How to Implement a Successful Online Program

By the Team at Edvance360

Edvance360

In the past 14 years we've served millions of users and hundreds of clients ranging from small mom-and-pop startups to global corporations, from Bible colleges to large universities. But when it comes to implementing an online program we've found the following key areas necessary for the success of all our clients. We're sharing them with you to help you avoid any potential pitfalls and navigate the myriad of tools available to you.

1. Know your audience

Your audience might be traditional students at a college, millennials, managers at off-site locations, sales teams spread out and on the road, or even your clients. Whoever they are, you need to know:

- What kinds of technology do they regularly use?
- How adept are they at using it?
- What are their expectations of training?
- What is the *value* of the training to them? If you can answer "What's in it for me" for them, you are more likely to get higher completion usage rates.

Here's a nugget of wisdom from Harvard Business Review (HBR):

> According to a study by MIT Sloan Management Review and Capgemini Consulting, the vast majority of managers believe that "achieving digital transformation is critical" to their organizations. However, 63% said the pace of technological change in their workplaces is too slow, primarily due to a "lack of urgency" and poor communication about the strategic benefits of new tools. "Employees need to understand why [the new technology] is an improvement from what they had before," says Didier Bonnet, coauthor of *Leading Digital* and Global Practice Leader at Capgemini Consulting, who worked on the research and coauthored the study. "The job of a manager is to help people cross the bridge — to get them comfortable with the technology, to get them using it, and to help them understand how it makes their lives better."

If you don't know what your learners are actually interested in learning, ask them! Use Edvance360 LMS's E360 Navigator to automatically match what they say they are interested in to topics within courses, content, and even learning paths that help them move to new levels or certifications.

You'll also need to set a measurable goal for your user/learner/audience. Something broad like, "We need our clients to know our software offering," is impossible to measure. So stick with something like, "We need our clients to understand and implement x toolset of our product," or, "we need our users to utilize x% of the tools by end of year."

Steve Penfold of Elucidat (a content authoring tool) makes several excellent points about setting small, measurable goals. He says in his blog post:

- It forces you to think about what your employees' needs really are (as opposed to a blanket statement that's hard to pin down).
- It begins to reveal what you actually need to tell/show your employees so that they can meet their objectives.
- It's easy to evaluate whether each of these small steps has been achieved after training. This could be done by providing employees with a small simulation that has to be completed successfully, getting them to pass an online quiz, or simply by being rewarded with a reduction in customer complaints.
- It helps you to see a possible program structure; for example, each objective could form one module, or one section within a larger module.
- It enables you to prioritize which training objectives need to be tackled first; which ones will be easiest or hardest to address; which ones will be most appreciated by your employees; or which ones will have the biggest impact on your business.
- It will figure into how you should *reward* them.

2. Know your leaders

You'll need to engage your influencers (see the third bullet), but first you'll need to empower your leaders to use the software or buy-in will dwindle when leaders don't participate. Charlene Li's HBR article covers why corporations must wake up to "a landscape littered with failed technology deployments." She explains:

> "Altimeter's research shows that less than half of the enterprise collaboration tools installed have many employees using them regularly…I recently spoke with the leadership team of a top Silicon Valley technology firm that had installed an internal enterprise collaboration platform for its employee engagement and collaboration efforts. After an initial spike in adoption, usage slowly dwindled. It was a disappointing outcome and they wanted to know how to fix it, or if they should maybe just toss it out and invest in a new platform.
>
> "As I stood in front of the executive team I posed an opening question: 'How many of you have been on the platform in the past week?'
>
> "Only a single hand went up – the administrator of the platform.
>
> "The problem was simple and obvious – because the top executives didn't see collaboration and engagement as a good use of their time, employees quickly learned that they shouldn't either."

Empower your leaders to become what Charlene Li calls "engaged leaders" or those who are confident extending their leadership through and deeply into digital channels.

> "Our research shows that leadership participation is crucial for collaboration. Leaders know they should engage with employees, especially via digital and social channels. But they don't, and they offer a string of common excuses such as "I don't have enough time" or "Nobody cares what I had for lunch." More than anything else, they fear that engaging will close the power distance between them and their employees, thereby lessening their ability to command and control."
> – Charlene Li

One the quickest ways to rope in your leaders is via dashboards and reporting tools. Make sure your LMS provides these to the leaders. Visible and easily understandable dashboards will draw your leaders in by providing a much-needed value.

3. Know your influencers

To build momentum, take some time to categorize your list of users/learners. Segment them into categories of Innovators (the risk-takers), Early Adopters (most influential group), Early Majority (team-player followers), Late Majority (skeptics), and Laggards (your holdouts). Once you've segmented them, create a timeline and strategy to engage each group at separate times, and each individual belonging to that group at a separate time. Have a goal in mind for your engagement.

Contraryto what you might think, you should engage the resisters first. According to Sally Blount and Shana Carroll of the Kellog School of Management in an excellent article on HBR on how to identify and overcome resistance:

> "Effective change management is critical to the vitality and progress of every organization. Where most people trip up is in failing to manage resistance effectively. Doing so requires an ability to listen to your opposition, diagnose their antipathy, consider their thoughts and feelings, and explain how it has changed your thinking, if not your plan. This is a time-consuming but effective process. As Jim McNerney, the former CEO of Boeing, said in one of our classes, 'Change happens one conference room and one office at a time.'"

They add to make change happen:

> "You first need to identify who — that is, which individuals and groups — have the biggest potential to thwart positive change. Then you have to unstick them. Doing so begins with understanding their perspectives."

They advocate having two conversations addressing the three main reasons people resist change, focus on listening instead of efficiency, be open to changing the plan, and have two separate conversations—one to simply hear them and another (they recommend two days or more, later) to share that you've reflected on what they said and outline what has changed.

Then, we suggest asking Late Majority skeptics and Laggards to have one-on-one training with the software trainer or salesperson to specifically address how *they* will use the tools. If using Edvance360, turn them over to our trainers who are adept at reaching a 95 percent or higher usage rate at all of our institutions. Be realistic about your expectations for this group.

Ask Innovators to find the problems, bugs, or issues. This group won't abandon the software just because they've found issues, so celebrate when they do (e.g. give awards for bugs found). They actually expect them and don't mind finding them.

Ask Early Adopters to share what they love and share it often—celebrate their sharing with badges or mugs or pens or whatever. Ask them to share what they don't like with you directly so you can offset any negativity. (But make sure they know those issues are being addressed and keep them updated, since this is your most influential group, and valuing their input is equal to valuing them.) Bring this group in early in discussions if a team decision is going to be made on which software to use.

Ask Early Majority users to use the tools and sit through training. Celebrate every early "win" publicly, and often. This group wants to be a part of the team or group that made a good decision, even if they actually weren't a part of the decision.

4. Know your vision

To build the learning culture of your dreams, you'll need to define your vision. What does this learning culture look like? What will best produce the desired skills in your learners? Does your vision have measurable goals?

For example, moving from face-to-face/butts-in-seat sessions to online to save yourself and your learners time is a great goal but not a vision. Think through the different delivery methods:

- the culture-building tools like gamification
- the necessary vs. not-so-necessary completion rates,
- developing leaders or self-led learners,
- delivering a value-based network to professionals,
- facilitating alumni relationships and raising funds for the school,
- eliminating manual tasks,
- hybridizing courses (making them partially self-paced and partially butts-in-seat or video-conferencing to keep the face-to-face component, but offload as many tasks as possible),
- increasing effectiveness of training by increasing interactivity via SCORM files (not just making SCORM files from PowerPoint presentations [more on that below]),
- bringing people back to take more courses,
- implementing value-add items to keep professionals coming back

Note: Here's an excellent blog post on articulating vision.

5. Know your content

Similarly to the section above, "Knowing your vision", you'll need to know the content you *have* and the content you *want*, in order to deliver the skills/objectives you need. You'll need to know and address accessibility needs, mobility needs, attention spans, etc. These all play into shaping the content that is usable for you.

For example, SCORM can be very interactive, but not everything works well on mobile devices or with JAWS readers. Another example is the ability to deliver content on-demand in a library of resources versus a more course-centered approach.

6. Know your personal limitations

You can't accomplish everything in one fell swoop. You'll need to make measurable goals that basically equate to bite-sized phases that accomplish objectives. Far too many people check off boxes like, "We are using SCORM" but, in reality, their SCORM file is just a fancy PowerPoint.

But don't make the mistake of waiting until everything is perfect to launch. If you do, you'll never launch. Consider outsourcing as it is quite often less expensive.

Here's a good example of phases a corporation follows moving from completely butts-in-seat to completely online:

- **Phase 1:** A good first phase is to take your already existing content—whatever it is—and put them in a course on the LMS. Convert the PowerPoint presentations to a clickable MP4 via your PowerPoint software or use something like Authorstream to convert it. Copy and paste your questions and answers in your Word document/PDF test to the LMS to create a test. Grab a funny video off the internet or make a quick intro video on your phone, email it to yourself, and post it on the LMS. Add a certificate. Add a survey. Launch.

- **Phase 2:** Learn to use SCORM-creator (there are 2-3 options). Re-create your PowerPoint presentations, embed audio, make a few pop-quiz questions, export SCORM file and add to LMS. Keep using the test created in Phase 1. Start adding on the other training courses that come after onboarding.

- **Phase 3:** Completely rethink and storyboard your PowerPoint/SCORM files to make them interactive. Use things like drag-and-drop puzzle pieces or to build something, editable spreadsheets so people can "see" how a change in one column changes the bottom line in another, use the drag-the-mouse option to have them fill in a gauge/timeline, use a clickable area for hotspot questions or "choose your own ending" questions. Export as SCORM file and replace SCORM files created in Phase 2. Rethink test questions since many will be already in the SCORM file.

- **Phase 4:** Use badges. Use something other than tests to have learners demonstrate they've achieved a skill: turn in videos they create on their mobile phone, etc.

7. Know your budget

Many LMS vendors, especially open-source ones, have hidden costs. Look for limitations, scaling costs, or third-party vendors that will be needed later. Know the costs for customizations. See more information on costs and pitfalls to avoid.

8. Know your administrator

This one is very much a part of the one above, “know your budget”, because you’ve probably got a limited amount of finances AND time. How much time do you have to “facilitate” courses? Build them? Update them? Run reports for that report-happy CEO?

Keep this rule of thumb in mind: It’s going to take longer than you think. Consider outsourcing if your time is limited or if you’re a business owner who will never launch if the launch depends on you doing administrative tasks.

9. Know your landscape

This one is related to the sections on vision, content, personal limitations, budget, and time. Since your technology landscape will influence your vision, determine content delivery, make a dent in your budget finances, and consume your time (or save you time if integrations are done well).

You’ll need to know what third-party vendors you can eliminate with the LMS, which ones you’ll have to integrate with and how they’ll need to be integrated (are they just passing information to the LMS or is it passing information back, etc.), and which ones just need single sign-on created. Many LMS vendors are LTI compliant or very adept at making their API work with your already-existing third-party vendors such as CRM, SIS, HRIS, AMS, etc. Most include single sign-on, usually at no charge.

10. Know your business model

You'll need to know your competition, your buyer persona and their role in your business model.

- Are you an expert selling your expertise to clients or the world-at-large? If so, you'll need an eCommerce module.
- Are you selling your expertise to an HR person at a corporation who will purchase it for their employees? If so, you'll need an eCommerce module and a multi-tenant tool, such as our Mothership.
- Are you a school district needing to manage several campuses or schools? If so, you'll need a Mothership.
- Are you in competition with others, selling content that is similar to your competition and need to differentiate yourself? If so, selling your content along with their own LMS site (connected to your Mothership) can be the value-add that sets you apart.
- Are you selling continuing education for professionals that is required to keep up their certification? If so, you'll need to make a plan to add value via the collaborative and social tools to keep them coming back to you, year after year, in order to maximize your profits.

In summary, there's no one-size-fits-all approach and you really can't have everything, but these ten areas should equip you to navigate the LMS vendor choice process.

Note: See more information on Edvance360 eCommerce module and Edvance360 Mothership.

More helpful links

Knowing When to Outsource

Creating Interaction With Learners

Increasing Employee Engagement with Gamification

Using Video

Going Beyond the LMS

How to Get Employees to Use the LMS

Finding the Right LMS

Gamification, Badges, & Incentives

Engaging Learners

Ask Learners the Right Questions

Purposeful Learning

Pitfalls to Avoid

Costs to Consider

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