Written by Jason Lewis, ExperiencePoint
Wednesday, 01 September 2004 13:02

Creating an e-learning program for your company can be difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. However, if you make the right choices up front, you can minimize hassle and still realize substantial return on investment.

Today there are hundreds of e-learning companies offering everything from off-the-shelf computer productivity courses to custom on-line universities. Just sorting through all of the options can eat up a substantial portion of your training resources.

Since we are focused on saving you time and money, our five-step process sticks to three major principles: online, off the shelf, and a portfolio from multiple vendors.

Online

All of the courses for your portfolio will be delivered over the Internet. This makes it easier for users to learn from home or the road.

It also reduces the amount of cooperation you will need from the IT department. While looking at vendors, be sure that the purchasing and tracking also occur online.

Off the shelf

Custom-made courses are fantastic. However, they are also time-consuming, risky, and expensive. If you do not need industry- or organization-specific content, then you are better off going to the off-the-shelf offerings.

While off-the-shelf courses may not be precisely tailored to your company, they can be very cost-effective. The most common types of off-the-shelf courses cover computer skills, management, and regulatory compliance. If someone has written a book on the topic, there is probably an online course for it.

Multiple vendors

Since the e-learning industry is relatively young and changing rapidly, it is unlikely that you will find one vendor that meets all of your needs. One vendor may have fantastic computer skills courses but nothing for managers; another may offer stunning simulations but nothing for project management.

Our approach allows you to cherry-pick the best from each vendor while keeping the total number of vendors down.

The process

Our five-step process will help you identify what you are looking for and get the right courses at the right price while ensuring that your organization actually uses the e-learning once it is implemented.

1. Laying the groundwork. Determine what you are trying to achieve with e-learning and ensure that e-learning is in fact the most appropriate solution. E-learning works best with self-directed learners with intermediate level Internet skills who have a clear training need. Before researching vendors ensure the following:

- Your learning objectives can be met by off-the-shelf courses.
- Your users can (and will) use the Internet to not only complete the courses but in some cases purchase them.

It is also important to identify and communicate with your stakeholders at this stage. Be sure that you have discussed your initiative with your HR/training department, IT, the supervisors of the learners, and some of the learners themselves. By including your stakeholders at the beginning of the process, you make it much easier to gain their commitment later.

2. User profiles and selection criteria. The easiest way to come up with your selection criteria is to imagine that you are a potential learner or end-user. Identify the types of learners who will be using the content and create a sample profile for each one. These are called user profiles. A user profile will contain all of the relevant characteristics of that type of learner. It should include:

- Level of computer proficiency
- Software/hardware that they have access to
- Learning needs
- Motivation
- Logistical details (access to company credit card or expense account for online purchases)

Combine all of your user profiles to create selection criteria. This is a list of must-have characteristics that include technical, logistical, and financial considerations. Having an

objective list of criteria in hand will make your decisions much easier and faster throughout this process. It is also a useful tool for communicating to your stakeholders that you understand their needs. The selection criteria may contain your learning objectives or you may already have a list of courses that you need to purchase.

3. Supplier short list. Start your search at www.tmreview.com/directorySearch.asp or a similar Web site. Do not forget to examine your software, hardware, and equipment vendors as they may offer product training online.

At this point you want to eliminate as many vendors as possible, so do not waste time going into the courses. Either the vendor can meet your selection criteria or it cannot. Keep track of who you have eliminated and why to prevent backtracking later on in the process.

4. Test the offerings. Now go to each supplier and ask for demonstration accounts so that you can examine the courses in more detail. Once the sales representatives understand what you are looking for, they may be able to make your search more efficient.

When examining the courses, ask yourself if they meet the learning objectives and are appropriate to your organization and audience. A vendor may provide great content but its style may turn off your users. Ask selected end-users and stakeholders to review a few of the demonstration courses and provide feedback. Not only will this ensure that you do not select the wrong content, but it will generate additional buy-in down the road.

Try to use as few vendors as possible; however, an exceptional course may be worth the added hassle of managing one more vendor.

5. Deliver and upgrade. It is crucial to have an implementation plan. A solid implementation plan ensures that users get the benefit of e-learning with as little difficulty as possible. No matter how brilliant your courses are, they are a waste of money if no one uses them. Your implementation plan should account for the following:

- Presentation. How will you present information about the courses (how to order, who should use it, etc.)?
- Motivation. How will you get users in front of the courses?
- Instructions. What instructions will they need to purchase and complete the course? Will

they need to keep track of user names and passwords?
• Feedback. How will you know if the program is working (surveys, interviews, supervisor feedback)?

You will need to have your IT department onside, as they will inevitably get calls from confused users. Help them by providing a support contact and communicating the process to your end-users up front.

Creating your own online university is time consuming and requires all of your organizational and management skills. However, the pay off is in the delivery of the right training to the right people at the right price. **MT**

Jason Lewis is a consultant at ExperiencePoint and has designed and developed online learning and management training. He can be reached at (602) 488-7786