



THOROGOOD
PROFESSIONAL
INSIGHTS

Chapter 1

Managing an E-learning Project

- 1. Define the Scope of the Training.....8
- 2. Link Outcomes to Business Objectives9
- 3. Carry Out Training Needs Analysis.....9
- 4. Identify Key Players.....10
- Who to Choose?11
- 5. Allocate Topics to E-learning and the Trainer-led Course.....13
- 6. Learning System Database14
- 7. Establish Milestones and Budgets15

Chapter 1

Managing an E-learning Project

1. Define the Scope of the Training

To retain competitive advantage you, like most other companies, will be on a continuous drive to deliver products or services which are quicker, cheaper, lighter, smaller, easier to use, offer more features, cost less to make, etc. To enable these changes to happen, your staff will also be under continuous pressure to change their working practices... and this means continuous personal development. None of this happens by accident.

Most sophisticated companies recognize the strategic advantage that having highly motivated and developed staff gives them. No wonder then that for many training is an important and continuous activity.

So the starting point on our journey is to look ahead and try to identify the specific changes you want to see in your people, and then to define those changes in terms of measurable competences.

It's important at this early stage to involve line managers in this process, and also some of the staff in the target audience. Check out your ideas against their practical experience. There are three main advantages to you as training designer:

- Are you being realistic in what you can achieve in a given time?
- They will have a valuable fund of case studies and real examples which you can use to bring the training 'alive'.
- A further advantage of involving them at this stage is that it starts to build their commitment to the final program – they will feel much more 'ownership' through having been involved.

2. Link Outcomes to Business Objectives

Developing e-learning training programs is initially more costly than simply asking a trainer to design and deliver a one-off course, so you will want to be selective about which courses to deliver using e-learning.

You can be more certain of the longer term cost-effectiveness of e-learning if the courses you identify for this approach:

- will clearly deliver benefits directly related to overall business objectives
- are topics for which there clearly will be an on-going demand, or lots of people are likely to access the training in a short period
- are topics which are likely to stay unchanged over a period of time.

Although it is possible to modify the content or learning process for an e-learning course there are obviously finite costs involved, and it's probably something you'll be reluctant to get involved in.

Let's assume that e-learning is part of your solution. An important part of the process is to define the outcomes in specific competences. What exactly should people be able to do differently at the end of the training?

The more specific the definitions...the more likely the training will deliver the required outcomes.

3. Carry Out Training Needs Analysis

Once you have identified a topic as suitable for e-learning an important step is to assess the current performance of the staff whose working practices or behaviors need to change. To ensure you collect valid information you might wish to:

- use assessment methods which are objective and focus on measurable attributes
- use systems which deliver consistent results irrespective of who is doing it
- sample people at all sites, on all shifts, working on all products or services
- use standard competences which are in everyday use within the company so that people understand what is being talked about.

The results will now enable you to assess the gaps in performance which must be bridged to ensure your staff are going to deliver the new required standards.

Of course the gaps are unlikely to be consistent across the company. In some places groups of staff may be more developed in some aspects because, perhaps, the services they offer are already class-leading. And then, within any group of people, individuals will have their own strengths and development needs.

Consolidating the data will enable patterns to emerge:

- There will probably be a core of new skills required by most people to enable the new levels of service to be implemented effectively.
- There may then be other groups who, because of their current jobs, may need development in specific areas.
- Finally there will be a mass of individual development needs, which reflect the varied backgrounds and experience of any group of staff.

4. Identify Key Players

TOP TIP 1

Make sure you get key stakeholders involved at the earliest opportunity.

Ensure you involve all the interested parties in the project process upfront to lessen the possibility of endless delays caused by the project being put on hold whilst another department gets involved after finding out about the project indirectly.

Your list of key people will include some or all of the following.

A Project 'Champion'

A champion needs to be someone well known in the company who is able to influence a wide range of key people, especially operational and financial 'movers and shakers'. They will promote your project and, if things get tough, argue why it should not be abandoned in favor of other projects.

Your champion will almost certainly have an operational interest in the successful outcome of the training initiative, probably contributing towards the success of corporate objectives which they are personally associated with.

Budget Holder

You will need to gain [and keep] the active support of the budget holder to ensure that progress is not held up by irritating budgetary approvals or delays.

Topic ‘Owner’

Each topic in the training portfolio will have someone who is recognized as the ‘owner’ of that project and who will have the power to ‘sign off’ changes to the strategy or the content of any materials related to it.

Subject Matter Experts

For the training to be credible you need to enlist the support of acknowledged experts in the field to provide up to the minute advice or guidance on the way the topic is being implemented, or may change in the light of future technological developments or legislative changes.

Instructional Designer

For the on-line learning to work effectively you will need a good instructional designer, whose job is to turn the raw facts or content into interesting and stimulating courseware.

Who to Choose?

Ideally the best solution is to find a subject matter expert who is also a good instructional designer. But don’t compromise if there’s any doubt. Their involvement will add credibility to the whole process.

You also have another issue to consider – do you use internal or external people?

Internal people will have extensive knowledge of current initiatives, be soaked in the culture and need no introduction to current processes or procedures. They will be less expensive than external subject matter experts or designers, but may not have so much flexibility in terms of availability.

The main benefit of using **external people** is they bring a fresh approach and are able to share best practice from other companies, unencumbered by all the internal politics or ‘baggage’.

The downsides are that they will need to spend time familiarizing themselves with your internal procedures or initiatives and, of course, they generally cost more than internal people.

So the choice may simply come down to costs or time, or just availability to enable a project to be completed in a given timescale.

Software Experts

The success of any e-learning program is geared to the flexibility and user-friendliness of the chosen learning management system so choose the best you can afford. Remember the old adage – quality lives on long after the price is forgotten.

The word will soon get around about which software companies offer the best solutions so make your business networking opportunities work for you.

Internal IT Department

TOP TIP 2

Leave the IT department out at your own peril! They are critical to the ongoing success of your project.

It's important to involve your own IT people right at the start of the project to ensure you have their full cooperation with the technical aspects of the training. They will need to develop a close working relationship with the learning software company to ensure complete compatibility between the different systems.

Line Managers and Staff

We've already mentioned the need to gain the commitment of the managers and staff who are likely to be affected by the training, and you need to keep them actively involved throughout the whole development lifecycle. Listen to what they say and build their ideas into the program as it develops.

5. Allocate Topics to E-learning and the Trainer-led Course

Now we come to the bit the experienced trainers will have been longing for! Designing the training program end-to-end. Start by selecting the models, concepts, skills, behaviors, tools and techniques required. Ensure every performance gap is targeted and the individual elements are specified and brought together so the whole program is a comprehensive and cohesive set of experiences.

This is best done in an extended brainstorming session – use Post-it Notes to free up minds and dispense with any potential barriers.

- Once you have selected all the elements arrange them into a logical sequence – again this is where the Post-it Notes really come into their own.
- At this stage allocate broad timings for each element but be prepared to change as you work through more detailed planning later.

Once you have the broad outline, involve senior managers and line managers from the target audience. Their input will be invaluable and, again, it keeps their ‘buy in’ to the eventual program.

Training designed this way needs to be more thorough than a conventional approach, because the whole content of what the learners are going to experience needs to be specified before the first person starts the course.

- With conventional training there is always the opportunity for the trainer to modify the course to meet the learners’ needs as you go along.
- With a combined e-learning and trainer-led approach there is much less opportunity to add additional learning points.

At some stage you have to go through the whole sequence of training experiences you’ve identified and decide how that particular piece of learning is to be delivered.

The main decider will be:

- is it knowledge, in which case it should be part of the e-learning course
- is it a skill, in which case it should be practised during the trainer-led course.

As you consider how each chunk of the course is to be delivered you may be surprised by the variety of other resources you already have, including:

- books and training packs
- published articles

- video tapes
- DVDs
- audio tapes
- interactive videos
- computer-based training
- existing course designs and materials
- one-to-one discussions
- visits.

Wherever possible try to identify more than one resource for each chunk of the course. For example, the variety of learning styles in your target audience means that a video which interests one group may be a real turn off for others.

6. Learning System Database

As you progress through the project you will quickly realize that a comprehensive data base is essential to manage the progress of learners through the program. You can use this database to:

- record learners' initial interest in a particular program
- enroll learners for Grasp the Theory [the e-learning course]
- monitor their progress through Grasp the Theory
- collect nominations for Practise the Skills [the trainer-led course]
- send out Course Joining Instructions
- record action points resulting from Practise the Skills
- manage relationships with suppliers – e.g. e-learning providers and course venues
- monitor learners' progress with action points
- monitor ultimate improvements in business performance
- evaluate the effectiveness of individual learning programs.

7. Establish Milestones and Budgets

The final part of this stage is to look ahead and set the key dates by which the various elements of the program need to be in place. Using one of the conventional project management software suites may help to keep everyone involved in the development of what will become a complex project.

Don't underestimate how long it will all take. A quick glance at the Project Specification document [Resource 1] will indicate the time scales you can typically expect.

Also be prepared for staged payments to the software company – they will almost certainly raise this at the initial meeting.