



PATHWAYS

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Focus:

How Do You Select the Right eLearning Tools?

In our last issue we looked at the types and varieties of eLearning software tools available and pointed you to some representative tool suppliers and web links. As you may recall, we defined eLearning tools as "packaged software products used by organizations to help them create, maintain, and manage eLearning."

Moving to eLearning represents a significant investment for any organization, even if the hardware and network infrastructure are already in place. In making such an investment, it is important to consider factors other than software costs alone. Not all eLearning software tools are the same:

- Some tools provide templates which fit your organization's learning culture and management style well; others may not.
- Some are easier for your development staff to learn than others.

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AT ISSUE:

An eLearning Tool Selection Strategy

To maximally benefit from your investment in eLearning, your organization will need effective eLearning development and management tools. Adopting a sound strategy for the selection and application of eLearning tools is worth the effort. In this issue of Pathways, we describe a strategy we have found effective. Except for Phase Four, the strategy described here is applicable even if your development staff decides to "roll their own" eLearning applications.

eLearning Tool Selection Steps

The graphic below outlines the strategy we recommend. You need to take three preliminary steps before actually selecting your eLearning tool(s), plus an additional two afterward to verify your choice. The first three steps lead you through an analysis of your eLearning needs. Step Four details the selection process. The final two steps help ensure a successful implementation.



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First we will briefly describe each step of the strategy, and then we'll concentrate on Step Four; which is the primary focus of this issue.

1 Establish Business Goals and Objectives

First, look throughout your organization to identify critical areas of training need.

- Are there individuals or groups too isolated to have the opportunity to attend much centralized training?
- Are there critical areas of training where costs are exorbitant because of travel, lodging, or other such costs?
- Do you have governmental or business association requirements which mandate verification/certification of employee training?

These are a few of the questions you need to ask to determine potential benefits of eLearning, but the analysis doesn't end there.

2 Determine eLearning Fit and Needs

Once you have identified groups with significant training requirements, you need to do a more detailed analysis of the members of each group. What do you want them to be able to do or do better as a result of the training? Which of those new skills will **require** one-on-one or person-to-person practice? eLearning is probably not the best choice for such skill learning. But, if you dig a bit deeper with your analysis, you will usually find that one-on-one skills must be supported by more basic learning:

fact and theory learning, practice in selecting best options, and other knowledge learning that doesn't call for classroom instruction. These are ideal areas for eLearning.

You also need to consider what eLearning **management/recordkeeping support** is required by regulatory organizations, or simply needed by your organization to effectively measure and document results.

3 Identify Organizational Constraints

There usually are certain business and cultural realities you need to consider as well.

- Some of the audiences you have identified may not yet have access to eLearning platforms. Is your organization willing to make the necessary investments?
- Some managers may be less open to new solutions than others. To begin your eLearning initiative, you need to look for one or more executives who will actively support, not thwart, your efforts.

4 Review and Evaluate Available Tools

In the following section of this article we will address this step in more detail. But, briefly, it is at this step that you:

- Assess what tools are commercially available, both to

support your targeted training requirements and to support your management/ reporting requirements.

- Negotiate cost-effective acquisition arrangements.

5 Develop Prototype eLearning Application(s)

During this step your development and management teams create one or more prototype eLearning programs, beta and small-audience test them, debug and modify as necessary, and implement a full-scale eLearning training program.

6 Evaluate Results and Adapt as Necessary

During the prototype program testing, you need to be especially sensitive to any areas of dissatisfaction that arise and attack those problems immediately. Something that seemed perfectly clear to the course developer may prove confusing to students. Sometimes a template provided by the tool you selected doesn't work well for your students, but can be adapted. Keep in mind a key benefit of eLearning: the content of eLearning screens (also called frames by some eLearning tools) can be revised and made accessible to users virtually overnight. Take advantage of this powerful capability of eLearning.

Then, as longer-term results come in, adapt current and future training programs to take full advantage of those methods that were best accepted. At the same time, keep an eye out for other ways to use eLearning effectively.

And Now, a More Detailed Look at Step 4

The Review and Evaluate Tools step is our primary focus in this issue of Pathways. One place to learn about available eLearning tools is through your industry's professional associations. You can also do much of your initial research for eLearning tools online, using any good search tool. In the last issue of Pathways we listed several representative suppliers of eLearning tools and provided links to their websites. You may wish to start your search by checking out the resources listed there.¹ Here are some key recommendations for identifying and selecting from the commercial tools available.

1. Using FLI's list and other resources, go on-line to review available eLearning tool vendor offerings.

2. Most vendors provide samples and demo copies for review, either on-line or downloadable. Determine as much information as possible about:

- The variety, capabilities, and tailorability of standard templates
- Compatibility with your organizational requirements and industry standards

- Typical users and their match with your needs
3. Try demos and samples
- Do they reflect your current training methods or offer possibilities to enhance current methods?

4. Analyze sample templates to determine:

- Consistency of student response methods from template to template.
- Is the general screen display and layout consistent from template to template, or do users constantly have to search for response button locations?
- Degree of interactivity of standard templates
- Some eLearning tools are pretty much limited to the reading of text/graphics screens plus multiple choice, matching, and true/false responses. Others provide rich simulation capabilities. What degree of interactivity do you need?

5. If not offered online, contact the vendor to request a limited-use sample authoring tool and have your developers try it out. Even if you have to pay a small fee, this is a worthwhile evaluation qualifier.

- How easy is the tool to learn and use?
- Will you be able to import and support your existing graphics and data files with ease or must they be converted to other formats?

- What technical support is available to your eLearning development team? What are the hours of availability?

6. Determine the tool's adaptability to any governmental and industry protocols important to your organization.

- Does your organization or industry adhere to and require such interfaces as ADL SCORM, AICC LAN, HASP, or other protocols?²
- Does the tool you are contemplating support required protocols?

7. Contact and query existing users. A reputable vendor should be anxious to provide such references.

- What do customers like/dislike about the tool?
- What advice do they have to offer for starting out with eLearning?
- What level of start-up and on-going support have they received from the vendor?

8. Determine what licensing, lease, and purchase options are available.

- Acquisition arrangements vary significantly from vendor to vendor.

Once you have made a selection, you are ready to get rolling with a prototype test of your eLearning initiative.

¹ Check out the "Publications" section of FLI's website (www.fliinc.com) if you have misplaced your copy.

² An excellent introduction to these standards is contained in the white paper, *Getting Started with eLearning Standards*, published by Macromedia at www.macromedia.com.

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- Some come as "shrink-wrapped" packages. That is, they may offer little other assistance to your development staff than print or on-line tutorials.
- Some vendors lease; others sell outright.
- Some permit you to import data from your organization's databases; some do not.

In the At Issue section we suggest a strategy for selecting the tool or suite of tools that best fits your organization.



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AT ISSUE from page 3**Some Final Thoughts**

It's not wise to jump into eLearning without first carefully reviewing your organization's needs and then making a thorough research of the options available.

Many organizations start out by working with an experienced consultant who can help their eLearning development/management staff to get started right. Experienced professionals can help your organization build standards, develop prototype

lessons, track results, and prepare reports to senior management. Your own development team can thereafter work on its own.

Finally, read the trade literature inside and outside your industry. It's always a good idea to learn how others are using eLearning. Don't just emulate them; build upon and expand their ideas to fit your organization's unique needs.



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