Outsourcing eLearning course design

A guide to navigating the process of outsourcing eLearning creation that covers what to expect over the course of a project and answers some frequently asked questions.
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Introduction

Ensuring your people are ready to achieve your upcoming goals requires investment in their skills with a well thought out, relevant and current training programme.

In our experience of working with clients, there are a number of questions that we commonly get asked regarding how an eLearning project is developed. Every project runs a little differently, it is custom design after all, however some of the answers given in this guide will help you ask the right questions when it comes to sourcing a partner to work with.

This guide aims to help you gain a better understanding of what you need to look for in an eLearning provider by enabling you to assess the strengths you already have in-house. When you find the right fit for your needs, you provide additional capacity to your in-house training team while also leveraging the expertise of eLearning specialists for a new and exciting programme.

When outsourcing your eLearning course or programme design you may have a number of questions about the process, like how can an outsourced company really understand what your learners need to learn? How long will it take? How much will it cost? These and other topics will all be covered here.
How can an outsourced company understand what our learners need to learn?

Documentation such as guidelines, process documents, marketing materials and available media such as video and photos are the basis for creating new courses. This is supported by conversations with subject matter experts, onsite observations or practice (tools and applications or physical skills).

Depending on your skills and available resources this information can be summarised and packaged to handover and move closer to creating a storyboard. An instructional designer can take this material and structure it in a way that will best support the transfer of learning and ensure the learning objectives are addressed appropriately. The ultimate goal is to create the course storyboard which will be the blueprint for the content in the course; the narration, onscreen text, visuals, multimedia, interactions, quizzes and assessments are all considered at this stage.

The nature of the content will dictate how much support you will need to provide, where generally speaking more complex content requires more time from your subject matter experts to prepare source materials, offer consultation with an instructional designer and review versions of the course.
When deciding on a potential partner, you need to consider what strengths you already have, and what expertise you may need to buy in.

What are my strengths?

You may come from a learning and development or training team and have the ability to conduct your own analysis of your target audience. If you have already identified performance gaps and defined learning objectives for the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be developed then you can just outsource your course design and development to save time and money.

If you already have offline training material that works, a multimedia provider may be sufficient for your conversion needs.

What are their strengths?

Different providers will offer different services, when you know what your requirements are it will make it easier to find the right partner to fulfil them. Do you need someone who specialises in multimedia development, learning consulting or learning analysis?

Some providers will only offer multi-media services to create the course, while others will provide an end to end service and take responsibility for your content and the overall course. You may also want to consider how you will want the courses reported and whether you will need them translated, some providers will also offer these services to varying degrees.

Outsourcing eLearning course design
How much of my and my team’s time should I budget for this project?

In many cases teams underestimate the time required from their in-house subject matter experts and content approvers during an eLearning development project.

In a simple case, you may have much of the content documented in existing training material, process documentation or marketing materials. If your performance gap is not yet understood and documentation does not exist, you or your provider would need to do some learning analysis such as interviewing SMEs, analysing data and observing performance. The time you budget for your project needs to reflect where you are starting from.

Even where documentation already exists, you will still need to budget time for input from your team. Using more meaningful and memorable content such as scenarios and case studies (both positive and negative) are not always documented, but investing time in sharing these will enhance the effectiveness of the course.

There are usually several review stages in the development process. It will vary between companies but often these will consist of Storyboard, Alpha, Beta and Final. You will need to budget for the time it will take for you or your team to conduct a full review of the content and provide feedback on technical accuracy and any required changes at each stage.
How does eLearning review and sign off process usually work?

Review is an essential part of course design. It ensures the course is meeting its goals. In our experience it is one area where the time commitment that is required to review and provide feedback is often underestimated.

Project review is not just a review of the final course itself; review should be multi stage, at a minimum review the sources of information available, the learning objectives, then the course storyboard and finally the alpha and beta versions of the course itself. Take the time to invest in the review and partner with your provider. Think of the review as an opportunity to increase quality and create the best learning experience possible.

Before committing to a project, check your eLearning providers review policy in your contract with them. Often an eLearning provider will offer a number of review cycles (often 1-3) where you can make changes before a charge is applied.
How much will it cost?

Obviously the cost will vary from project to project, but you can get a good estimate by considering the depth of the service you require and the amount of training you need to create.

A ballpark formula for creating eLearning is 127:1, One hundred and twenty seven hours of development time for one hour of course duration. That figure allows time for all aspects of the process, some elements of which you may be taking on yourself, for example front end analysis, storyboarding and review. The tasks involved in creating the eLearning break down as follows:

- Front End Analysis: 9%
- Instructional Design: 13%
- Storyboarding: 11%
- Graphic Production: 12%
- Video Production: 6%
- Audio Production: 6%
- Authoring/Programming: 20%
- QA Testing: 6%
- Project Management: 6%
- SME/Stakeholder Reviews: 6%
- Pilot Test: 4%
- Other: 1%

Case Study 1

Say for example you have a one day classroom course that you would like to convert to eLearning. It is already structured as a series of slides with relevant images and graphics and a participant guide, but currently contains no animation, interaction or video content. Six hours (a typical 'full day') of classroom training can usually be condensed to around half the time when self paced, so that cuts it down to three hours (this is a standard conversion backed up by independent research). That converts to around 381 total hours work, if a course was being built from scratch, based on the above formula. But as this example is a conversion from an existing course, the front end analysis (9%) has already been taken care of, as well as the instructional design (13%), storyboarding (11%) and graphic production (12%), so you can take out 45% of that figure, 171hrs, straight away. If you will also be reviewing the content yourself, another 22hrs can come off, leaving you with 188hrs that you'll need to pay for at your eLearning service provider’s hourly rate.

Case Study 2

As another example, let’s say you want an hour of eLearning created from documents such as manuals or interviews. You have no storyboard yet and you want your eLearning provider to work with the material you have. According to our formula, 127:1, it will take 127 hours total, but since you have conducted the initial analysis and will be conducting the reviews, we can take 15% off that figure, which leaves 108hrs to pay for. Bear in mind that an hour of eLearning could be broken down into two half hour modules or six ten minute modules.
What is the most effective teaching style?

How people learn is diverse, the most effective way to ensure you engage learners is to present the material in a multiple ways. Some people respond best to visual stimulus, some aural, some linguistic, some kinaesthetic (learning by doing).

eLearning solutions are similarly diverse to cater for these different needs by utilising a variety of available media: Content can be delivered through video, animation, gamified experiences, blended programs, interactive exercises, micro learning and assessments, the list goes on. You may need to provide certification or insure compliance or hit a specific performance goal. Ask your provider what types of projects they have completed, as experience in one area does not necessarily transfer to others.

What style of courses should I ask for?

eLearning companies use a variety of tools to create online content which gives a certain look and feel to the courses. Check what tools your provider uses and review their portfolio to see the styles of content they create. Think through what you are looking to achieve and ask your proposed company what their experience is specifically to each area.

How long will it take to get my courses?

Customised eLearning development is a process with course typically taking four to six weeks to develop from an initial idea to being fully reviewed and signed off. Don’t forget scale when discussing your project. Does your eLearning team have enough instructional designers, graphic designers, course authors and multimedia developers to meet your project deadline?
What about updating the courses once the project has finished?

It’s wise to account for this in your initial conversations with a provider. It can be a good time to negotiate the maintenance of courses during your initial project scope, which will likely give you a more competitive price and also to ensure that your courses will be updated over a longer period without having to secure more budgets at a later date.

Alternatively, you may have the competence and time to update yourself, in which case query what tools and process your provider is using, and review if it is possible to align with your organisation.

In either case, check that the source files for your eLearning courses are included in your contract; this gives you the option to provide them to a new eLearning company for maintenance.
How will content be managed in my LMS?

You may have a learning management system in place and regularly add courses for your learners, or you may be new to eLearning and implementing a learning management system for the first time.

Consider the role your outsourced partner will play in relation to your LMS. You may just want them to send you designed courses for upload to an LMS hosted by yourself or another provider, or they might actually be your LMS provider, in which case they will add your content and your users and provide reporting. Managing and supporting your own LMS versus outsourcing is a balance between having internal control versus having expert support. Which way you go will depend on your in-house resources and skills.
We would love to hear from you.

What questions or feedback do you have from outsourcing eLearning projects?