Do-It-Yourself E-Learning on a Tight Budget

By Jane Bozarth

How to get the tools you need when you are underfunded.

THE DECISION to build an e-learning solution can be daunting. But it isn't impossible. When you're starting out, take your time and give some thought to what you want to do. The potential to waste money—something that you simply can't afford—is enormous. You don't want to misstep and buy something you don't need or, worse, something you already have on your shelves.

So before your rush out to buy anything, take a good look at what you have, or at least what you can get your hands on. Be creative and specific—and ask. I once started a new job and, worried about losing my files, asked for a $200 external hard drive. Weeks later, I discovered all employees had private space on the organization's network drive. That $200 could have bought a digital camera, thousands of blank CDs, or captioning software. It was an expensive lesson to learn.

To buy or not to buy

When taking an inventory of your supplies, be sure to venture outside your own office. Someone down the hall may own a digital camera or CD burner. In addition, take stock of the people around you. Do you have

- someone who knows web design? If not, who will learn it?
- instructional designers and in-house training staff?
- a graphic artist? If not, someone who can draw or has an eye for color?
- both technical and administrative support?
- co-workers or friends with acting skills?

- someone with a good voice who is willing to narrate?

Another important note about inventories: Don't forget about the vast training materials you've already created or used. Class handouts, graphics in overhead transparencies, and even old videotapes can be repurposed for e-learning applications.

In addition to the items at your disposal, there are some basics that you will need to create most e-learning from scratch. So, if you don't have them, try to get access to them (and "access" doesn't necessarily mean "buy").

The first item on your list should be a computer loaded with at least Windows 98. (Windows XP is even better.) Your machine will need to have plenty of memory, too. Graphics, especially animation and video, can take up large amounts of space. Even PowerPoint files can be huge. Also be sure that your new computer is equipped with CD-ROM and fast Internet access. Cable, DSL, and T-1 connections are great choices; dial-up is not. Finally, find a microphone. They typically cost less than $20.

If you are puzzled over prices, a good rule to remember is that the development computer will cost double the price of the average user's computer. But that doesn't mean you should always opt for the lowest price tag. For example, if you are sure that you will be doing a lot of in-house development and think that you may be using sophisticated graphics such as video, try to get the best machine you can afford.

When I designed our e-learning solutions, I splurged on a top-of-the-line computer. It's fast and holds huge amounts of information, so I edit videos worry free. Although I believed in buying cheap, I also knew that spending my time dealing with a slow or temperamental computer would cost my agency more in the long run than just buying a

good computer.

Don't feel discouraged if there's no money in the current budget for something better. Factor in the sophistication of the products that you will be developing and the reality of your budget. Also consider leasing the equipment. Depending on your needs, that may be a more cost-effective option.

User considerations

If this is your organization's first foray into the world of e-learning, you should investigate what technology is available to your participants. Does your organization have standard equipment, and do all participants have access? If not, you should address that matter before creating any solutions. Also consider the quality of your participants' machines and Internet access. That along with their locations will play a huge factor in your design decisions later.

Another rule of thumb is to design for 75 percent of participants. For example, if 75 percent of your class members have sound cards and speakers, then you can use audio in you presentation. (You should also have a plan to make the program accessible to users who do not have that technology.) Avoid the temptation to design for the lowest common denominator. If you do, your program may result in nothing more than text on a screen. That kind of low-end presentation will lose tech-savvy participants and likely fail to engage even those for whom it was intended.

Some organizations hesitate to implement e-learning because all employees don't have good computers, or even their own machines. In reality, however, that isn't a big issue. Participants only need occasional use.

Instead, one of the biggest obstacles for learners is interruptions. Consider a

receptionist trying to complete an online customer service course at his desk while greeting visitors and answering the phone. The constant interruptions are frustrating, and they impede his learning. But they don't have to. Instead, the trainer could arrange for equipment to be available at a specific time and location. That way, participants can set aside the quiet time they need to learn, and the organization doesn't have to worry about computer access for all employees at once.

In addition to assessing equipment issues, check your participants' technical skills. While it's tempting to assume that everyone is computer literate, that's not always the case. Many workers use their computers for nothing more than typing documents. So, be sure that participants have the skills needed to complete your courses. If they don't, be prepared to provide the necessary training.

You don't have to be Houdini to implement e-learning on a tight budget. You just need the right preparation. Before spending any money, determine what is truly essential for success. Then assess what you already have. Clarifying the needs, capabilities, and situations of your participants will help you make the most cost-effective decisions possible.

Editor's Note: This article was adapted from *e-Learning Solutions On A Shoestring* by Jane Bozarth (September 2005, $40, paperback) by permission of Pfeiffer/A Wiley Imprint.

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