

Rapid e-learning: 'more opportunities than threats to the e-learning industry'.

An excellent E-learning Network event in May on rapid e-learning, finished up with two teams agreeing to take polarized views in a light-hearted debate on rapid e-learning. The motion they were debating was: 'We believe that rapid e-learning offers as many threats, as it does opportunities, for the e-learning industry'. After the debate, about a third of the audience was for the motion; however the other two thirds felt that rapid e-learning offered more opportunities than threats to the e-learning industry.

The consensus of the 60 e-learning professionals in the room was: 'we know there are some issues of concern, but in general we believe rapid e-learning is good for the industry and here to stay'. Taking this consensus view, our challenge as an industry, is to embrace and develop rapid e-learning and make it as good as it can be. And that means:

- having enough competition in the rapid e-learning space so the tools themselves are constantly made ever more user-friendly, easy for collaborative working and effective at producing learning results;
- ensuring that we use rapid e-learning only for appropriate projects;
- when rapid e-learning is appropriate, select the right rapid e-learning tool for the job; and then
- efficiently project manage the development and delivery so the learning is as effective as it possibly can be.

Enough competition

There are at least 7 major software tools for creating rapid e-learning content but many large corporate buyers of e-learning are reticent to 'fix their colours to the mast' about which one they favour. This is a healthy state of competition, which encourages the rapid e-learning industry to innovate and differentiate their product offering. This will ensure that rapid e-learning tools continue to get ever more effective. It would be disappointing if, at this stage, there were significant mergers in the industry that reduced the number of competing products on the market. It would be like everyone using just one type of software to develop presentations.

Using rapid e-learning for the right projects

The rule of thumb is that if you want people to learn new knowledge, then rapid e-learning is a great tool to get something out there quickly. So for good projects for rapid e-learning are briefings, updates, introductions or system tours. However let's say you want to change behaviour, skills or attitudes in your audience; for example you want to create a customised 'Managing diversity in the workplace' course. In this case, your audience will need a richer experience that engages them at a deeper level and offers them different learning paths through that experience. This kind of material is harder for a subject matter expert to create quickly using a rapid e-learning tool.

At this 'tool selection' stage there will usually be several choices for an e-learning buyer, of which rapid e-learning is one of the choices. These are the typical choices:

- Put a bunch of information pages on the corporate intranet and email a link to your target audience.
- Use a rapid e-learning software tool to create an e-learning course using your own L&D staff as the resource.
- Outsource the production of rapid content development to a UK consultant.
- Outsource the production of a media-rich e-learning course with multiple learning paths to a UK consultant.

- Outsource the production of development to an offshore consultant who offers low development costs and quick turnarounds.

Selecting the right rapid e-learning tool for the job

With a variety of different rapid e-learning software tools on the market, an e-learning project owner needs to keep abreast of the best tools for the job. Such informed buyers will look to independent research reports to compare the tools. Good examples are Elearnity's 'Core Insights' report on rapid e-learning and Kineo's Rapid e-learning Tool Selection guide. Also informative are the results of 'shoot-outs', such as those organised by the US-based e-learning researcher Brandon Hall. Shoot-outs are where a group of 'guinea pig' instructional designers are each given a different rapid e-learning tool but the same content. The winner is the tool that creates the most effective learning in the shortest amount of time. And of course, there is the 'Best use of rapid e-learning' award from the *e.learningage* magazine, which is announced in November this year.

E-learning's problem child

The 4th issue a good rapid e-learning tool needs to address is project management. Project management is the problem child of the e-learning industry. Everyone knows e-learning projects could be better managed but we can't really agree on what to do to make it better. Good rapid e-learning tools will have some workflow elements in them that make the management of the whole project easier.

The fact of global working means that the subject-matter experts may be in one country, the developers in a second country and the project owners in a third. And then the training is rolled out to a global audience of learners. So for these types of projects, collaborative working is going to be essential, particularly when the content is constantly being modified right up the last minute. A good rapid e-learning tool needs to allow team members to collaborate quickly and efficiently across multiple time zones. Many people regard server-based rapid e-learning systems as being preferable to all team members emailing attachments to each other with revised content and/or versions. A server-based system, as opposed to a desktop system, can store all the versions of the content and keep a record of revisions by all team members. However all team members need constant internet access to make this kind of system effective.

'Burger or 5-course meal, Sir?'

To use a food retailing industry analogy, there is no doubt that sometimes one just wants a quick burger, or a bowl of steaming noodles, rather than a long, over-fussy, expensive but ultimately delicious 5-course dining experience. The challenge to the consumer is to pick the food retailing outlet that best suits their needs for a particular occasion.

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