



David Perring shows you how to avoid the pitfalls, rat-holes and dead-ends, to reach your ideal bespoke content development partner.

THE TRIPWIRES BETWEEN **YOU AND A PERFECT E-LEARNING PARTNER**

There are many ways you can go to the market to find a bespoke content development partner. Most of these options hinge on finding the best solution at the best price. Selecting on cost alone, doesn't always translate into long-term success. The accepted wisdom is to partner with the right provider, not just the cheapest.

The familiar mantra is to work systematically, with the best fit for you, with the right resources in place; and the right framework, with the best proposal. This should be more successful than

commissioning one-off e-learning projects. But is it? *And how can you tell if it isn't?*

The global bespoke e-learning development market is incredibly localised and potentially inconsistent. It is this combination that can make commissioning a project, even a modest one, fraught with rat-holes, dead-ends and trip wires. This can only lead to some uncomfortable and unexpected headaches for 'the unprepared'.

Things have improved over the past five years. The industry has changed

significantly. The range of suppliers and options has grown, and there is more flexibility. It is a competitive market in terms of products, pricing and complexity.

THEN AND NOW

- **Once**, local suppliers subtly wrapped new customers into their own development solutions, which steered organisations along a path of maintenance dependency. *Now there is increased opportunity to use independent authoring and content management tools*

- **Once**, e-learning meant desktop PC solutions. *Now there is the potential to generate solutions for mobile devices such as tablets and smart phones*
- **Once**, projects had rigid development processes and were sometimes document heavy. *Now there is the choice of agile and rapid development, and teams are more flexible and multi-skilled*

BUYERS ARE NEVER SHORT OF CHOICE

At the same time, in-house production has increased. So too has the capability of authoring tools and this has broadened the range of services that corporates demand from development companies. Also, the overall development cost has come down as bespoke solutions have become more varied and to some extent more commoditised.

But, for all this choice, we still hear of projects that fail to run smoothly and customers who remain trapped without the source code for their bespoke projects.

Customers of bespoke e-learning development have consistent gripes about the quality of their projects in terms of creativity, project management, quality assurance and proofing. As a result outputs are inconsistent, overly template-driven and page turning in style, and with disappointing and frustrating learning content. So, what can you do to navigate more effectively through the bespoke e-learning development marketplace to find the best partner and the best solution?

APPOINT PREFERRED SUPPLIERS?

What sort of provider are you looking for? This is a key question. Are you seeking a strategic partner to add to a preferred supplier list (PSL)? Or would you prefer a supplier of a one-off project? A PSL is a list of a pre-specified select group of providers from which organisations choose when they want particular services.



Sourcing the perfect e-learning vendor

There's a big pay off for organisations with solid procurement and vendor management processes.

Foster good supplier engagements

Typified by clear goals, objectives and scope, good supplier engagements result in higher quality projects that are more creative, develop more efficiently and are ultimately more successful. Involve stakeholders in the key decision making stages.

Consider a preferred supplier list

PSL relationships can drive down costs and increase productivity across projects. This approach also reduces technical risks. For example, courses failing to track back successfully in an LMS... screen resolutions not correct for your audience... video built-in Flash when it should have been MP4, etc.

Standardise your authoring platforms

Thus reducing technical risks, minimising content lock-in to existing suppliers and enabling you to speed up quality assurance and maintenance cycle.

Use a range of development approaches

Flexing between internally developed resources (with the help of your subject matter experts) and externally developed resources, is likely to provide the best long-term e-learning strategy. Optimising cost-per-hour of internal and external e-learning development, means scaling between both production approaches.

Define layers of content complexity

Distinguish between low-effort productions like video vox pops and PowerPoint e-briefings; and high effort interactive simulations and complex virtualisations. Then you can more easily explain to your stakeholders the range of content options available to meet different timescales and budgets. Build a cost table that outlines the expected timelines, costs and effort and quality benchmarks for your core content layers.

Analyse and compare

Analyse your current production models and compare the comparative costs and efficiencies of what you do.

Forward planning

Group your projects wherever possible when tendering, even if they are spread over time. This can significantly reduce costs. Use your project pipeline to plan ahead, working across all stakeholders to reduce costs.

PSLs are used by companies that buy-in services, like e-learning development, to secure lower rates. In short, the customer commits to a certain volume of business, which leads the preferred suppliers on the list to agree to lower fees for a specific time, for example one to two years.

As a consequence, a preferred supplier relationship is typically more strategic and doesn't necessarily have project-specific details as a lens through which to evaluate the vendors on the list.

There are efficiencies to be made from a strategic partnership regarding cost, process, production and deployment. So, you could ask why you wouldn't have a preferred supplier list?

COMMISSION ONE-OFF PROJECTS?

In fact, there are very few reasons. It could be that you have very little experience in the marketplace and you want to check out a few suppliers, before you commit to a short-list. Or, it could be that you don't have the project volume to create sufficient amounts of content to make it worthwhile. Or, it could be that you don't have the commitment of your procurement team to support setting up a PSL and the associated contracts.

One-off projects give you much more flexibility and the tender process itself can drive very effective cost efficiencies. But as one-off projects start to accumulate, a preferred supplier relationship is often established naturally. Once a vendor begins to routinely take individual projects, you should really look to move to a more

PSL-driven relationship. Some treat this as a single partnership; others will have a shortlist of preferred suppliers that can be engaged on a retained basis. But, a PSL can be a valuable tool to simplify and speed up your buyer processes, reduce your costs and drive significant efficiencies. So PSLs shouldn't be ignored.

WHAT ABOUT CROWDSOURCING?

Over the past couple of years 'crowdsourcing' has become the buzzword around buying services. *crowdsourcing* is the act of outsourcing tasks, traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, to a large group of people or community (a crowd) through an open call (Wikipedia). Essentially, you submit your development request to a crowd and gauge the response.

Some big names like Netflix, Amazon, DuPont and iStockPhoto use Crowdsourcing to commission development activity in the wider business community outside of e-learning. For example, Netflix offered \$1m to anyone who could design a solution to out-perform its existing recommendations algorithm.

Crowdsourcing options also exist for

e-learning development – if you know where to look and what you are looking for. In some ways, crowdsourcing turns the traditional business model on its head. Relationships become much more transactional than those usually associated with a real partnership.

Interest has grown in this approach to support e-learning development, though it is not a widely used corporate approach (especially for entire projects). It has been explored by some companies as a way of sourcing specific elements for a project, such as video vignettes and for specific expertise. This is definitely at the early-adopters' stage, and things are changing, so crowdsourcing could become a new standard in engaging suppliers.

It is certainly a fascinating development, though the scalability and reliability of this approach is debatable. However, if you have the resources available to this emergent approach, you could take a cue from organisations like SAP, Thomson Reuters, Gateway Teleport and TRW that are very positive about this methodology.

Time will tell if it is destined to become mainstream. But if it does take off, it will

change the selection of content development suppliers. In many ways it is a Darwinian solution leading to survival of the fittest. The best proposals, the best ideas will rise and endure. However, at this stage, unless you are totally confident about feeding your e-learning project to the 'crowd' this approach may be best for the experienced buyer rather than the novice.



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It is all about linking ideas, structure and learning technologies to complete the puzzle



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