

Professional Development Forum Online

Advancing Your Success

asae | american society of
association executives

December 2004

Published quarterly for ASAE Professional Development
Section members

Start E-Learning Off Right with Critical Look Inside

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Great news: Your association has just committed to launching a new e-learning program. Confident that your members will clamor for this, you can hardly wait to get started on selecting a technology vendor and platform.

But wait. Before you choose the tool to do the job, first make sure you know what the job *is*. In other words, it's essential to take the time to clearly define your requirements and formulate an e-learning strategy before you glaze over from all the technology options. Doing so can save you literally thousands of dollars, give you a stronger base for negotiating resources, and help you set more realistic expectations both internally and within your market.

Here are some of the issues you must clarify before you can determine the right learning experience, the right media, and the right way to position it.

1. Determine your purpose. Start by asserting a clear statement for what you want to achieve. If the business purpose for this initiative is not evident, all the other important questions will be harder to answer. Ask your organization: What is the purpose of taking our content and fashioning it into technology-delivered instruction? Is it to:

- Reach a broader audience?
- Reduce the cost of program delivery?
- Create a new revenue stream?
- Respond to market demands?
- What new value are we looking to create by doing this? Can we clearly define the outcomes to which we aspire?

2. Know your audience. The second most critical success factor is the extent to which you know your target audience. Can your organization answer these questions?

- What are the size and scope of the market(s) we want to reach with this program?
- Can we clearly identify the target audience for our program by demographic, psychographic (*behavioral*) and technographic (*familiarity with and reception to technology*) factors? Do we have sub-markets that would create a need for varying approaches?
- Does the audience have high access to and familiarity with any particular technology?
- Do we know for sure that our target audience wants the program delivered this way?
- When and where will our audience participate in this learning activity? Are there preferred conditions?
- Does the audience have any limitations (such as access to technology, time, and cost) that will dictate what the final product needs to be?
- Does our audience have specific learning needs that have to be incorporated into the instructional design and technology choice?

3. Consider your content. The nature, format, and shelf life of your content can often dictate whether e-learning is an option and, if so, what format you need. Perform a critical audit of the content that you now have or intend to offer.

- Is this program part of a larger curriculum?
- What instructional content already exists?
- In what format are these materials, and how current is this information?
- How old is the current content? How often is it updated? What is the content's shelf life?
- What is the source of the content?
- Who determines changes to the content?
- What instructional techniques are used in the program?
- Is it highly sensory? What senses need to be engaged?

4. Identify your subject-matter experts (SMEs) or facilitators. Instructional support is not absent in e-learning; the talent simply plays a different role. You need to determine what that new role needs to be. What personnel do you have to support these areas?

- Is the person(s) developing the materials the same one who will deliver it?

- Is the content delivered by a single instructor or several? What options do you have for back-ups?
- Are the SMEs willing to use the technology? Is their style appropriate for the delivery platform?
- Do all the content experts who will be developing this courseware have access to the technology, and can they operate it?
- Will you need to provide specialized training for content creation, delivery, and maintenance?
- Have you worked out a compensation plan for the developer/deliverer of learning products?

5. Examine platform possibilities. You need to determine what level of technical sophistication will meet your needs, be responsive to your goals, and be appropriate for your audience. Before you even speak to a vendor, ask your organization about these limits:

- Are there any technologies that would be prohibitive based on access, cost, and familiarity?
- Is our goal to use cutting-edge technology or only proven tools?
- What is the production value (or *wow factor*) we aspire to have?
- Do we have the means and access to the necessary technology?
- Does the technology require any special training or expertise to operate?
- Who will make decisions about the treatment of the content once it's in production?

6. Investigate interactivity. Interactivity defines the user experience and the level of exchange the learner has with the instructor, the other learners, and the learning tools.

- In our existing programs, how do learners interact with the content, their instructor, and their peers? Which interactions are essential to keep? Where are we looking to add interactivity?
- Is the current course for independent study or group learning?
- What types of interactions are you looking for from the cohort?
- Will learners interact with the instructor or SMEs? If so, how often and on what basis?
- Are learners expected to interact with one another to facilitate learning?

- Are we looking to create a community of learners? What will that look like? How will we measure its success?

7. Think through the program administration. E-learning is not plug-and-play. It must be continually managed and maintained, which means the following need to be taken into account.

- How often will this program be delivered?
- Is there any seasonality to its administration?
- Are there any requirements for demonstration (testing) of learning?
- Are there credits or certification requirements associated with this program?
- Is there testing and, if so, of what kind? How is the learning validated?
- Do you expect that offering this program will increase or alter the way the overall program is administered? Is your association prepared for that?
- How often does the program change?
- Who will be responsible for course changes?
- How important is it that learners receive up-to-date information?

A final note

Engaging your association in these seven discussion areas will go a long way toward ensuring that you have a clear strategy. As you work through these questions, make note where you lack valid data or consensus. These are flags indicating that you need to do more homework before moving forward.

In two recent association e-learning assessments, the research concluded that either members were not ready to embrace this tool or had very different needs than the organizations assumed. As a result, these organizations rethought their approach—and avoided costly investments—while better serving the needs of their members.

As the commercial goes: Program development costs: Several thousand dollars....E-learning technology costs: Several hundred thousand dollars....Having a clear e-learning strategy: Priceless.

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