

Selecting an E-Learning Partner

By Jennifer De Vries

An e-learning vendor called-on an association to offer assistance with setting-up their e-learning program. The association had a membership of about 3,000 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 were saying that they wanted e-learning courses... so what went wrong? Why weren't their members buying the courses? Why were their satisfaction levels so low?

Taking the Right Approach

Setting-up a successful e-learning program requires a highly experienced, 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. When you choose an e-learning partner, you should also consider these criteria.

Experience

Just like when you look for an executive, you want to ensure that the professionals who would work on your e-learning program have actually run a successful e-learning business. This is most important criteria.

Make sure that a potential e-learning partner has experienced professionals on-board 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 – can tell you about a range of options for developing or sourcing your content
3. Marketing and Motivation – discusses methods and recommendations for communication, promotion, and incentives to encourage members to take e-learning

4. E-Learning Business Process Design – recommends options for administration, support and management of your e-learning program
5. Financial Analysis – is able to demonstrate a clear, obtainable return on investment (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 degrees focus on delivering e-learning in an educational setting, and other degrees focus on providing e-learning in a business setting. The degrees may be named something like:

- Instructional Technology
- Educational Technology
- Learning Technologies
- Training and Development with an emphasis in e-learning or multimedia

In general, you want to target someone who is degreed this field with coursework that is business-oriented.

There are also many relevant certifications that you may encounter. The most credible ones are offered by associations, such as:

- American Society for Training and Development (HPT and other certificates)
- International Society for Performance Improvement (CPT designation)
- The E-Learning Guild

If you are offering continuing education credit (CEUs/CME, etc.) for your e-learning courses, then look for a professional who has completed coursework in educational measurement and evaluation. CPTs and HPTs have demonstrated this competency.

The best e-learning professionals usually have a degree and one or more relevant certifications.

Track Record

You want to select an e-learning partner whose employees 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 a 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 a for-fee (e-commerce), externally focused (not employee-focused) e-learning platform
- Provides tools that help experts in your field to work with you to develop e-learning courses. This is a common practice for association content development.

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 world. AICC and SCORM are the e-learning industry technology standards. If you ever want to change technology platforms, porting your content will require complying with these standards. Stay away from proprietary e-learning platforms that don't comply with industry standards. If you want 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. Have you addressed all five of these components in establishing your e-learning program? Is your e-learning vendor advising and assisting you with all five of these components? If not, where are the gaps? You may want to supplement your program with one or two consultants who have strengths in the areas in which you don't have good support.

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 typically 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.

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E-Learning Partner Checklist

Criteria	√
Experience	
- Technology Selection	
- Content Development	
- Marketing and Motivation	
- E-Learning Business Process Design	
- Financial Analysis (E-Learning ROI Calculations)	
Education and Certification	
- Degree in Learning Technologies with business emphasis	
- Professional Certifications	
- Coursework in Educational Measurement for CEU programs	
Track Record	
- Professional resumes and/or bios show success	
- References verify success	
Cultural Fit	
- Works with non-profits	
- Does externally-focused, for-fee implementations	
- Provides tools that help subject matter experts develop courses	
- 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.