

Needs Assessment on a Rapid Development Schedule



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Adult learners assess potential learning experiences by asking, “What gap does this fill in my knowledge?” “Should I make the time investment?” As a result, the first instructional design step, needs assessment, must answer two important questions:

- Who is the learner and what is the learning need?
- What delivery method(s) best meet this learning need?

Today’s corporate culture encourages the “just do it” attitude. Decision makers see formal needs assessment as unnecessary, burdensome, time-consuming, and costly. To management, extensive surveys, focus groups, and statistical analysis are “nice to have” and strictly optional. Developing courseware quickly and efficiently is a critical success factor. The instructional designer must start a project with some assumptions about needs and move on quickly. Rarely does the designer dig into the root

question, “Why does my audience need e-Learning? What problem is e-Learning going to solve?”

Acquiring answers to these two questions allows you to perform an adequate needs assessment on a rapid development schedule and tight budget.

Without needs assessment, e-Learning can become “content-centric” rather than “learner-centric.” Learners shy away from “content-centric” courseware because they have to work hard to find what they need.

For example, a colleague of mine asked an insurance salesman if he had any tips that would help reduce his car insurance premium without increasing the deductible. Now, the insurance salesman had recently completed an e-Learning course about car insurance. The course was so dense with information that the salesman could not identify the topic that might provide an answer to my colleague's question. An adequate needs assessment could have identified typical questions customers like my colleague have, and it would have resulted in a course that helped sales people to answer these questions.

Recognizing the importance of customer needs is critical to success. Sales people realize this because success in selling a solution directly relates to how well a product meets the customer needs. In fact, identifying the real problem or challenge the customer faces is critical. A problem identified is a problem half solved.

Solid e-Learning course content follows the same principle. The better the course meets the needs of the target audience (the more learner-centric it is, in other words), the more skill and knowledge they will gain. In addition, reducing unnecessary content up front saves development time. Finally, allowing the learner to focus on course content targeted to their needs prevents loss of interest.

Interactive, engaging, self-paced e-Learning is effective when the learners' time is at a premium. A short, self-paced course that targets the learners' needs enables them to learn quickly and efficiently. Individually, the learner can control the learning process. The learner becomes happier and more motivated. For example, an introductory product training course helps the learner become efficient and comfortable when getting started with the product, which results in the learner feeling more secure using the product, which in turn translates to more product sales.

A blended approach can position e-Learning as a precursor to instructor-led training. This may result in the participants' deriving more benefit from the instructor-led training because they have developed foundation-level knowledge first, through the e-Learning. Instructor-led training is time-consuming and expensive, so increasing the return on investment with appropriate, well-designed e-learning is always a good idea.

If you are an instructional designer who skips the needs analysis phase of course development, I recommend reconsidering your practice. Rapid prototyping is the latest trend, but skipping the needs

analysis phase completely is never a good idea. At a minimum, talk to the people in your organization who interact with your audience and gather their feedback about what the true need is. Put yourself in the learner's shoes and think about what you need to know and why you need to know it. And for every piece of content you include in a course, be able to explain why it is there and what need it addresses.

Topics Covered

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