

The Pros and Cons of Outsourcing E-Learning Services (Mar 11)

By Lee Stayton

We each have different ways of managing change in our organizations, but we all face the need to impart knowledge and skills to our employees. Whether implementing new procedures or new software, e-learning is a cost-effective training option for employers—and often a preferred learning method for employees. Knowing when to use a vendor requires careful analysis of the pros and cons involved with each project.

Before speaking with any vendor about your e-learning project, a careful needs analysis should be performed. Does the project require proficiency in content development, learning behavior, or media production? Can one vendor handle the project or would it be better to divide it among multiple parties? Having a clear sense of your e-learning needs will result in a more successful vendor experience.

Here are some key aspects to consider before you outsource your e-learning project:

1. How time-critical is the project? How busy is your internal team?

If a project requires the expertise and focus of an over-committed internal team, it is time to take a hard look at priorities. Refrain from assigning a critical project to internal staff, who are already struggling to meet deadlines. The projects that require less internal knowledge from your organization are prime candidates for outsourcing.

Assigning lower tier projects to a vendor will result in greater throughput of time-critical projects and will protect valuable internal resources for the most important jobs

2. Do you require expertise that is not available internally?

Some projects require specialized skills relating to instructional design, the development of video assets, or evaluation standards. Some projects relate to areas where a company interacts with external entities or bodies of knowledge such as information technology, tax law, health insurance, or intellectual property. It is important to recognize when an e-learning project requires skills that go beyond the reach of your internal staff. In these cases, there is little deliberation required for the outsourcing decision.

3. Does the e-learning project involve sensitive information?

There are times when learning materials will involve sensitive information that is best shielded from internal scrutiny. Transforming an organization can cause stress, and work related to difficult transitions should be performed outside the company. This might pertain to the implementation of new systems or protocols for resource planning, customer relationship management, new product development, or R&D.

Alternatively, there may be concerns in the opposite direction. It's not uncommon for those who traditionally protect the company's proprietary information to object to the outsourcing of sensitive projects. You can manage this fear through legal agreements such as non-disclosures or by specifying the workers chosen for a vendor's team. A long-term relationship with a trusted vendor is also an asset.

4. Does the project require tight management and control?

When you outsource an e-learning project, you might need to give up some management control. Vendors may have their own project management tools or their own methodologies for developing content. You may need to adapt to their working styles or procedures.

Regardless, you will probably need to factor in another layer of management to ensure that work done remotely is coordinated with the internal resources supporting the effort. It is essential to anticipate the ways in which outsourcing will change the way you manage the project.

5. Where do you need to build eLearning experience for future work?

Developing and delivering engaging e-learning content may require expertise in instructional design, user interface (UI) design, video production, assessment writing, scripting, and coding. If you foresee consistently outsourcing work related to e-learning content or technology, then it's appropriate to accrue this expertise in an external team.

On the other hand, if similar or related projects will be executed internally, it may be best to retain the work in-house. If you are outsourcing an e-learning project while trying to build internal proficiency, make provisions in the project management so your employees internalize the lessons and acquire the skills generated by the project.

Successful e-learning projects require money and resources whether completed internally or externally. You might believe your internal subject matter expert armed with the latest software could produce award-winning content for a fraction of a vendor's price, but there is more to consider than the price tag.

By carefully selecting the right projects to outsource, you will reap the benefits of successful outsourcing: flexible capacity, increased throughput, access to "extreme" talents, low or no overhead, and exposure to new processes or perspectives.

About the Author:

Lee Stayton leads the eLearning Services division at nSight, which works with companies, institutions, associations, and training providers to develop digital, online, and mobile learning solutions that meet clients' needs. With a focus on innovative technology and learning methods that produce quantifiable results, Stayton has more than 20 years of computer, interactive media, and eLearning experience.

eLearn, ©2011 ACM