Are You Building the Right Type of E-Learning Course? (Jan 08)

Building an e-Learning course can be time-consuming and costly. Because of this you don't want to waste your resources by making your e-Learning course more complex than it needs to be. Instead, your objective is to create the best e-Learning course you can with the limited resources you have.

Identify the Course's Purpose

The intent of most e-Learning courses is to change performance. However, the type of course that's usually built focuses on sharing information rather than performance improvements. This happens because most people focus on delivering content rather than on changing performance.

Your first step is to get your client focused on the real performance goals and then guide them to the right type of intervention. Sometimes it means they don't need an e-Learning course. In that case you save time and money by not building the e-Learning course.

However, if they still need (or want) an e-Learning course, then determine what type of course they need. By identifying the type of course you are building, it's easier to determine what resources you can commit.

Understand the Type of Course

Types of E-Learning

E-Learning courses typically focus one of two things: **sharing information** or **changing performance.** And, within that framework, there are basically three types of e-Learning courses.

1. **Communicate information with no performance expectations.** Information-based courses communicate new information but have no built-in expectations of changed performance. A good example is a course that highlights new features of a software application. You learn about the new the features but you aren't required to do anything with this new information.
2. **Give step-by-step instructions that have specific outcomes**. These courses are focused on procedures and how to do something. They're made up of repeatable tasks that are very close to what the learner will do at work. A good example is showing someone how to complete a worksheet or use software.
3. **Share guidelines to help the learner solve problems.** The most challenging courses to design are those where you teach principles or guidelines versus repeatable steps. You really have to understand the nuances of the learner's situation and how the principles can be applied while respecting the fact that each application is somewhat unique.

All three types of courses can be as simple or complex in design as you want to make them. Keep in mind that the more complex the course is, the more time and effort it will take to build it.

Your best bet is to minimize the complexity and free your resources for the projects that are going to make the most impact.

Manage Your Resources Wisely

When you build your courses, use an approach that is appropriate to the type of e-Learning course you're building. Just like my recent post on the [e-Learning hierarchy](), the goal is to free up your resources so that when you need to create the more complex work, the resources are available.

Here are a few tips to help manage your resources:

- **Reading is best done offline.** Many e-Learning courses require a lot of reading. If most of your course is text-based, find a solution that best supports reading rather than building a course. Remember, the goal isn't necessarily to create a course. Instead, it's to deliver content that helps the user. This might be accomplished without a "course."

   If you do need to create an e-Learning course, then build one that summarizes key points and then push the learner to a PDF or other format that is better for reading.

- **Teach people to find information rather than just giving it to them.** I don't know how many times I've worked on projects where all I did was reuse content that was already available on the company's intranet. If that's the case for your course, save time and money by just pointing people to the right resources.

  Better yet, build your course on how to find the resource rather than just giving it to them. This is more performance-based and in the long run helps the learners find the information on their own, which might reduce the need for additional courses in the future.

- **Break the content into bite-sized pieces.** If someone wants to know what time it is you don't tell them how to build a clock. In a similar vein, too many e-Learning courses offer more than is needed.

  If you break the course content into pieces, you can offer both the "need to know" and "nice to know" content. At the same time, the learner has the freedom to get what is needed.

  I like to create "coursels" (as in course morsels) where the key content is broken into manageable chunks. I've built courses where the coursels are combined as a whole course, yet they are offered as separate links that work more like a web page structure than a traditional e-Learning course. The content is all in one place. There are distinct measurable courses. Yet, the user has quick access to the most critical information.

- **Keep the course simple and focused on its outcome.** Too often we want to make a course "engaging and interactive" and yet it turns out to be a bloated product that takes more time to create and more than likely bores the learner anyway. Instead of getting cute with the project, make sure that it is focused and meets its objectives.

  If the course is supposed to share information, give me the information. I don't need a role playing scenario or play a Jeopardy game to get it. On the other hand, if I need to learn principles or guidelines, don't just dump a bunch of information in my lap. Instead build a relevant case study or scenario and let me practice what I need to know.

To build good e-Learning courses means that you have to know what type of course you're building and get the most out of your resources. Learn to differentiate between information and performance based courses. Then move your resources to those courses that are going to have the most impact.

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