
Moving Online:

Taking Your Classroom Training to the 'Net

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This white paper describes the process of moving classroom training online. The decision to move training online is very complex. After you've made the decision to implement online training (or e-learning), what steps should you take to make this transition? In this white paper, we focus on four major aspects of moving training online: 1) overall design considerations, 2) selecting an e-learning contractor, 3) estimating your costs, and 4) delivering on the contract. The final section of this paper describes several additional issues that apply when the course content is highly complex and "soft," such as courses in leadership training programs.

Preparing to Go Online: Overall Design Considerations

Taking an existing face-to-face course and putting it online is much more than a simple conversion process. It will probably take more time than you think, especially if this is your first foray into e-learning. We suggest that you use the opportunity to rethink the course and create a solid *online* course that leverages the capabilities of the Internet to help your students learn, whether the topic is filling out an accounting spreadsheet or improving leadership skills. Here are some suggestions for beginning the process:

- Acquire all existing materials for the course (lecture notes, handouts, student assignments, etc.) You're likely to find that these materials do not comprise the entire course; much additional content exists in the instructor's head and in instructor-student interactions. How can you capture this additional information?
- Gather student and organizational feedback about the existing course. What's currently working well? What's not? Pay particular attention to negative feedback that could remedy in the online course problems in the classroom course.
- Hold a meeting for the internal stakeholders (such as the training director, subject matter expert, instructor, and project manager) and an online learning consultant to help define the online course and create a statement of work. This statement can be used to contract an outside team to design and develop the course or to guide your internal team in the process.
- Revisit your audience analysis. Is the audience for the online course the same as the classroom course? Will students be taking the course during the same time frame or over a longer period of time? Many e-learning training solutions expand the potential audience and time frame in order to take advantage of e-learning's anytime, anywhere, and scalability features.
- Consider the technical environment for the course. Where will the course be hosted? Do you have an existing learning management system (LMS)? Will the course have a discussion forum or other interaction technologies? What Internet connection speeds will students have?
- Consider the pedagogy for the course. Many so-called "soft-skills" courses (such as leadership courses) typically use problem-centered learning approaches with many case studies, role-play scenarios, and discussion forums. How will you create this interactivity in the online environment? Will the course still be supported by an instructor? If so, how will the instructor communicate with students? Is a blended learning approach, combining face-to-face and online components, appropriate? Is

the course solely a training experience, or will it also serve as a knowledge resource (or performance support system) for managers?

Of course, not all courses are alike. Developing a procedure-teaching course is easy when clearly defined processes and requirements can be obtained. Financial accounting, information technology, and legal regulations are examples of subjects in which answers are often either right or wrong and performance processes are easily defined. However, leadership development and other soft-skills topics are harder to define, and designing and developing training for these topics can be harder. It is sometimes very difficult to practice and assess skills such as "leadership" in an online environment. Instead of depending on the *right* answers as presented in a procedural course, leadership courses must draw on the best practices among those in the community of leaders. One of the key advantages of online education is the ability to leverage the *best of the best* practices. Content can be assembled from multiple expert sources and compiled into a solid, consistently delivered training program. Classroom instruction typically is limited to the experience of the instructor (or the ability of the instructor to explain someone else's experience), while online courses can incorporate the experiences of many leaders in interactive text and exercises.

Online leadership training can include interactivity, role-playing, problem-based scenarios, case studies, and other tools to build leadership skills. Leadership training is particularly context-sensitive. For example, a line manager's leadership development needs may differ significantly from a senior corporate manager's needs or an information technology analyst's needs, etc. Other issues that affect the style, approach, and content required in a leadership course include intercultural, intergenerational, and international issues.

Our experience has shown that face-to-face courses must be carefully and thoughtfully transitioned to online systems. Many early efforts have failed, primarily because someone thought it would be "fairly easy" and simply uploaded the course presenter's slides, notes, and 20-question multiple-choice tests. Effective e-learning requires a commitment to both learning and quality instructional design and development. Even though it is a challenging process, building effective e-learning solutions can be accomplished in many ways. In the next section, we explain how to select an e-learning contractor.

Selecting an E-Learning Contractor: The Whys and Hows

You first must decide *why* you are selecting a contractor. Do you want someone to help you develop an overall e-learning strategy and train your staff to build online courses? Or do you want someone to design and build the courses for you? Your overall strategic and business objectives should indicate the answer to these questions. If you need a high-quality, effective result within a set time line and your staff has no experience creating online courses, then you should contract both design and development. With the right contractor, you may be able to train and position your own staff for future in-house development. The overarching instructional design skills and process required to build an online course are dramatically different from those required to build instructor-led or even paper-based correspondence courses. You need an experienced partner to ensure that you do it right.

How do you select the right contractor? First, you should find a firm that possesses the full range of skills required to build an online course from start to finish. Many consulting

firms have instructional designers, but they have no media or technically skilled staff to complete an online training project. These firms attempt to outsource the tasks they can't do themselves. Conversely, some firms have highly skilled media and technical staff, but they lack qualified instructional design staff. The skills required in instructional design, media development, and technical programming for an online course are significantly different from traditional training environments. A contractor should possess these skills and experience using these skills to develop online courses:

- Project management
- Instructional design
- Content development
- Management of subject matter experts
- Visual design
- Multimedia development
- Audio and video production
- Web programming
- Learning management system experience (and objectivity)
- User experience testing
- Quality assurance (technical) testing
- The ability to conform to emerging standards (such as SCORM)

These skills are all essential to the development of an online course that is both cost-effective and instructionally effective. Be sure your contractor can offer these skills in a seamless project team.

When selecting a contractor for online course development, especially in the subject area of leadership development, it is important to evaluate a contractor's past achievements within that subject area--and within multiple learning environment settings, if possible. If you are embarking on your first e-learning project, you probably don't want your course to be the contractor's first attempt at teaching in a particular domain. If possible, choose a contractor who has experience with your content and who can demonstrate successful online teaching approaches in the domain. Also, contractors who have worked for clients at various levels (small to mid-sized businesses, "catalog" e-learning vendors, online universities, etc.) may be better able to meet your needs. Often, different client "classes" emphasize differing perspectives on the content. A good contractor can leverage effective instructional techniques and lessons learned from prior projects at all levels to create a truly effective training solution for you.

How do you know whether your contractor is qualified? As with a contractor for any other product or service, check the contractor's references and have the contractor furnish background information that will enable you to answer some key questions. Has this contractor done this type of course before? Review samples of the contractor's past work, focusing not merely on online work but specifically on work in your target subject matter. Review the contractor's design and development process. Is it documented; is it repeatable? What is the contractor's track record for on-time, on-budget performance? Does the contractor have existing relationships with learning management system vendors? Has the contractor demonstrated that it can produce a course that will work in your technical environment? You might be able to visit the contractor's facility and meet its staff. Online development projects are often lengthy processes and require

considerable collaboration between client and contractor. Your ability to work well with the contractor's team is a fundamental requirement for success.

Hiring a contractor for a comprehensive engagement is an important decision. Quality products and services come with a price, of course. In the next section, we explain how you can estimate the cost of an e-learning development project.

Estimating Your Costs: Being Realistic

For this discussion, we consider two distinct types of online course projects: converting an existing classroom course, and creating a new course from scratch. The first is easier to estimate because you already have a sense of the length within a classroom. The second is harder and requires a two-step approach to get it right.

Converting a classroom course to an online one typically produces a course that is 60 percent of the duration of the classroom course. Why is that? Recall a typical one-day classroom course: It starts at 9:00, ends at 4:00, has several breaks (including one for lunch), and probably features lots of questions asked by other students that may not pertain to you. Overall, the one-day class may only have five actual hours of content. This is not an exact science, of course. The subject matter may require more intense interactivity to effectively teach the course, adding to the student's time in the learning process. However, assigning a student a one-hour exercise does not necessarily add another hour of content to the online course and may not add to the cost.

Regardless of whether the course is a conversion from instructor-led or a new creation, the safest path toward an accurate cost estimate is to conduct a definition phase before starting the design and development of the course. An effective definition phase can be completed within 5-10 days for most courses. Qualified contractors can complete this for \$7,500 to \$10,000 using an experienced (ideally a Ph.D.-level) instructional designer and supporting project team. An acceptable definition document will contain enough detail to enable you to determine the scope of the project and to construct a solid Statement of Work.

Pricing the rest of the course project is influenced by several factors: *pedagogy*, *content*, *media*, and *length*.

- How complicated is the *pedagogy*? Does the course use linear or problem-based instruction? Does the course need to act as a post-completion employee performance support system (EPSS)? Are the students able to take the course in small (30 minutes) sessions, or must they spend several hours at a time with the course content? What level of assessment or certification is required? The answers to these questions complicate the design of the course and influence the price of the project.
- Is the *content* readily available? Do you have access to resource materials, instructor guides, and most important, subject matter experts (SMEs)? How many SMEs do you have? Are they readily available to the project team? Is the content relatively generic (so that SMEs are easily found), such as accounting or marketing, or is it proprietary, such as conducting clinical trials for a new drug?
- How important is *media* to the course? Does the content require multiple interactions, animations, videos, and simulations? Are the visual design standards of your online courses already established, or are you creating a new

interface? Complicated or extensive media requirements add to the cost of the project.

- Finally, the *length* of a course affects the price, although not always in the obvious manner. At a gross level, longer courses are inherently more expensive than shorter ones; a two-hour course will be less expensive than an eight-hour course. However, the *longer* the course is, the *cheaper* it is per instructional hour to build, because the definition and design process do not scale proportionally to course length. Two-hour courses are not as economical to build as eight-hour courses; generally speaking, they are twice as expensive per hour. A week-long curriculum achieves huge economies of scale and is cheaper per hour by nearly half again. So although it may be appealing to start small and move by inches, it's probably cheaper to fully define and design the curriculum and then build the courses sequentially. Building out the week-long curriculum in one project could cost approximately half as much as building the program one day at a time.

Building online courses can cost \$10,000 to \$40,000 per instructional hour or more, depending on the vendor. We generally use a baseline estimate of \$19,000 per hour and then adjust the price up or down by 10 percent for each of the four key factors (pedagogy, content, media, and length). An experienced development team should have an established quality standard, one that they know they can achieve consistently for the base price. (You'll want to look at samples of previous coursework and ask for the price factors.) Courses that require increases in any of the key factors would increase the price by 10 percent for each. The length factor, however, is a converse factor in that the cost per hour goes up as the length goes down. Again, this is not an exact science because many things vary, including each contractor's baseline, definitions of key factors, and a contractor's ability to manage the factors in a consistent and predictable manner.

Cost	Pedagogy	Content	Media	Length (Inverse)
2 Factor Increase	20%	20%	20%	20%
1 Factor Increase	10%	10%	10%	10%
Baseline Quality	0	0	0	0
1 Factor Decrease	-10%	-10%	-10%	-10%
2 Factor Decrease	-20%	-20%	-20%	-20%

Delivering on the Contract: The Most Important Part

Setting a price up front is the easy part. Delivering the course within that price is the hard part--and the point at which carefully evaluating your contractor pays off the most. Online courses are amorphous and hard to define, and they can quickly devolve as the development team is works to create a product that effectively teaches the subject and meets all the stakeholders' expectations in various domains (pedagogically, aesthetically, etc.). Managing the project scope and client expectations are essential parts of the process, and your contractor must have a solid track record of doing this!

Frequent, formal, iterative design and approvals help to control the scope and cost while ensuring that expectations (the real vision) are consistently achieved. Review and approval phases should occur every two weeks. The project plan should show tangible deliverables scheduled at each phase. For example, definition, high-level design, detailed design, content outline, content (on paper at least), online integration, and user

testing are all key points at which a deliverable can be produce, reviewed, and approved. These approvals benefit the contractor as much as the client. These approvals provide the contractor with a source of guidance and protection from future scope-creep requests, which aids in managing the change control process. And the approvals provide you with necessary information to ensure that your course production is progressing as specified in the Statement of Work.

Conclusion

The decision to move your training and education programs online is a complex one. However, after you've made the decision to begin an e-learning project, you *can* move your organization's training programs online effectively, by following a few guidelines:

1. **Rethink your training design.** Reevaluate your content and learner analysis to take into account the differences between the previous delivery media and the online environment.
2. **Select an e-learning contractor wisely.** You must choose a contractor with a proven track record on quality, dependability, and overall excellence. A wise choice for your first project can pay large dividends in follow-on projects.
3. **Understand the costs involved.** The factors that exert the greatest influence on overall project cost are pedagogy, content, media, and length. Online courses can be difficult to define and can quickly become something other than what they were intended to be, so you must implement iterative approvals, scope management, and change controls if you want to achieve your vision without blowing your budget.

BIOS

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