



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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To Market, To Market, To Buy a Fat Stake

Addressing stakeholder concerns to increase e-Learning usage

E-learning is successful when it focuses on the needs of stakeholders, especially those who have the maximum buy-in. The stakeholders, in this context, are the learners. However, it is also important to address the concerns of the other parties involved in any e-learning initiative - learning institutions, support staff, trainers and instructors.

Addressing stakeholder issues gains even more significance when organizations intend to market their e-learning content globally. Geographically diverse stakeholders come with their own set of issues. The bad news is that no stakeholder issue can take a backseat, as every issue is critical to e-learning success. The good news is that meeting stakeholder expectations is easy!

Stakeholder concerns can be broadly classified under eight areas - technological, pedagogical, user design interface, institutional apprehensions, e-learning management, ethics, evaluation and support staff.

King customer

E-learning is valuable to learners only when it is designed to be user-friendly, accessible, affordable, and facilitated by an efficient learning environment. Therefore, one of the first e-learning concerns is pedagogical in nature. Important questions to ask are, "Is the content dynamic? If yes, then how often is it updated?"

Static content (grammar rules, historic organizational events) needs no updating. However, dynamic content (organizational policies, law) needs regular revision. It is important that the training department create a database of content that has the potential to change. The next step is to develop an ongoing updating methodology that analyzes and updates course content as and when required. Obsolete or outdated course content easily frustrates learners, leading to a disinterest in e-learning courses.

Standards

e-Learning administrators are often concerned about optimizing its usage. While technological advancements offer many solutions, their magnitude and complexity confuse the best of administrators. Standardization is a way out.

Most learning objects are designed based on international interoperability standards such as SCORM and IEEE. Including such standardization in the infrastructural design of e-learning improves the sharing and reusability of course content. Reusable learning saves the organization time and money. Interoperability is an added benefit as organizations can collaborate with other e-learning institutions the world over.

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Use, abuse!

Globally diverse learners interpret commonly used signs and symbols differently. For instance, in the United States a nod signifies assent, but it connotes just the opposite in some Middle-East countries. A thumbs-up signal shows approval or well done in other parts of the world. However, in Bangladesh it is used for challenging someone! When dealing with cross-cultural learners, it is important to pay attention to the page and site designs of course content.

Using uncommon jargon, ambiguous humor, bigoted jokes, acronyms and comments in the interface design can lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings. This affects cross-cultural communications. Such e-learning content is sure to lose its global appeal. An ideal interface design avoids or reduces the use of words or content that affect usage.

Improving appeal

Developing e-learning content is highly time and effort consuming. Therefore, most e-learning designers and non-tenure faculty are bound to ask the question, "Would I be given the same credit for developing an online e-learning course as I would for publication of an article in a professional magazine or journal?" Faculty members in learning institutions find developing online content a thankless job. They believe that it doesn't help further their careers or speed up promotions. Institutions that recognize or credit faculty members for their online contributions address this institutional concern well.

On your marks!

e-Learning makes sense to trainers and instructors only when learners attain a high level of participation to fulfill learning goals. Evaluations answer important questions such as, "Is learner performance improving post training?" and "Are assessments fair and accurate?" Assessing distant learners is quite a challenge for e-learning instructors and administrators. Additionally, the issue of cheating plagues online courses. e-Learning institutions should develop a mechanism that truly measures learner knowledge without allowing any scope for cheating.

Hacker menace

Providing adequate security measures is a challenge every network manager faces. Hackers threaten efficient e-learning management. The bad news is that online content cannot be immunized against hackers. However, the use of encryptions, for example a coding system, can protect academic networks. Additionally, such encryptions allow learners to access and send confidential information online.

Friend indeed!

Repeated technical snags in e-learning can frustrate learners. It is important to rid an e-learning course of such problems. Additionally, training departments should put together teams of efficient online support staff to deal with any technical problem the learner might encounter.



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Distant learners are often concerned about backup support in terms of resources and staff. While it is easy to meet resource demands, technical or online help staff at times is inept at dealing with learners. An ideal approach is to train the support staff to improve their human or soft skills. A trained online support staff member can communicate well with distant learners to help them through minor technical problems.

The question of ethics

Vigilant activists find easy prey in e-learning programs that fail to cater to learners affected by issues of digital divide. When developing e-learning programs, designers should consider the following:

- Internet loading speeds vary
- Connection speeds vary
- There are differences in bandwidth

Learners with slow connections and limited bandwidth find it difficult to download large files. Videos or images without a text alternative are inaccessible to visually impaired learners.

The use of multimedia elements and a non-text alternate for textual content (in order to make e-learning accessible to the visually impaired) are solutions to most digital divide issues.

In keeping with organizations, e-learning institutes too are going global and addressing the increasing demand of providing e-learning courses. Stakeholder concerns are bound to rise too. However, an advantage of such a situation is that organizations now have a better idea about which global e-learning practices work and which do not. The most meaningful e-learning courses are well-designed, well-distributed, learner-centric, flexible, easily accessible and staffed with quality support people. They result in high levels of learner satisfaction and returns on investment. Although it sounds formidable, it is achievable!