



PATHWAYS

A PUBLICATION OF FLI

Focus:

Are eLearning Tools for You?

In our last issue of Pathways we discussed the topic of eLearning, explained what eLearning is, and described how some organizations are benefiting from this educational delivery/ measurement/ management facility.

Assuming your organization is considering investing in eLearning, you need to be aware that there is more than one way to get started.

- One way is to call upon your development people to develop a delivery/ management system from scratch, doing all the screen design, navigation indicators, link specifications, and other coding themselves.
- Another way is to use one or more of the specially designed tools on the market - tools designed to help organizations develop, maintain, and manage their eLearning services.
- A third alternative is to get help from a professional services firm that has helped other clients learn how to develop and use eLearning in their organizations.

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AT ISSUE:

How Can Your Organization Benefit from eLearning Tools?

As we said in the last issue of Pathways, eLearning may either be an organization's total educational/informational delivery system or it may be used simply to supplement and support more traditional instructional systems such as the classroom, computer-based training, print self-study, and the like. Whatever your objective and need, eLearning tool software exists to assist you in developing, managing, and measuring the effectiveness of your eLearning delivery system. Let's look at some of the things eLearning tools can help you do.

What are eLearning Tools and What do they Do?

eLearning tools are packaged software products used by organizations to help them create, maintain, and manage eLearning without the need to learn on-line coding languages such as HTML and JAVA, spreadsheet software, and the like. The major benefits to these organizations are a savings in the front-end development costs, a reduced need for highly skilled resources, and a reduction in the time needed to get programs deployed. A side benefit (often a valuable one) is the opportunity to build on the experience and successes of the eLearning tool developers, rather than having to learn by trial and error. For this discussion, we've arbitrarily classed the tools into two types:

- Development/Maintenance/Delivery Tools
- Management/Monitoring/Reporting Tools

Development/Maintenance/Delivery Tools

These eLearning tools offer pre-designed learning module prototypes featuring templates and pre-programmed subroutines to create and maintain on-line presentations, exercises, tests and quizzes, and other types of interactive learning sessions. They help developers create a consistent, structured user interface. Some offer facilities to automatically and dynamically update on-line training components as content and data change.

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Management/Monitoring/Reporting Tools

These eLearning tools are used to simplify the development of training management tasks. They offer such capabilities as tailorable templates to generate enrollment forms, track learner progress, perform learning assessments, report completions, and generate e-mail messages to students who are lagging in progress (or excelling!).

Many eLearning tool suppliers offer tools and suites that combine features of the two broad capabilities described above. And as one might expect with Internet-based eLearning, many of these suppliers are located worldwide, providing both local and international support. See the table on page 3 for a short list of some tool suppliers whom FLI has worked with in the past. The table provides both a sentence description of their products and services and a hot link to their website.

eLearning Tool User Successes

The following paragraphs describe how three organizations used off-the-shelf eLearning development tools to support their information and training development/delivery needs.

CASE 1 -AUTOMOBILE MANUFACTURER

This organization began using Catalyst Interactive's LearnSwitch® eLearning development software to create training for 500+ employees in their Australian manufacturing plants. Initially they distributed 30 courses via CD-ROM. They have since migrated distribution of these and additional courses to the Internet. This manufacturer is currently developing a fully integrated learning management system (LMS) through which they will be able to reuse and tailor existing content to serve the needs of multiple employee audiences worldwide. This eLearning development/distribution capability has significantly reduced the company's need for, and reliance on, print course materials and classroom instruction.

CASE 2 - DISTRIBUTOR OF ELECTRONIC AND COMPUTER COMPONENTS

This U.S. based international distributor used Click2Learn Aspen's Learning Management Server (LMS) to set up a web-based corporate university. The LMS tool provides the company centralized control over all training delivery systems, from classroom to eLearning, addressing the needs of all divisions of the organization. Company managers are "able to review assessments and required learning events to ensure that employees attain the necessary competencies to effectively perform in the workplace."

CASE 3 - WHOLESALE/RETAIL SOUND SYSTEM MANUFACTURER

This company, well known for its innovative high-end loudspeaker design, began marketing a relatively low-cost retail sound system directly to the public. They faced the problem of relying on mailers and costly live demonstrations to qualify customers until they decided to try an Internet-based solution. Using Macromedia Flash MX, they created an on-line, informative guide. The guide helps potential customers learn about the audio system offerings and to articulate to a "virtual salesperson" their interests and needs. The on-line application then leads the customer to the sound system solution best suited to his/her needs. This on-line solution reduced customer response/decision time by some 50%.

Critical Management Tasks when using eLearning tools

You also need to be aware that there are a number of critical tasks no eLearning tool will do for you and your organization.

- They can't perform a needs analysis for your organization. Some can support the effort, but none will decide upon your organizational or training audience needs.
- They can't specify required content or eliminate extraneous detail.
- While they may offer a variety of delivery method options, they can't decide for you what is the optimal way to present your information and training.
- Similarly, while they may provide assessment tools, they can't decide for you what is the optimal way to assess training effectiveness.
- They don't design your courseware; they simply provide a variety of tailorable user interface and delivery/practice/test screen templates and options. These decisions and their implementation remain the responsibility of your training development/delivery team.
- These tools won't force you to conduct one or more beta tests of your draft training products before their full release. But, it will be a major mistake if you fail to do so.
- The tools can help you collect and organize client (student) feedback, but your eLearning team has to review the results, draw conclusions therefrom, and make appropriate change decisions.

There are also some on-going tasks which only your eLearning team can accomplish. You have to:

- Maintain the technical environment necessary to support the tools during courseware development and delivery.
- Monitor and select from eLearning tool upgrades.
- Investigate new eLearning tool products or assess their adaptability to your organization's needs.

To Summarize

eLearning tools can help virtually any organization get up and running with web-based staff and customer training. But these products are just that, tools. They cannot supplant the need for careful needs analysis, planning, execution, and follow-through.



Van O. Wright, Ph.D.

Representative Suppliers/Links

Catalyst Interactive Pty Ltd.....www.LearnSwitch.com	Macromedia, Incwww.macromedia.com
Click2Learn, Inc.....www.click2learn.com	Microsoft Corporation.....www.microsoft.com/mscorp
Intermezzonwww.intermezzon.com	Placeware Inc.....www.placeware.com
Lotus Softwarewww.lotus.com	Skillsoft/SmartForce.....www.smartforce.com

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In this issue, we look at a few representative tools that our clients have used. We review some case studies describing how eLearning tools have helped organizations meet their specific needs. And, we address some important tasks eLearning tools will **not** do for you – critical eLearning development and control tasks which cannot be totally automated.

There are many more eLearning support tools available than those mentioned in this brief overview. Some offer the capabilities and

features your organization needs; others may not. Some differ little from traditional CBT and learning management software. Others offer a plethora of features you may never use. Still others don't offer the capabilities and features your organization needs. Some are highly sophisticated and, consequently, can present a challenge for your development staff to learn and implement. Buyer beware! Analysis and careful selection are critical. The tool you choose is the one you will have to use.



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