



E-learning—easy to create, hard to do well

Well-designed e-learning is powerful and effective, but poorly designed e-learning courses can do more harm than good, says Beryl Oldham. She identifies common e-learning issues and explains how to avoid them.

E-learning is a quick and effective way to deliver training that upskills and educates employees—right? Not necessarily! Poorly designed e-learning courses can do more harm than good. Time and good planning at the outset are needed to deliver results.

COMMON E-LEARNING SHORTCOMINGS

- **Poor course design:** E-learning course-design faults include overly-long courses with far too much written material and, the worst sin of all, courses that involve transferring a poorly-designed traditional course to an online medium with little modification.
- **Inappropriate use of media:** People learn differently online than they do in live situations, so simply capturing a presenter on video and putting it online is not effective. Some content is best presented in specific formats; people learn better when there's strong alignment between media choice and content type. Poor e-learning media choices often arise from the commonly-held belief that it is necessary to accommodate different learning styles. For example, well-intentioned designers may decide to have a narrator read the text for the 'auditory learners', or add some images for the 'visual learners'. Researchers have repeatedly debunked the learning styles myth. It is more effective to base e-learning media decisions on the nature of the content rather than perceived learning styles.
- **Unengaging content:** Any course, e-learning or otherwise, must emotionally connect with and interest learners. Establishing this connection is more difficult to do online, yet many e-learning courses fail to actively engage people. E-learning needs to be immersive and challenging.
- **Content overload:** Trying to squeeze too much content into the e-learning course is by far the most common issue. Just because the internet provides unlimited space in which to put content, doesn't mean you should use it.
- **Low online learning design skills:** The learning and development profession has been around a lot longer than e-learning has. Unfortunately, many L&D professionals haven't kept abreast with what the new technology means and how best to use it, so they lack the necessary skills and capability to design and deliver good e-learning courses.

This hasn't been helped by the lack of New Zealand-based professional development opportunities for L&D specialists. Fortunately, that will soon change when the New Zealand Association for Training and Development's (NZATD) competency framework is launched.

- **Treating training as an add-on:** Training is often a last-minute add-on to a wider organisational project (eg, change projects). This affects trainers' abilities to develop good e-learning programmes due to lack of time and budget.
- **Using e-learning as a cost-cutting (rather than value-add) tool:** Thinking of e-learning as a cheap way to deliver training creates the risk of doing more harm than good. As is the case when building a house, an e-learning course is only as good as its foundation. Invest time in analysis before designing the course because the better you understand what the training is trying to achieve, the more effective the end results will be. This may sound obvious, but it is very common for organisations to rush into designing and delivering training programmes without clarity about what they are trying to achieve with the training.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE DEVELOPING E-LEARNING

There are several important questions to address before beginning training programme design. Firstly, check that a training programme is even needed. Often organisations rush into developing a training programme without identifying the root cause of performance gaps. It could be that process improvements, or improving people leaders' skills rather than training, will fix the issue.

I recently worked with an organisation upgrading its IT system. It was about to design a complicated course to retrain all employees to use the upgraded system version.

A needs analysis identified what people would have to do differently when using the new system and what those changes would look like. It transpired that, even though the upgrade was complex from an IT system perspective, the resulting user process changes were minor. No training was needed; employees were simply updated on the process changes and given a job aid to remind them.

Be clear about the training programme's purpose. Start any training development exercise with a clear end-point in mind. Understanding what the organisation wants to achieve from the training and then setting key performance indicators (KPIs) will enable the effectiveness of the training to be tracked and adjustments made as required along the way.

Common shortcomings include training that focuses on telling people what they need to know, rather than what they need to do. All the knowledge in the world won't help if one doesn't know how to apply it.

Establish clear learning goals and evaluation measures at the outset. Articulate exactly what the training programme is trying

to achieve, and how you will know when it has been achieved. Think about visible on-the-job behaviours that learners will need to 'do' to eliminate performance gaps, not the traditional 'explain', 'describe' or 'define'. Delete any material that does not directly support the learning goals.

Understand who the training programme is being designed for. Consider attributes such as age, skill levels, prior knowledge, language skills, cultural barriers, technology skills, etc. The more you know about the learners, the more effective the training programme will be.

For example, too many organisations insist on delivering written content-heavy courses to their employees. Most find it difficult—and boring—to wade through screeds of written information, and this can be a particular issue for low-skilled workforces.

When designing e-learning courses, bear in mind that around half of New Zealand's workforce has significant literacy and/or numeracy gaps. Be aware that the knowledge conferred during the e-learning course cannot be fully utilised unless the recipient possesses the underlying communication (reading, writing, speaking, listening), numeracy, ICT and critical thinking skills to leverage that information. Ensure the training addresses any anticipated gaps. Another thing to consider is whether the learners have access to devices and connections required for e-learning.

Taking a 'one size fits all' approach is all too common. For example, with system changes it is not always necessary to train everyone about all aspects of the change. It may be more appropriate to educate some employees about the part of the process that directly affects them (including the steps immediately before and after their process/s so that they get the context). It could be that only supervisors and operations managers need to be trained in the entire process.

Be sure to regularly evaluate progress throughout every stage of a training programme's design—including during the analysis phase. Reflect on the findings, and modify as you go.

Questions to ask include: Have I correctly identified my audience? Are the learning objectives useful and in line with what the learners need to do on-job? If anything doesn't seem right, fix it before moving on. It can be tempting to rush the time-consuming analysis stage, but remember that a training programme is only as good as its foundation.

TOP TIPS FOR DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE E-LEARNING

Use the right tools. There are several e-learning course development software applications on the market but some are better than others. Questions to ask before purchasing include:

- Does it use universal (as opposed to proprietary) standards, such as SCORM, Tin Can API, or xAPI?
- Is the application flexible enough to enable non-linear design?
- Is it well supported and accepted in the L&D industry?

Avoid taking a linear approach to instructional design and the course itself. Build feedback loops into the design process so that errors or illogical flow can be quickly identified and rectified. Errors typically amplify, so fix problems early rather than letting them compound.

Linear learning is one-dimensional and risks being boring. Draw upon video gaming's success and design the course in a way that gives learners the opportunity to explore. No one would want to play a video game that restricted them to running down the corridor, then through room A, then room B, then C in search of the baddie they are hunting. The thrill of choice and exploration into the unknown is an element that makes video games exciting!

This also applies to e-learning. Even though everyone needs to get to the same end-point, give them a range of paths—some more detailed, others more direct—that they can take to getting there.

Keep content short and simple. Just because you have a lot of content to hand does not mean that it needs to be included in the course modules. Be prepared to let go of most content and prune mercilessly.

Provide an engaging user-experience by actively involving learners in the process. Build a variety of compelling, real stories into the content that are told by people the learners can connect with. For example, health and safety e-learning can be so much more compelling if it features real-life people in similar roles talking about the workplace injuries they suffered and how it affected their life.

Also consider providing help mechanisms so that learners seek assistance if they get stuck. This can be achieved by giving access to an online coach or a user forum that enables peer support.

Well-designed e-learning is powerful and effective. As is the case with most things, time and thought invested at the outset, and ongoing evaluation and improvement throughout the course design process, will deliver the best results.

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