Remember how you were once a kid, bright-eyed with wonder—perhaps dreaming of becoming a teacher, a doctor, or even a professional World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) wrestler. What did you end up becoming? Well, look at that. You’re an e-learning professional, aren’t you?

Not surprisingly, many of us come into the world of learning and development, and namely, instructional design (ID), purely by accident. However, as the industry matures and evolves, more and more of you are making an intentional choice to be involved in e-learning and instructional design. The good news? Whatever led your path to this field, you’re not alone. Many people face the same challenges as you on this ID mission.

So what can you do to make sure your career in e-learning and instructional design thrives? Let’s explore a few best tips and insights to make the most of it, and find your passion along the way.

Recognize All the Hats You Need to Wear

Years ago, Dr. Ellen Wagner, a friend and mentor, shared a unique model about learning and development (L&D) professionals. Her model laid out four unique sectors of the industry that we’re all expected to know and pursue in our practice as instructional designers. I still refer to this model, and you should too! I like to think of it as a big pie with four pieces that we should all taste:

- **Learning and Pedagogy**: How do adults learn? What’s a learning objective, and how do you craft a good one? What are the guiding principles of ID? How do you decide on the appropriate instructional strategy? How do you assess whether someone has learned?
- **Creative**: E-learning without a creative element is just blah and boring. Graphics and strong visuals, storytelling, video production,
snappy writing - these elements make e-learning interesting, such that people actually want to work through.

- **Technology:** Do you use authoring tools? Do you know what Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) is? Do you know how to code? QA? You might just have to if you’re a one-stop-shop instructional designer, which isn’t out of the ordinary in this industry.

- **Business:** As an ID, you need to understand the needs of your business, requirements of the organization, and what you’re doing to support the bottom line. You need to know how to talk to senior leaders, stakeholders, and the gentle art of persuasion - how to change hearts and minds along the way, to help educating them onto a different and better path for an e-learning program. Additionally, you may have to know how to run an e-learning project, keeping budgets, time frames and quality in mind.

For many of us, you have to do all these things - and you might be a superman if you can do it flawlessly. However, for many of you who work as a one-person e-learning shop, it’s a lot of hats to wear, and a lot of different skill sets to master. What can you do to round out your pie?

**Know Your Sweet Spot**

Do you love to write? Do you love speaking to people and performing? Can you break down something and make it simple? Maybe creativity is your sweet spot. Or, maybe multi-device learning and management system (LMS) portals excite you, and you know everything there is to know about coding and SCORM. That’s cool too. Most of us have one sweet spot in what we do - that aspect of the pie that really gets us excited and passionate - but then we all have our gaps. Make sure you’re exploring your sweet spots and taking your practice to the next level, but don’t neglect those gaps - explore those areas that you’re a little less comfortable with, and find ways to increase your fluency in those areas.

**Don’t be Afraid to Ask Dumb Questions - Lots of Them!**

To be an instructional designer, you need to have that innate sense of curiosity and that urge to know how things work, and be able to break it down for people. You could be working on lots of different projects, in different sectors, in one year; maybe one day it’s a regulatory workflow for a pharmaceutical company, and the next day you’re onto sales training for a major car manufacturer.

That curiosity about how things work will be a great tool to help understand how things work, from start to finish. Curiosity translates into asking lots of questions, and often you have to pull out the details from your subject matter experts (SMEs) and the people you’re working with. Ask all the questions you want. Put yourself in the shoes of the learner and try to anticipate the questions they will have. You can’t really teach curiosity, but it becomes a finely honed skill that will be a useful tool as an instructional designer.

**Want to Keep that Passion? Staying Fresh is the Best Medicine**

I’ve said it once, and I’ll say it again. Curiosity and the ability to breakdown complex subjects into simple ideas are key to being successful in this field, as is strong communication skill. However, don’t forget to be empathetic. Being able to look at content from a learner’s perspective, and to simplify and structure it in a way that they can relate to your work. Empathy should be at the heart of what you do.

**To Degree or Not Degree?**

The scales may tip over time, but it appears that people who are currently practicing in the field don’t have degrees in instructional design. That doesn’t mean you have to be complacent. You can read up on instructional design, and continually learn about the industry, making an effort to learn as much as you can. However, a degree or a certificate might be the jump start to get you into the field, and will give you credibility that may help you get a job. But then again, some higher education courses don’t teach the skills and capabilities between the academic program and what the industry is doing. At the end of the day, it’s your decision. There are plenty of organizations and universities that do certification and degree programs, however, there are also plenty of free online resources to help you master the skills and competencies on your own.

**Be Empathetic**

I’ve said it once, and I’ll say it again. Curiosity and the ability to breakdown complex subjects into simple ideas are key to being successful in this field, as is strong communication skill. However, don’t forget to be empathetic. Being able to look at content from a learner’s perspective, and to simplify and structure it in a way that they can relate to and actually do something with, will help you bring even more value to your work. Empathy should be at the heart of what you do.

**The Accidental Instructional Designer**

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