the closer you move towards a **Find it** system. This does not mean that there is no learning. Far from it, as often the learning will be greater when the information accessed from the system is placed immediately into context and used. You can refine this process by plotting the outcomes above or below the line based on their priority.

Whatever your result, this starts to help you define at a high level what kind of system you need, and whether you might actually need more than one system.



Multi-purpose system (KiFi™ spread)

It is obvious that you can use a **Know it** product for **Find it** purposes and vice versa.

The question then becomes "How *well* can I use a particular **Know it** product for **Find it** purposes, and vice versa?"

Notice that this is just the same with the car and the truck. Up to a point, you can use a car to move cargo, and you could use a truck to commute.

So which do you need? A car, or a truck, or both?

We looked at the form of a product earlier, and how this should be dictated by the function. Given these differences, it becomes clear that a **Know it** system will usually be less than ideal as a reference resource. You cannot easily flit from place to place within the often rigidly sequenced content to follow your own path of enquiry. You can't search or skim through multimedia content for specific information, especially if you have never seen it before. Trying to find specific information within a **Know it** module can be very frustrating.

On the other hand, a **Find it** resource can score well on learning because when it is used, the information gained is usually put into practice immediately. This practical application of new information leads to it being retained for next time, even though learning was not the original goal, which was to solve the problem. The learning derived from a **Find it** system is a wonderful secondary benefit beyond the initial outcome of finding information to solve a current problem.

However, the learning derived from a **Find it** resource will be 'informal' and thus uncontrolled as to what is learnt and when, so it probably won't satisfy any specific learning outcomes such as preparation for a Food Hygiene exam or Health & Safety test.

You need to go back to what you are seeking to achieve. What is the true user need and thus the required function of the system?

Now you can decide on the form of a solution: **Know it** or **Find it** or **both!**

KiFi™ model

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