



Advance

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Delivering global e-learning programmes

As the benefits of e-learning become more widely appreciated, some international organisations nevertheless remain wary of rolling out global e-learning solutions, due to concerns about the effort and expenditure required and fears of training content becoming 'lost in translation'. If it is carried out appropriately, however, global e-learning offers an unbeatable, cost-effective solution for large multinational companies.

Training a workforce that is united by brand but dispersed across all geographical and cultural corners of the world requires a level of consistency that makes classroom training an unviable option. Aside from the logistical difficulties of subject matter experts (SMEs) personally delivering their messages to a global mass of employees, it is unrealistic to assume that they will have mastered twenty languages along with their specialist subject matter.



This is where e-learning comes into its own, as a vehicle by which the messages of SMEs can reach the desired audience at an appropriate and convenient time for each individual employee. In addition, e-learning courses also distil SMEs' knowledge into a form which can be reasonably easily altered to suit a particular purpose or context – through translation into different languages, for example.

However, the task of delivering a truly global e-learning programme is not completely straightforward. Each version of a course rolled-out globally must be produced with the same attention and care as the original, if it is to be equally useful. It is essential that a structured, considered approach is used to harness the full capabilities of the e-learning vehicle and to ensure that potential pitfalls are avoided.

Planning for success

The imperative with a global e-learning programme is to ensure that the project is fully scoped from the outset. The project owner will need to consider numerous questions that are specific to global solutions, including:

- What are the linguistic capabilities of the target audience? Based upon this, what are the real translation requirements for the project?
- How much of the learning content is truly global and how much will have to be tailored for local markets?
- What can be done to standardise the content across countries and continents to ensure consistency? Is it possible to develop a common version of the e-learning that can then be tailored and translated as required, to avoid 'reinventing the wheel' for each market (which both reduces consistency and increases the total effort required)?
- Who should be included in the project team, both centrally and locally?

And with that we come to the second critical element of global e-learning projects.

A global team for a global solution

Any successful learning programme is dependent upon having the right team in place. The key differential with a global project is that you will probably need to look outside the normal teams of HQ- or regionally-based SMEs, project managers and instructional designers to a wider group of stakeholders in order to succeed.

If your business or industry uses specialist terminology, for example, it might be worthwhile considering employing an in-house resource to translate the content, as this person will know how to express any such terms in local language better than an external translation company. Third-party companies should still be used, though, as a quality-control measure to check the in-house work.

Similarly, local or regional team members may need to be included to ensure that any examples or scenarios used in the training are equally applicable in their market. Do not forget that accurate translations can still be rendered meaningless by differences in cultural


context. Gaining this input from the very start of the project will ensure that the team is working towards delivering exactly the right content for a truly global programme and will reduce the need to re-work the content at a later date to fit local needs.

Communication, collaboration and teamwork

Having the right people in place is only part of the answer; it is also important to generate a good team dynamic across borders and languages, so the right communication, collaboration and feedback methods must be in place.

Indeed, one of the major questions that will need to be addressed during the planning process is how to ensure global collaboration, while still controlling and managing the access each individual will have to the content during the development process.

In one recent project, Saffron suggested the use of version management software, allowing team members in disparate locations to access, work on and save the same lesson at the same time,



with the ability to “rollback” changes if they weren’t correct. More than 50 people accessed this server throughout the project and it enabled real efficiencies. For example, content might be translated in one country while the audio is concurrently being recorded in another country.

Global projects such as this also require frequent communication in various forms. Team members on this recent project used web-conferencing, teleconferencing and file sharing as well as traditional face-to-face meetings to keep in touch. Being able to recognise which form of interaction is required with whom at each stage of the project and maintaining open lines of communication between all team members encourages trust, respect and confidence in often complex situations.

In addition, it is advisable to break the project down into key deliverables, assigning specific tasks to particular groups or individuals, and to log this information in a database to ensure robust project management. Where contributors are geographically spread, this enables individuals and small groups to focus upon their specific role and deliverables at any given time, serving to support the project team as a whole.

Further initiatives can be introduced to enhance the smooth running of a collaborative effort. For example, in building a recent global programme for Hilton International, Saffron developed new screen capture software known as i-Capture. The i-Capture tool provides team members re-working the course content, such as in-house translators, with the defined space into which content must fit for the design of the screen to work. Novice users require just a few hours of training, usually over the phone, to become proficient in using it. In this way, i-Capture enables the course to be re-written for a specific purpose, whilst maintaining a consistent appearance and functionality.

Consistency and standardisation

With numerous different contributors, there has to be a focus on consistency, particularly for key corporate or service messages that must be uniform around the globe, regardless of language. Agreeing standards across the global team, in all aspects of the project, is also crucial in making the project labour-efficient and consistent in style.

In Saffron’s experience, simple tips that help to deliver a seamless user experience, particularly where translations are involved, include:

- Developing the learning to fit a series of pre-designed formats with common graphics, text space, positioning, logos and so on across the globe
- Agreeing a “standards” manual at the outset, outlining common terms and phrases, and how abbreviations, acronyms, amounts and phone numbers must be represented, for example. This must be updated and shared amongst the team throughout the project
- Specifying the simplicity and tone of language to be used
- Focusing on including realistic and relevant scenarios and examples that meet the learning need and have global relevance

Whilst global collaboration is enabled by technology, these measures, based on effective communication and a focus on common goals, are critical in ensuring that the product is both consistent and universally usable.

You have never needed QA more

When done to a high standard, the development of e-learning will be centred around the need to ensure quality. In a global e-learning project, both informal and formal quality assurance (QA) must be integrated into the development and translation stages to mitigate the effects of a large number of contributors.

Peer and management review of draft content can help ensure global validity and credibility in the early stages, with formal QA processes guaranteeing output quality. Similarly, translated content should first be peer reviewed within the company, with external experts brought in for final QA. What’s more, good QA will ensure that the e-learning works first time, every time, in spite of any regional or country-specific variations in the technical equipment or communications links available to the user.

A strong QA process is crucial to achieving consistency of experience and content, which in turn leads to a common, positive training solution.

An achievable goal

By putting the right people in place, driving efficiencies in development, managing the project robustly, ensuring attention to key messages and placing quality at the centre of the development process, there is every reason to expect and achieve a successful outcome.

As an example of what is possible when the appropriate people, processes and technologies are employed, Saffron's recent project with Hilton International delivered 55 hours of bespoke e-learning, in eight different languages, in the space of nine months. The programme has been positively received by users and has made a demonstrable difference to employee capabilities within the client organisation.

So, for any multinational company considering the development of a global e-learning programme, it is now more viable than ever before.



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