The Top 5 eLearning Mistakes

There are many reasons that consultants are called in to assist organizations with their eLearning initiatives. Sometimes it is because clients have experienced or have heard of scenarios that ended in disaster. We have encountered these scenarios often enough that they are worth discussing with clients ahead of time.

Here are the "Top 5 Most Repeated Mistakes" we have encountered and suggestions on how to avoid them.

1. Just Place the Course Content in HTML Pages.

This is the easiest starting point for the conversion of an instructor led course to an online course. The process usually goes like this:

1. Turn course notes into prose.
2. Turn prose into a "page turner" web course.

The result is a book that forces you to sit at a computer to read. It's not engaging enough for topics of any length. Users quickly become bored. Soon the mention of the word eLearning causes people to raise their eyebrows and look out the window.

Solution: Instead, consider a dual approach. First, take advantage of the multimedia features of eLearning. Use short segments of digital video to emphasize key points. Include activities and simulations. These techniques enhance the interest level of the courseware and still keep its availability at 24/7.

If this still doesn't adequately address the topic or sufficiently enhance its usability, consider blending more human interaction into the mix. Adding a short instructor led review or a mentoring session to the course design can provide the needed interactivity. This can be accomplished by blending a web-based module and an assigned classroom session without adding major cost to the budget. A mentoring session might also be appropriate. These human interactions can be virtual Internet sessions to save time and reduce travel costs.

2. Just Skip the Assessment

It's amazing how great the temptation is to skip the assessment when facing a time crunch. True adherents to Instructional Systems Design (ISD) are far less prone to do this, but once it's determined that ISD is too complicated for a particular effort, the assessment is often the last item produced and or it is omitted entirely.

Some organizations have turned this into policy and have built out the eLearning program without any automated assessment. If they exist at all they are paper tests that create bottlenecks of manual labor. To often in the corporate environment, modules that have no assessments result in courseware that is only skimmed and not taken seriously.

Solution: Quizzing along the way and a final module assessment helps the learner focus on the main points of the material. It is the most basic of interactions and, with the right tools, is the simplest to implement. Assessments also help track utilization and provide justification of the Learning program to management. There are excellent, inexpensive tools that create automatically graded assessments. Think twice before you decide to skip building an assessment and make your courseware "just a content piece".

3. Only the Tests Are Interactive

There is the also the mistake of using eLearning capabilities only for automated testing.

This most often occurs when using existing content such as a videotape or book. Because web course authoring tools make it easy to create automatically scored assessments, they are sometimes the only components to be converted to eLearning.

Using online tests is fine in a well-balanced mix of delivery options, but doing this for the first or only eLearning initiative sends the wrong message. Users associate eLearning with the more negative experience of the test itself. Soon this becomes the standard meaning of eLearning in the organization.

Solution: Don't succumb to this temptation. Make sure you have a balanced eLearning approach from the start. Use the computer to deliver both content and assessments. Interactions such as simulations and video case studies liven the experience and increase retention.

4. Post and Hope

A number of eLearning advocates have started their eLearning programs by posting the courses on the corporate intranet and hoping the users go to them. Many early adopters of web-based courseware took this approach only to find that utilization was less than ten percent. Tempted by high quality and relatively inexpensive web course authoring tools, it is easy to build a series of web courses, post them on the corporate intranet, and call it your eLearning initiative.

Solution: A Learning Management System (LMS) provides a number of solutions to the Post and Hope syndrome. An LMS not only personalizes the

curriculum for the learner, but also provides feedback to both learner and management on the progress of the Learning program. Furthermore, an LMS has built-in mechanisms for promotion of the curricula. It also has the ability to link the curricula to both job skills and career advancement. If you attempt to launch eLearning without an LMS, be aware that you must spend additional time and energy on these issues to ensure successful adoption of your eLearning initiative.

5. Fail to Engage the IT Department

The most dramatic reason for failure of an eLearning initiative is the failure to engage the Information Technology department early enough in the game. The eLearning approach means that the IT department now becomes your course delivery vehicle. This change of delivery strategies has important consequences. Here's how the story usually unfolds:

A courseware vendor comes in and demonstrates a well-designed and engaging third party web course. The course has great motion graphics, professional sound, and stirring video sequences. The content addresses all the topic issues with just a little modification. It generates much excitement within the group. The decision to implement eLearning is made.

The courseware installs easily. The modifications are easily made. The vendor gives a generous quantity discount and it fits within the budget. The courseware runs well in the training department. A few remote tests are made from home and a couple of representative locations. It all looks great. The decision is made to launch company-wide.

On the fateful day a mass email goes to "Everyone" announcing the new courseware topic and the start of the organizations eLearning program. Immediately hordes of interested learners flock to the course at the same time – only to find the course crashes, the network clogs, accounting can't print payroll checks, and four hundred users call to complain that they don't have sound cards.

The course is quickly withdrawn and the eLearning program suffers a six month setback.

Solution: These problems can be avoided by engaging IT at the beginning of the initiative. An infrastructure assessment can be performed to match the requirements of the courseware to the capabilities of the organization's system of servers, network gear, and personal computers. Upgrades, enhancements, and changes to the gear are often required before successful launch. Policies and procedures may also have to be reviewed and changes made so that the applications supporting the eLearning initiative do not interfere with existing mission critical systems.

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Though there are other eLearning stories to relate, these five are the most often repeated. Avoiding these mistakes will help ensure the success of your next eLearning initiative.

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