How To Battle eLearning Project Concerns?

5 tips

By Edmond Manning

When I taught the e-Learning Instructional Design Certificate program for ATD, I would regularly encounter this complaint and question:

At my organization, the real-world constraints make it impossible to create good e-learning. We never have big budgets or timelines like you consultants do. So how do we achieve high quality with such limited resources?

I think people asked me that question because they wanted either:
- A miracle answer, or
- The satisfaction of having a perceived expert say, "Since you have all those strikes against you, it's okay to produce something of terrible quality."

I would explain that there is no miracle answer. Sorry.

Regarding the second bullet — and let me be sparkling clear on this point — I never exonerated instructional designers from producing something of quality. In fact, it's probably more important that you create "something of quality" under those ridiculous circumstances.

At the lowest end of the spectrum, companies see eLearning as a supplement to their traditional offerings. eLearning is perceived as a cost-savings and perhaps an innovative (and also under-funded, underrated) option. At the highest end of the spectrum, organizations align their eLearning course offerings with mission-critical projects, and eLearning becomes an optimized performance tool throughout the organization.

Most folks creating eLearning today work in that low end of the spectrum environment: under-funded and underrated, *ad hoc* projects.

If your organization views eLearning as a poor, but necessary, substitute for more expensive classroom training, it's MORE imperative you begin challenging this misperception by creating something wonderful.

I know, I know: they're not giving you enough time. Or budget. Plus, you have 12 eLearning courses due in the next eight weeks.

Please let me offer five tips to begin waging war on mediocrity.

1. Challenge Authority

Buck the system to the extent you can without getting fired. You want to change how e-learning is perceived? Create change. Of course, the risks you take depend on the relationship with your internal client(s). However, do not give the excuse, "Things are delicate with this client right now. We have to prove our value first, and then we can challenge later." Sorry, but in this scenario, later never comes. Challenging the status quo of crappy e-learning is exactly how you prove your value. Keep in mind, challenging authority can take many forms. It doesn't have to mean yelling at your stakeholder during a crowded meeting. (In fact, don't do that. Not ever.) But if you don't begin passionately advocating for a better way of creating e-learning, who will?

When will you get that permission you so desperately crave?

Yes, it's difficult to be the person who stands up and says, "We could create this course in three weeks, but no one will learn from it and you won't see any behavioral change." It's a provocative stance; I understand that. But how much worse is it for your professional credibility to remain silent? Your silence cheats the company out of a great opportunity to improve performance cost-effectively.

If you're not having conversations about the impact of eLearning

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on performance goals and changing behavior, maybe the first person you need to challenge is yourself and your complacency.

2. Embrace Authority

Ah, paradox, my old friend. At the same time as you're "bucking the system," you must also embrace a better understanding of your current environment: business drivers, goals, performance metrics,

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and what's important to C-level management. My colleague, Gerald Matykowski, wrote some great articles about C-level buy-in and the importance of finding a champion at that level.

My goal in raising this point is to remind you that the authority figures in your organization are not the enemy — they're part of the solution, just as you are. You must challenge them, and you must commandeer their support for your plan and goal of creating better e-learning. To challenge the status quo while not alienating those *creating* the status quo is a unique skill. Cultivate it. It can be done.

3. Discuss the Impact of Constraints

Could you feed 20 people lunch with $100? Yes. Could you do it with $50? Yes, but you'll need to make a few decisions about the quantity and quality of food. With $25? Now, we're talking about spaghetti. $10? Hope you like crackers and tiny Spam cubes. How about with $2? No, probably not.

Can you create an effective eLearning project with a 20-week timeline? Absolutely. Two weeks? I hope you like crackers and Spam. Talk to your decision-makers about the very possibility of success, given the existing constraints. Document your concerns. You're a professional, after all.

If I told my doctor that I "didn't have time" for casts for my two broken legs and then stormed out of his office (I guess I'd drag myself with my arms), I'm confident that I'd receive a follow-up note from the doctor's office explaining that he had recommended a treatment and I refused to follow it. He would be explicit in his warnings and waive all responsibility for my recovery. This is what professionals do. Document their (as well as your) recommendations and the possibility of success if these recommendations are ignored.

As a professional, do you communicate (formally) that a strictly constrained course has little chance for success? Do you communicate the impact of the constraints on achieving desired outcomes? There are tactful and effective ways to do this.

Perhaps you could create a simple form to use within your organization in which you estimate the possibility of success based on constraints, alignment with the business goal, availability of SMEs, autonomy of the instructional designer, etc. Keep it simple. One page. Write out a one- to two-sentence summary for each project and deliver it with the Project Plan. This will definitely initiate a conversation with important parties involved.

4. Single Out a Winner

I often find instructional design professionals designing to the constraints and not designing a solution that will work. (In other words: "What can we build within two weeks?") That kind of thinking is bound to have you producing optimized garbage. There are always constraints, but it's unforgivable to ignore the prime directive: to improve performance in direct, measurable ways.

Begin by identifying the single most meaningful performance improvement, even if it's a small piece of all that's needed. Conceive your ideal solution, then come down from it as much as you must while still making sure you'll achieve desired outcomes, even if you'll achieve nothing else. If resources allow, expand your scope, but stop at the point where you can no longer be confident of success.

In other words, instead of asking, "What can we build within two weeks?" figure out the solution that works and ask, "How much of this can we build in two weeks? How do we create a simplified version of that?"

Another possibility: If you have eight projects to create in eight weeks (this was a true-life example from a participant at one of our ATD courses), pick one and make that the focus of your instructional efforts. Pick the course likely to have the most impact, the greatest visibility, the most important behavior change, etc. and figure out what you could do with that one course.

Use that time to create one great course and seven thrown-together lesser courses. You were going to produce eight terrible courses anyway, so why not employ a strategy to produce one that's better than the others?

When your stakeholder wants to know why one course is better than the others, you'll have a great explanation ready, and you can finally discuss how constraints can kill a project's design.

5. Communicate Your Strategy

Here's an idea: create a list of 20 attributes that are important from an eLearning project outcome point of view. Circulate the list to your sponsors independently of any specific project. Ask them to number their top 10.

Then, for each project — considering its constraints — come back to these stakeholders and identify the ones on which you're going to focus. Acknowledge those that cannot be addressed. Mind you, I'm not advocating choosing to do a terrible job — I'm advocating mindfully strategizing, given difficult constraints, and communicating what your constraints require you to sacrifice.

I do hope this gives some options to those who feel "optionless."

For the record, constraints are universal. We rarely have the desired budget or timeline for a eLearning project. Success comes not from worrying over what we don't have, but from figuring out how to best apply the resources we do have. **TEL**

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