Online Learning for Your Membership—
7 Ways to Avoid Mistakes

by Erin Roberts

Are you considering adding online education to your organization's professional development curriculum? Read these tips to maximize your ROI.

Online education comes in two primary flavours....webinars and self-directed online learning

A webinar is typically a live conference call with a slide show shown over an internet connection. The best use of this tool is for overview and introductory presentations where the material can be covered quickly.

Self-directed online learning is an interactive experience between the user and a special purpose website. The best use of this tool is for more in-depth learning. The players involved in producing a learning program are a subject matter expert, a curriculum design firm, and a provider who disseminates the program to its clients. Typically the provider funds the cost of the program .

What is Self-Directed Online Learning?

In the old days self-directed learning meant receiving a three-ring binder of printed material in the mail accompanied by cassettes, CDs or DVDs.

The advantage is that this method can support an in-depth curriculum and the user can choose the pace at which they learn.

The disadvantages are that it is not very portable for the user, and it is expensive for the provider to produce CDs and to print and ship the printed material. Every update requires a new production and shipping round with the associated expenses and delays.

A self-directed *online* learning program provides the content over the internet, optimized for web-delivery.

The online version has all of the benefits of the print version plus several additional valuable advantages for both the learning provider and the user.

Advantages For the Provider:

1. No fulfillment costs. Printing, shipping and disk production is eliminated.
2. Reduced turnaround time. Updates are made on the hosting server and are instantly available to all users.

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Advantages For the User:

1. Instant fulfillment. The user receives the program immediately. They don't need to wait for shipping.
2. A richer learning experience. Audio, visual and textual elements are integrated. The experience is interactive and unique to each user.
3. Completely portable. The user can use the program from anywhere with an internet connection and can download content on demand.

Self-directed online learning: 7 ways to avoid mistakes ….

1. DO have a plan before you start. Online education should have a clearly defined place in your overall professional development strategy. Engage the curriculum designer early in the process. They can help with this.

2. DON'T choose an untried topic for your first online program. Pick a topic that you know is of interest to your audience.

3. DON'T be blinded by special effects. Content quality is far more important. Animation and other cool features get annoying quickly unless they add value. Work with a qualified subject matter expert to oversee the curriculum development.

4. DO sort out who owns the content before you start. Is it your organization? The subject matter expert? The curriculum designer?

5. DO create a detailed set of specifications before you start. Think of this as a construction project. Would you build a house without an architectural plan?

6. DO create a pilot program and test a prototype on your audience first. You need some feedback before you build the entire program.

7. DO budget time for a thorough alpha and beta test before launch. Remember the 3x3 guideline; budget 1/3 of your time for planning, 1/3 for building and 1/3 for testing.

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⇒ *If you'd like to learn more about our workshop "**Professional Development Programs: How to Maximize Member Value & Revenue**", go to www.zzeem.com/ZzeemWorkshops.aspx*

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