

## Selecting an eLearning Platform

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The new term-of-art is "eLearning." It's at least easier to say than "*technology-facilitated instruction*," broader than "*CBT*," and perhaps more relevant than "*distance learning*." What we're referring to in all cases is using technology (of many forms) to deliver all or a portion of instruction. Technology can be a powerful and economical tool for learning. We've been integrating audio-visual materials in the classrooms and corporate training rooms for decades. Since the late 60's, in fact, there has been a field of study around Instructional Media and what tools work for what types of learning. While there has been unprecedented advance in the tools available to educators, the basic decision guidelines have not changed appreciably. Before you tackle the dizzying array of technology options, you must first consider these defining parameters.

### Usage

Are you familiar with the behavior patterns and preferences of your association members? Is this a population that works in offices? Are they regular commuters or line workers? Will they use this tool independently or in groups? Do they have large blocks of time to devote to training, or only "soundbytes?" Does your audience need for this training to be portable? Does your learner population need flexibility in when they engage with your program? These environmental factors and patterns drive the decision on which technology is most appropriate for when and where your target population will use it. If you can dictate the time and place for the learning activity, then teleconferencing or videoconferencing systems might be an option for you. For a working population in urban areas, you might capitalize on their commuting time and offer an audiobook series. This can be a great way to reinforce learning and appeal to the learner's convenience.

### Goals

What are your goals for using technology? Is it to enhance the learner's options? Are you trying to save training costs? Are you looking to improve distribution?

Are you hoping to speed up the learning cycle? What you assert as your programmatic goals will help steer your selection process. If you're trying to economize, then you'll probably want to avoid technologies that require separate hardware, frequent maintenance, and expensive distribution. If you're hoping to reduce the time it takes for you to get a learning module "on the street," then you'll want to explore the technologies that do not require elaborate production support. (If you are hoping to make people learn faster, well, technology can't single-handedly make that promise...yet.)

### Budget

Quantify not only what you have to spend on development, but what you can budget for distribution, maintenance, upgrades, and member support. Some learning technologies may be completely out of your range, like cable television or live satellite broadcasting. Some technologies are cheap to reproduce and distribute. Audiotapes, diskettes, videotapes and even CDs are relatively cheap to produce and mail. Some options are deceiving: the classic "3-ring binder" approach to learning materials is expensive from the standpoint of production, maintenance and distribution. And again, don't overlook the operational costs of deploying a whole new system for learning. Do you need to train internal staff on how to develop instructional materials for this medium or a train-the-trainer program to deliver the service? Do you need a dedicated support staff for the hardware or software? How are you going to offer learning support to members in their homes, offices, or elsewhere?

### Content Shelf Life

How dynamic is the content you have to deliver? If, for example, you have a certification program with a standardized curriculum, then some of the more static media may work. If it's likely that your material will change, or that the students will want to contribute to the curriculum, then you need to look at some of the more open technologies. A book is a very static medium that can be costly to reproduce and distribute. A web-based learning program can support content that changes daily. Is this material that your learners will want to reference indefinitely, or is the program offered once and then it's out-dated? You will want to balance the shelf-life of the instruction against the cost to produce the materials.

## Access

Much is written about the "haves and have nots" of the digital era. Your target's access to the technology should be a consideration for you too. However, it's more than "do they have a computer (or VCR or television)?" The questions are also: Do they have access to a computer that meets performance standards? Do they also need a CD-ROM drive, sound card, or access to the Internet? Do they only have access to a computer in some public facility, and is that an appropriate environment for your program? And think even larger about the issue of access. Does your program require access to certain people or other resources? Will the technologies you choose widen that accessibility or narrow it? Consider the university with notable professors and an exclusive library collection. Students near a campus have access to faculty and materials that the remote student does not have. What other systems do you need to put into place to equalize their access?

## Interaction

How important is it that the learner interact with the content, or with others in order to learn? Videotape is not an interactive medium; videotape with workbook is more interactive. Videotape with online exercises, tests and web-based student chat rooms can significantly increase the level of interaction. Most learning has some social component. Even if the study takes place independently, at some point the learner has to test his understanding or skill against "the real world." Based on what you are teaching, what level of interaction with others, or with the physical world, is required?

## Literacy

Does the technology you are considering require any special training or skill? How literate is your population with using this technology? Building a sophisticated computer-based training program for people who aren't comfortable with the computer may be a wasted effort. At the least, you'll want to include training on how to use the medium as part of your overall program. Consider other forms of literacy too. If you manage an international association and some members are not native English-speaking, you might serve them well by offering technologies that are more text-based, or allow for the user to self-pace through the program. Some

learning technologies can offer added-value to special audiences.

You cannot look at these questions in isolation and necessarily derive your answer. These parameters are so interdependent that you may have to matrix your options, or create your own criteria for weighing their importance against your learning goals. If your membership is widely diverse, or your content multi-dimensional, you may need to employ several strategies. In fact, some of the best e-learning programs are those that utilize each technology for its strength and appropriateness to the content. A well constructed e-learning program is one that puts the needs of the learner first, the programmatic goals and association resources second, and the specific choice of the technology last.