



Selecting an E-Learning Partner

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An “e-learning” vendor called-on an association and wanted to provide assistance with starting an e-learning program for their membership. The association had about 3,000 members and had experienced steadily decreasing revenues for their classroom and conference-based education programs. The association’s executives had wanted to start a distance learning program and this seemed like a perfect opportunity to work with a local vendor who offered an e-learning technology product.

A year later ... the association had a problematic e-learning program on their hands. They had developed four e-learning courses that were available for sale. To develop each course took 3-4 months and tens of thousands of dollars. E-Learning sales were about 10% of projections. When they did sell a course, the purchaser often required an extensive amount of assistance to access the course. Member satisfaction for this program was extremely low.

The association’s members we’re saying that they wanted e-learning courses... so what went wrong?

Taking the Right Approach

Organizations need to choose an e-learning partner with the same care and selectiveness they would use to hire an executive to run an important part of their organization.

Look for:

- *Experience*
- *Education*
- *Track record/references*
- *Cultural fit*

Setting-up a successful e-learning program requires a knowledgeable, multi-disciplinary approach. Associations need to choose an e-learning partner with the same care and selectiveness that they would use to hire an executive to run an important part of their organization.

The Selection Criteria

When you hire an executive you look at experience, education, track record and cultural fit. This is also what you look at when you select an e-learning partner.

Experience

The most important criteria for an e-learning partner is that their executives/consultants have run a successful (profitable) e-learning programs.

Make sure that a potential e-learning partner has hired experienced professionals who can address all five components of a successful e-learning program. The components are:

1. Technology Selection – works with a variety of e-learning types and platforms to help you select the right one for your organization
2. Content Development – provides a range of options for developing or sourcing your content
3. Marketing and Communications – discusses methods and recommendations for communicating, promoting and selling an e-learning program.
4. E-Learning Business Process Design – recommends options for administration and support and management of your e-learning program
5. Financial Analysis – is able to demonstrate a clear obtainable ROI that will come from implementing their proposed e-learning program.

For each of these criteria, ask a potential e-learning partner to tell you about how they address each of these components with their customers. You'll need to discern whether the e-learning professionals have implemented for-fee, externally-offered e-learning programs that have satisfied learners and met organizational goals.

Education and Certification

Many universities offer degrees in e-learning. Some of these degree programs focus on delivering e-learning in an educational setting, and other programs focus on providing e-learning in a business setting. The degrees may be named Instructional Technology, Educational Technology, Learning Technologies, or possibly Training and Development with an emphasis in e-learning or multimedia. In general, you want to target someone who is degreed or certified this field with coursework that is more business-oriented.

There are also a variety of certifications in the market today. The most credible ones are offered by associations, such as:

- American Society for Training and Development (CPLP—Certified Professional in Learning and Performance, and their eLearning developer certificate)
- International Society for Performance Improvement (CPT – Certified Performance Technologist)
- The eLearning Guild – offers a variety of coursework on designing and developing e-learning courseware

Target a partner who is degreed or certified in an e-learning related field who is business-oriented.

The best e-learning professionals usually have a degree and one or more certifications. These credentials show that they are as serious about e-learning as your members are about their professions.

Track Record

You want to select e-learning professionals who have a proven track record of establishing successful e-learning programs. Ask each potential partner for resumes and references, specifically for the professional who will be assigned to work with you. When calling reference, ask these three questions:

1. What were the organization's goals for establishing the e-learning program?
2. How has this e-learning professional helped you meet the goals?
3. Have you met or exceeded those original goals? If no, why not?

Cultural Fit

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of e-learning vendors out there. Look for a company that:

- Likes to work with non-profit organizations
- Has the capabilities to implement an externally focused (not internal employee-focused) e-learning program.
- Works well with the experts in your field and your content. They do not need to be experts in your field, but they do need to work well with your staff, stakeholders and volunteers.

Your e-learning partner not only needs to work well in your organization, they also need to work well with the rest of the e-learning technology world, so that your program can grow and change over time.

Keep in mind that your e-learning partner *not* only has to fit into your organization, but also needs to play well with the rest of the e-learning technology world. AICC and SCORM are the e-learning industry technology standards. If you ever want to change e-learning platforms (or vendors), porting your content will require complying with these standards. Stay away from proprietary e-learning platforms that don't comply with industry

standards. To have the freedom to grow your e-learning program, make sure your potential e-learning vendor is committed to one or both sets of industry standards.

Fixing a Broken E-Learning Program

Now let's go back to the association at the beginning of the article. How can an association address a situation like this one? There are two possible solutions:

First, take a hard look at the five components of a successful e-learning program in the *Experience* section of this article. (As a reminder, they are content, technology, marketing and communication, administration and support, and financial.) Have you addressed all five of these components in your current e-learning program? If not, where are the gaps? You may want to supplement

your staff with one or two consultants who have experience in areas that are newer to your organization.

Second, you may want to consider doing a thorough analysis of your program at this point. This includes a member survey, member focus groups, executive and staff interviews, as well as research on industry trends and technologies. Some potential fixes will be obvious once you look at the data. However, many of subtleties and possibilities will not likely jump-out at someone who is not an experienced e-learning practitioner. Doing this type of analysis and getting recommendations from a qualified professional can help you gain leaps and bounds in your e-learning program.

Third, don't give up the baby with the bathwater. Just because your audience isn't buying eLearning doesn't mean that they don't want eLearning. We often find that if you ask your audience what type of eLearning would work best for them, its 180 degrees different from what you had in mind. There are countless times where we are called in to do Webinars, and our survey results show that the audience can't commit to a scheduled training time for one reason or another. Or sometimes our client wants to do self-paced training, and all the audience really wants is a facilitated discussion with their peers.

The secret to success isn't that a very big secret... align your eLearning program to meet target audience needs and desires and make the courses work well for them... then you will meet and exceed your eLearning goals.

Jennifer De Vries is the President and Chief Solution Architect for BlueStreak Learning. Jennifer has over 20 years of experience in managing successful e-learning programs for companies such as Joint Commission Resources, IBM, Motorola, Galileo International, and Thomson/NETg. Jennifer has earned the designation of Certified Performance Technologist from the International Society for Performance Improvement (www.certifiedpt.org) Her company, BlueStreak Learning (www.bluestreaklearning.com), focuses on helping non-profit and for-profit organizations successfully start and grow high-quality, market-focused and revenue-generating e-learning programs.

E-Learning Partner Checklist

Criteria	√
Experience	
- Technology selection	
- Content development	
- Marketing and communication	
- E-Learning business process design	
- Financial analysis (e-learning ROI calculations)	
Education and Certification	
- Degree in Learning Technologies with business emphasis	
- Professional e-learning certifications	
Track Record	
- Professional resumes and/or bios show success	
- References verify success	
Cultural Fit	
- Works with non-profits	
- Does externally-focused, for-fee implementations	
- Works well with your content and subject matter experts	
- Complies with e-learning industry standards (AICC and/or SCORM)	

The more criteria an e-learning professional meets, the more likely it is that they will be able to help you establish a successful e-learning program.