eLearning: The Foundation for Success

Internal and External Approaches

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Training Solutions for the Financial and Human Markets

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Preparing For the Move to E-learning

During tough times, a learning organization may need to make a move into e learning - the cost is lower, the maintenance is less expensive, and the personnel requirement is lower, as well. If your organization is about to make this migration, consider vital elements in three areas before you move forward: preparedness, pre-migration, and migration.

Before you actually prepare to move your organization to e learning, the first thing you should do is analyze the current organizational culture when it comes to learning. Through this analysis, you'll discover the organization's level of preparedness for e learning. Is there even an "e" element in the organization? Are all levels of associates accustomed to email contact and basic computer usage, or do their jobs not require this kind of contact? If there is no "e" element, you may want to consider introducing e learning at a very slow pace to allow people to get used to the idea and the access. Of course, if your organization is tech-savvy already, this part of a migration is usually easier.

The second part of preparedness goes back to the organization's managers. Are they currently held accountable for any training outcomes? Do the managers have to schedule their associates for training and ensure that the associates get it? In regulatory and "constant-change" environments, managers sometimes have this responsibility. If your organization's managers do not currently have a training responsibility, remember that part of your migration will be an explanation of how and what each manager will be responsible for when it comes to training.

Keep in mind that in an e learning environment, only the manager and the employee will know on a day-to-day basis if courses are being accessed and completed successfully.

Once you've looked at general preparedness, take a look at how you'll migrate to an e learning culture. The first part of this is to examine the existing training courses and any future courses to determine what could move to an online format. This is a good time to point out that there should be no swing completely to e learning just to save money or advance technologically. Many organizations have made the mistake of putting all training online - only to have to go back and completely renovate the program. So what courses and types of information lend themselves to online formats? Informative courses, orientation courses, and even regulatory courses are great candidates for conversion. Even in longer classroom courses, some of the information portions can be moved to pre-classroom online formats.

Next, determine how you're going to implement the online learning system. Will you take courses "off the shelf" to be deployed by the vendor? Do you need a Learning Management System that delivers courses and tracks completion? Or is your organization technologically advanced enough to create its own LMS? Whatever your choice, you must take the time to consider all aspects of this step before creating a migration plan. In addition, consider if the organization will offer certifications or rewards for completing various core e learning programs. This can be a great incentive for employees and will also increase the organization's retention.

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For the actual migration to an online learning environment, you'll need to take steps that are in your organization's "size"; if there is not much of an online environment, take small steps and avoid rolling everything out at once. There are great ways to increase "e culture" without scaring the masses and alienating those employees who are not quite confident in their own technical skills. For example, start by sending out informational emails that detail the migration and what courses might be accessible. In these emails, focus on the benefits for both the employees and the organization. If you have an "Intranet" site, consider appropriating a page for the e learning transformation to get people used to going online for information.

Probably the most important step during an e learning migration is to communicate. It's as simple as letting the organization know what changes are being made, why, and how they can access their training easily and conveniently.

If you think through these aspects of an e learning transformation before any work is done, you'll have a good idea of how ready your organization is - and how to proceed with a cost efficient migration.

eLearning: About External Licensing

When your organization needs eLearning programs but doesn't have an internal program in place, external licensing of eLearning may be a good choice. Many eLearning and LMS providers offer external training that you can use as part of your organization's learning and development program. Let's take a basic look at external licensing, as well as discuss what you'll need to create your eLearning program using this approach.

First, what is external licensing of eLearning? In the simplest terms, external licensing means that you choose and "purchase" courses and programs "off the shelf" from vendors. These vendors, in turn, host the learning, deliver it to your organization, and manage the content for you. We will examine benefits and potential obstacles of external licensing in our next discussion, but you may already see yours developing here.

So what does the external licensing "recipe" require? First, in terms of personnel, you'll need your staff to choose and review courses and programs. This means that your staff should have, at the very least, assessed the audience for learning needs and outcomes. With this knowledge, your learning and development staff will be able to narrow down their choices of online courses and programs. Along with staff, you may need SME's or stakeholders to review the courses, as well. After all, you probably do not want to roll out an eLearning program that does not meet the approval of SME's or stakeholders.

Once you or your staff has narrowed down the choices, you'll need to estimate how many learners will be accessing the courses or programs. This is a twofold piece of the process. First, you can estimate the cost with vendors using your estimate. Second, you can run the estimate by your internal IT department to verify that this number of learners can access outside applications at any given point in time.

There are, however, other decisions that you will need to make. What method will you use to deliver the training? Some vendors will host the learning program directly for you, which will require participants to directly access the vendor website. Or, if you have an LMS, you may want to have the vendor host through your

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system. Either way, you'll still have to have a discussion with IT to determine if the organization's technical infrastructure can handle the influx of users.

As a training and development decision-maker, you are probably accustomed to budgeting. But when it comes to licensing your content externally, you'll have to build a budget based on the current year's cost as well as coming years. For example, if the course you want to license costs $15 per user, you'll probably want to create an estimate of how many users you'll have in two or three years' time. If your organization is in growth mode, this is an important aspect of your budget. And remember that the budget for external licensing of eLearning is similar to leasing a car: the amount you pay on a monthly basis will be recurring over time, with no eventual ownership of the content. Don't get confused by a vendor using the term "purchase" to describe your arrangement. What you are essentially doing is paying a recurring fee to use the content. In addition, you should also find out if your fees cover updates to content, especially if the content is changeable in nature.

One of the other things you'll need is an overall process for your external licensing approach. In other words, map out what you intend to do before you ask your staff to do it. Remember that you'll want to have an analysis or assessment on the front end, conducted by your staff on an internal basis. Once you have this information, you'll want your staff to begin looking at courses and vendors before you bring in your SME's and stakeholders. Give that group your best choices so that they are not bogged down with too many vendors and courses to review. Determine your review and approval process, and remember to include cost in that

process. There's no sense in finding a course everyone loves only to discover that you cannot afford it. The point here is take the time to create a process for external licensing.

Now that we've discussed the basics of external licensing, let's look discuss the benefits and potential obstacles of this approach.

eLearning: Developing Internally vs. Licensing Externally

eLearning is becoming an essential in learning and development, especially for organizations with diverse workforces. Keep in mind that a diverse workforce, in terms of learning, could be a group of employees who are physically together but learn at different paces. A diverse workforce could be geographically and culturally different, as well, meaning the employees can be remote from the headquarter organization in many ways. But with the advent of eLearning comes the decision about whether to develop eLearning programs internally or to outsource them to vendors or eLearning providers. Before you make a decision for your organization, it may be a good idea to look at each approach, define it, and determine the benefits and drawbacks, both in general and for your organization. First, let's take a look at internal development.

Internal development of eLearning is the process of developing, designing, deploying, evaluating, and changing courses and programs within your own organization. It sounds simple, and from outward appearances it is. In fact, any time we see the term "internal development", we think of control, ease of access, and probably less cost. Most of these thoughts are true, and we will look at benefits and drawbacks of internal eLearning development next. But let's break down internal

development into its necessary components, so that you can determine if you have the infrastructure to take it on.

First, let's examine what you'll need in order to undertake internal eLearning development. One of the main items to look at is your delivery method. After all, you can spend time in development but all of this means nothing if you do not have a reliable delivery method. Do you have a Learning Management System that can deliver each program and record its completion? If so, does your Learning Management System allow you to develop content that is packaged and ready to deliver? If you are without an LMS, finding one should be your first step. Along with this, decide if you want to spend the extra time and money to obtain an LMS that allows for content creation.

Let's look at content creation. If your LMS has an authoring tool, you'll still need instructional designers to create the content. Remember that the online environment requires small "chunks" of information that are optimized for the remote audience. But if you do not have an authoring tool, you'll need not only instructional designers but also the expertise to create online programs that can be delivered by your LMS. Some designers have both skills sets, but some do not. And your decision will be which skill set and which people.

What about content expertise? Remember that, just as in standard instructor led training development, you'll need to pull in subject matter experts (SME's) to provide and approve content. eLearning, just like ILT, is only as good as its content, so consider how much access you'll have to your SME's - and how you can get them together with your design team.

Time is another element that is necessary for eLearning development. For some reason, some learning and development professionals seem to believe that eLearning development takes less time. In some cases it may, but in the beginning you'll need time to develop content, approve it, test it, and test its viability in your delivery method. And you'll need time to work out the bugs in your development process.

That brings up one last necessary element in internal elearning development: the process. What will your process be? This depends on all of the other elements, such as staff, timing, SME's, and delivery method. For example, if you have SME's working directly with designers, you'll need to determine the process of how they'll work together, how they'll test the content, and how they'll approve it for delivery. And with this process comes your management of time, the steps involved, and the problems that may develop during that process.

Now that we've discovered the basics of internal development, let's look at the benefits and potential drawbacks of this approach.

Benefits and Potential Drawbacks of External eLearning

Licensing external eLearning content can provide you and your organization with definite benefits, along with some potential drawbacks. Again, as we discussed on the benefits and obstacles to developing internally, your role is to determine where the greatest benefit lies. But as we are discussing external licensing, remember that it can be a temporary approach. As we will see, the infrastructure requirements are much less than developing your own eLearning. First, let's examine the benefits of the external licensing approach.

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In terms of cost, we will examine both time and money. In relation to time, externally licensing your eLearning content can be quick and efficient. Once you decide on the vendor and sign the contract, delivery may be relatively quick. And there is no run-up to full staffing, like you would need to do with internal development. Cost is another potential benefit. Remember that the cost of both approaches will depend on your infrastructure, the number of users, and the current technological condition of the organization. But suppose that most of these factors are in place: a per-head eLearning course may not be a major cost at all, especially up front.

Another benefit of external licensing is in the management of learning. In most cases, a vendor will manage content and delivery for you. In terms of delivery, if participants are visiting a website there is virtually no delivery concern for you. Content management is also a plus. For example, if your organization is highly regulated, the cost of maintaining regulatory training and all the changes that comes with it may be fairly high. But a vendor that specializes in this type of training has a staff that maintains the content. And all you have to do is wait for the update to be pushed out.

In similar context, you will recall that we discussed the necessity of an internal delivery mechanism that will be necessary for internal development. In general, this is not necessary for external licensing. In many cases, the vendor hosts the courses, which means that your users simply log on via the Internet and take a class. Then the vendor provides you with reports on completions.

There are some obvious obstacles that may come along with external licensing of eLearning content. First, consider content control. Just as content management by a vendor can be a benefit, it can also be an obstacle. For example, if your organization's environment changes rapidly, you may want the control that comes with developing your own content. Customization of externally licensed content is expensive, if it exists at all, and may or may not work exactly for your organization's audience.

Along these lines, most external content cannot be branded to match your organization's look and feel. For some organizations, this is not issue. But for some, who spend time and money creating a brand, this can be a deal-breaker. Participants know that they are not accessing an intervention that was created and branded just for them. Also along these lines, you will not be able to target the content to your audience, which in some organizations can be a deal breaker.

We've already discussed cost as a benefit, but we have to discuss it as a potential obstacle when it comes to external licensing. Many vendors provide eLearning on a per-learner basis, which can be cost effective in a small organization. But if you have a larger organization and plan to reuse content on a regular basis, the cost can become an escalation. And although you may see some return on investment versus your cost, what happens when the ROI begins to level off? Alternatively, what if your external courses are simply the ones that cannot be priced in terms of ROI unless something goes wrong, like a regulator citation? In this case, the escalating cost may not be worthwhile in the long rung.

As we've mentioned, external licensing of eLearning content may be a great place to start with online learning. Once you've built up the time and the budget, you can transition to an internal development approach. Regardless,

your role is to make the choice of approach based on your organization and its needs.

Benefits and Potential Drawbacks of Internal eLearning

Internal development of eLearning brings both benefits and a few potential drawbacks to learning and development as well as the organization as a whole. As with any business decision, your job is to determine if and when the benefits will outweigh the drawbacks. Or, you may determine that drawbacks will be no more than a blip on your radar. Let's look at the benefits of internal development first.

One of the primary benefits of developing eLearning internally is the control that comes with it. As the developer and owner of the content, your organization has the ultimate control of each and every word, activity, test question, and evaluation. This means that if your organization sometimes has rapid or constant changes in policies, procedures, products, or regulations that affect training content, you'll be able to implement those changes quickly and efficiently. Plus, you can tailor your content to your audience so that it makes a long-lasting impact on the learner.

In terms of time, developing internally may take less time once your process is up and running. For example, let's say you have an instructional designer who manages the SME, develops outcomes, and creates content, and then passes the prepared storyboard on to a course developer who prepares the course for delivery. This process can become very efficient over time-and end up saving time that you might spend testing externally licensed courses.

Cost is also a benefit to internal development of eLearning. Although there may be an initial cost, which we will discuss in a moment, the cost of designing and delivering your own programs may be lower than external development, especially if external courses are paid by the learner. And once you've developed a staff, this cost will also be lower in the long run.

Finally, internally developed eLearning can be branded to match your organization. This kind of seamless development and delivery of learning, even across a diverse audience, may have more credibility than an externally packaged program. With your own branding, your courses can match the overall "look and feel" of the organization's online applications, such as HR, social media, and internal Internet.

What about potential drawbacks or opportunities? Again, keep in mind that just because a potential drawback exists does not mean that your organization must suffer through it. First, the process of developing internally will require you to either re-purpose existing staff or hire new staff that can handle the process. In addition, the staff you manage will most likely be handling both instructor led and eLearning programs.

In terms of delivery, internal development pretty much requires that you have an internal mechanism for delivering and recording online learning interventions. This can be an "off the shelf" LMS or it can be something that is developed by IT within the organization, but you'll need it. As we mentioned earlier, if you have courses and programs without a delivery method, you've wasted your time and effort.

Also, costs in terms of time and money are also potential drawbacks for internal development.

Although we have discussed the potential of saving time in the long run, you may find that time expense is much higher in the beginning of internal development. This time includes working out a process, testing and re-testing your delivery method, and breaking in the staff. Costs, as with any new adventure, may be higher on the front end, as well. For example, you may find that you'll spend more in year one on staffing and technology than in years to follow. In addition, LMS technologies change, and you may want to upgrade at some point going forward. Along with this, you may find that your internal development has become successful to the point that you have to add more staff to handle content development and deployment.

Remember that your role is to determine how the benefits will outweigh the potential opportunities, or to decide that the potential problems are just normal obstacles for your organization. Next, let's take a look at external licensing of eLearning programs.

Developing Internally vs. Licensing Externally: A Combined Approach

We've discussed eLearning in terms of internal development versus external licensing as two separate approaches. For many organizations, a separate approach using one or the other method may work. But what about an organization that has some leeway in regard to its eLearning programs? A combined approach using both internal and external eLearning content might be the way to go.

First of all, what is a combined approach? There is no number, such as 50% of content, or "demarcation line", such as all regulatory training should be outsourced to a vendor. A combined approach will work with the

organization's budget, infrastructure, staff, and audience to come up with the right combination of internal and external content.

So why would you use this approach? Let's say your organization is investing in eLearning and you have the budget to develop your own content. But you don't want to get in over your head. In a case like this, you could begin developing internal content for those items that are more efficiently managed, such as those with a major development process at the beginning and minor changes thereafter. Using this content as your own, you can test your system and its infrastructure before going full swing. On the other side of this, you can outsource those items that may test your reserves, such as regulatory training or general industry learning.

As with any of the approaches we've discussed, there are benefits and potential obstacles. Consider the benefits of a combined approach. You may be able to focus your internal staff's efforts on customizable, branded, internal eLearning programs while giving the vendor the programs that don't require too much attention. From this, your organization can be introduced to eLearning on a good scale, that is, on a customized, targeted scale. In terms of time, consider the fact that you could essentially be managing and implementing two separate eLearning projects for your organization. In our previous example, what if you could roll out the organization-specific program as well as the industry-related program at the same time? Essentially, a combined approach would allow you to cover more ground more quickly and more efficiently.

But what about the potential obstacles? As we've mentioned, cost is one of the most obvious. You may not have the luxury of a

budget that stretches to both internal development and external licensing. And if you're not sure, spend plenty of time examining both options before you decide to use a combined approach. If you and your staff are handling too much as it is, a combined approach could be difficult, as well. Just because you are looking to outsource content management does not mean that there won't be any management internally. For example, someone has to manage the relationship with the vendor, billing and payment, and quality assurance. Another potential drawback of a combined approach is spreading your SME's and stakeholders too thin. We already know that an SME most likely has another job, and

that he or she is adding training responsibilities to what already exists. If you ask an SME to review internal content as well as externally licensed content, you should make sure he or she understands the extent of work that will be required. You definitely do not want an SME think that you are overloading them.

As you can see, a combined approach is definitely useful in certain situations, but use caution if you plan to embark upon this approach. Think it through completely and you shouldn't have any problems. And, keep in mind that once you embark upon an external licensing approach, you can always move to an internal development or a combined approach.

Bryant Nielson – Strategic Alliance & Acquisitions Director at Financial Training Solutions a division of CapitalWave Inc – offers 20+ years of training and talent management for executives, business owners, and top performing sales executives in taking the leap from the ordinary to extraordinary. Bryant is a trainer, business & leadership coach, and strategic planner for many sales organizations. Bryant's 27 year business career has been based on his results-oriented style of empowering.

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