Managing e-Learning

A Beginner's Guide to Harmonious Buyer-Supplier Relationships

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Table of Contents

I. So What's Your Problem?

Is This Guide for You?

This e-booklet is not intended to be an all encompassing tome on the topic of managing e-learning relationships. It's designed primarily for training professionals who are relatively new to managing e-learning projects (although vendors may get a few insights as well). And, while there is some reference to LMS and LCMS vendors, the focus of this booklet is on managing *custom content* projects.

The Buyer's Side

If you are an e-learning "buyer" have you or your colleagues ever said one of these statements?

- *The prices on the proposals varied by a factor of ten!*
- *They completely blew their deadlines.*
- *We had to rewrite the scripts ourselves from scratch.*
- *It just didn't work!*
- *It ended up costing twice what the proposal said it would.*
- *I'm being held hostage on the updates.*
- *We rolled it out and got terrible reviews.*
- *They promised interactivity – it wasn't at all.*
- *It takes forever to download!*

The Vendor's Side

If you are an e-learning supplier have you ever said one of these statements about your clients?

- They keep asking for more but won't adjust the budget!
- They're taking forever on their reviews and sign-offs.
- Their reviewers don't even agree with each other.
- They don't understand instructional design!
- Their implementation was terrible and there was no support.
- Why didn't they give us that technical spec before the project started?

- We told them bandwidth would be a problem but they didn’t listen.
- We’re losing our shirt on this.

How it Goes Wrong

Much of what goes wrong in e-learning projects can be traced back even before the project begins. Things begin to go wrong in the Request for Proposal (RFP) phase, they get worse in the contract stage, and completely fall apart in the project management process. So what do we do about it?

II. How to Write an e-Learning RFP

Training managers are often surprised when they receive vendors' proposals and see the wide disparity in prices and proposed solutions. One training manager at a pharmaceutical company received five proposals for the development of a CD-ROM to teach sales representatives about a new drug. The low bidder quoted $28,000 while the high bidder came in at $380,000 (the winning proposal was for $78,000).

What explains this huge disparity? Most likely, the training manager was not specific enough in his RFP to receive comparable and valid responses from the vendors.

What are Your Requirements?

A fair amount of analysis and planning should be done by the client in order to provide appropriate, specific requests to e-learning vendors. For content projects a needs analysis and high-level design document should be created prior to sending out RFPs. Whether done internally or with an outside consultant, a clear analysis of business objectives, subject matter, delivery options and desired learning outcomes is a minimum. If you are looking for an LMS or LCMS you need to document your functional requirements (e.g., authoring, reporting) and non-functional (e.g., security, global factors) business requirements.

Ideally, you should identify other critical success variables like interoperability requirements, target audience, evaluation measurements (i.e. what will success look like?), technical or other limitations.

How Much Time Should Vendors Get?

Vendors should be given at least two to three weeks to complete their proposals – longer if it's for an enterprise wide system. Some managers believe that mandating quick turnarounds of a proposal, three days, for example, tests how professional and committed the vendors are. The theory is that only the best companies will be able to respond on time.

In reality, the best companies are very thorough with their proposed solutions and very busy with existing clients. The companies more likely to respond to quick turnaround RFPs are those that are desperate for new business, or are overstaffed for their current workload. A quality company might submit a proposal that is 20 to 100 pages long, with detailed design strategies, sample screen images, and perhaps even a return on investment analysis. The extra information you receive from such a company will be worth the wait.

The Components of a RFP for Custom Content Development

A request for proposals (RFP) is a document that explains the training need, and provides details about the size and scope of the project. A complete RFP should include:

- Review of business objective and performance objective.
- Background on the student population.
- Outline of the content or learning objectives to be covered.
- Estimate of the total amount of learning time the finished program should include, if one exists.
- Samples of any existing subject matter or description of available subject matter expertise.
- Description of the delivery technology, whether CD-ROM or Web-based or blended, if known.
- Description of the types of media to be used, such as whether audio or video will be included.
- Clear requests for vendor background information.

III. The Devil's in the (Contract) Details

Many vendors use certain practices that give them short-term advantages or lower prices, but with long-term negative consequences to the client. Make sure you investigate your vendor's approach to these topics, and avoid falling into common traps.

Who owns the source code?

The source code is the actual program, or lines of instruction, in an unencrypted format. Many vendors keep the source files and hold the copyright to them, which prevents the client from making changes to the program on their own.

Retaining the source code gives the vendor tremendous power over the client. If you are dissatisfied in the middle of the project, you can not fire the vendor without being willing to start the project all over from scratch. More commonly, when you return to the vendor in the future for minor updates to the program, you may discover that exorbitant rates will be charged for the updates. Without ownership of source code, you have no choice but to pay the high fees - it would still cheaper than creating the program again from the beginning. Additionally, if the source code remains with the vendor, you have no protection in the event that they go bankrupt.

Make it clear in your RFP and contract that all unencrypted source files and programmer notes will be turned over to you (the client) and that you have the right to maintain the program yourself in the future.

The vendors' side of this issue is that they have invested a lot of money into their "intellectual capital" and they don't want their source code falling into competitors' hands. Indeed, if they've created reusable objects, graphics, or original audio files these could be used by others without the original investment of time to create them. But the reality is that there are a lot of buyers who have been burned by a few bad vendors, who either hijack them on the maintenance or just disappear. And the buyer gets to set the rules. There are plenty of e-learning vendors who provide full source code so there just isn't any reason why you (as the buyer) would want to work with someone who doesn't.

If you are dealing with an e-learning application like an LMS, you should escrow the source code which protects both parties interests. As long as the vendor is still in business you shouldn't need it. But if they should ever go under your IT department will have a shot at keeping you up and running.

Who owns the content?

Ownership of the content itself is as important as the source code. If the vendor holds exclusive copyright to the words, images, and videos that appear in your program, then only that vendor has the legal authority to change the content, or reuse it in a modified program.

Most vendors have a legitimate need to protect their "intellectual property" and need to be able to reuse part of the content on other projects. As the client, however, you need to make sure that you have the right to use, modify, and re-use the content for your internal purposes. Clear exceptions to this, of course, are if you are buying off-the-shelf titles. Contracts for this type of content are considered as licenses rather than work-for-hire agreements used for custom work.

Are project expenses extra?

Some vendors bundle all expenses into the project fee, while others bill for individual items. Just be sure you know in advance how your vendor operates. Some vendors charge for photocopies, phone calls, postage, faxes, office supplies, administrative assistance, and travel. These fees can add an additional 5 to 15 percent to a project total. If your vendor charges for expenses make sure to get a detailed list of which items will be charged, find out the exact cost per item, and insist on receiving all receipts or detailed records of materials used.

What will program updates cost in the future?

If you own the copyright to the source code and content you are likely to get competitive rates for time and materials since you can always turn to another vendor. Never accept flat fees or percentage fees for changes. For example, some vendors will charge $2,500 plus $1,000 per day for changes. If you sign such an agreement you could pay $3,500 for the vendor to make a simple text change that might only require an hour of time. The best deal is for the vendor to charge normal hourly rates ($75 to $150) and expenses for any future updates.

Is the vendor using a "black box," "engine," or proprietary tools?

A software engine, sometimes called a black box, is a program that automatically processes content such as data stored in a separate database. For example, an engine might specify where to place text on a screen, and where exactly to place a photograph. Because an engine is built once, and the content is easily added or changed, a large amount of multimedia training can be developed for a relatively low cost. Typically, however, engines result in linear "page turners" where each page looks the same and there is little interactivity or room for creativity. Many vendors consider their engine to be proprietary technology and refuse to turn it over to their clients.

Similarly, many vendors have created proprietary development languages or models that enable them to reduce the time and cost of program development. While this may cut development time for the vendor, it also means that you, the client, will have to always return to the same company for future updates and changes, even if you are dissatisfied with the prices or service.

Never agree to have your training produced using proprietary programs of any type. You will be forever shackled to the vendor who may or may not even be in business two or three years from now when you need changes. Your initial investment becomes worthless if it needs to be updated and cannot be altered.

Today there are many excellent, easy-to-use tools on the market that are common with many vendors. Insist that your project is developed in a standard authoring language such as Authorware, Director, DreamWeaver, or the tool that accompanies your LMS/LCMS.

Is the vendor using freelance developers?

It is easy for a vendor company to present themselves as being capable of all services - video, audio, multimedia, instructional design, web development. Whatever it is you want, they do it. The truth often is that the company offers these services but do not have in-house capabilities in each particular area. Instead, they go outside the company to a freelancer.

While there is nothing wrong in theory with using freelancers, there are some pitfalls to be aware of. Freelancers can help keep costs down and bring specialized expertise to a particular job. But freelancers present a risk to you, the client. When a company uses freelancers, you really do not know who is working on your project. Neither the vendor company nor you are in control of the freelance individual. What happens if the person becomes ill, moves away, or takes a job? Always make sure you ask in the RFP or follow-up meetings for the vendor to specify the exact team that will be working on your project and to tell you which ones are full-time employees and which are employed on a freelance or contract basis.

IV. Custom e-Learning Project Management

Successful project management starts with clearly defined project milestones that include client reviews and approvals at each point. These milestones or phases should loosely follow the Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation process known as ADDIE.

Project Kick-off

The kick-off meeting gathers all key team members from the client and the vendor for a face-to-face review of the major project parameters. Typically, the proposal is reviewed, schedules are confirmed, and individual roles and lines of communication are clarified. If available, source materials and technical specifications are turned over to the vendor at this time.

Analysis, Design Document, and Rapid Prototype

The vendor conducts a thorough needs analysis or reviews the client's analysis if one has been completed ahead of time. This step culminates in a high-level design document that reviews audience demographics; details technical specifications; provides a detailed content outline; and describes strategies for interactivity, navigation, testing, and tracking. Along with the design document, the vendor supplies a rapid prototype that is reviewed with the same technology that will be available to the students. The prototype shows the interface, structure, and performance of the software. After the vendor makes requested changes, approval is granted to continue.

Script or Storyboard

Sometimes called a detailed design document, in this step the vendor's instructional designers produce detailed scripts or storyboards. This document describes the details of every screen, including text, audio narration, video, and a description or sketch of graphics. Notes on each screen provide direction to the programmer and client about special navigation or other options (see Appendix I for a sample script). The client reviews these documents carefully and provides written feedback to the vendor. Revisions are made and approved before proceeding.

Development

After final script approval, development begins on all media. Artists create graphics and illustrations while audio narration and video is recorded, edited, and digitized. When these media items are complete, programmers produce the final program. A thorough round of quality control hopefully uncovers any software bugs or other problems.

Pilot Test or Formative Evaluation

At this stage, the program is tested with members from the actual student population. This pilot test is completed with 10 or more individuals in an environment that is identical to the one the actual students will use. This pilot test is designed to both uncover any technical glitches or bugs, and also to confirm that the instructional program is sound and achieving its objectives. Based on the results of this test, bugs are fixed and final adjustments are made to the content.

Delivery

To prepare for delivery, a final round of quality control is conducted on the master CD-ROM or actual Web-site location where the program is held. After thorough testing, the vendor produces any necessary CD-ROM labels, jewel case packaging, or quick reference user instructions. CD-ROMs are duplicated and distributed or the Web-based training program is uploaded to the server and opened for access.

Evaluation

Finally, the vendor and client work closely to evaluate the results of the program. Student evaluations and scores are tabulated and summarized and observations of behaviors completed. A brief memo or report describing the cost, benefit, and return-on-investment of the program provides vendor and client with evidence of the effectiveness of the solution.

V. Six Rules for Good Buyer-Supplier Relations

By establishing certain ground rules with your vendor prior to project kick-off, you can facilitate communications and establish your expectations about communication, progress, and service.

Rule #1: Maintain a single point of contact, a project manager.
Although each side typically has many team members contributing to the project, miscommunication becomes likely when several individuals are talking with different levels of each organization. For example, if the client is experiencing a technical glitch or bug, it might make sense for the client's technical support personnel to speak directly with the vendor's most advanced programmer. However, the project manager from the client and vendor should participate in this meeting or phone call to make sure that prior commitments or expectations are understood, action items agreed upon, and timetables are set.

Rule #2: Hold frequent progress meetings.
Adhering to this simple rule helps improve communication and teamwork on a project. Ideally, once a week at a pre-scheduled time the vendor and client project managers should discuss in person or on the phone the project status. Topics can include new questions that have come up, answers to questions raised in the previous meeting, a review of milestones, and an update on the schedule. Even if there is little to report, a five-minute phone call confirming that everything is on schedule keeps the project moving along smoothly. Documenting the action items at the end of each meeting can also keep everyone on track.

Rule #3: Work from detailed project schedules.
Depending on the complexity and size of your project, the schedule can be as simple as a table of items and delivery dates or as complex as Gantt charts that graphically show the overlapping tasks as bars on a timeline. Detailed

schedules that are frequently updated let you see the consequences of missed deadlines or allow you to plan early for overcoming these delays.

The client's responsibility for deadlines is as important as the vendor's in meeting the final delivery date. If the original agreement and schedule is for client reviews to take place within three days and you take six, then you should be prepared to add three days to the schedule or risk sacrificing quality or quality control in order to meet the deadline.

Rule #4: Client project manager must be on hand for all video and audio shoots.

Most corporate training programs include a fair amount of industry jargon, technical words, or phrases that might be mispronounced by a professional actor or narrator. Too often, the client does not catch errors in pronunciation until the media is already incorporated into the program. At this point, correcting mistakes is expensive, requiring the rescheduling of the talent (who often charge a minimum half-day rate, even if they only work for 10 minutes), setup and possibly rental of audio/video equipment, and time to re-edit and digitize the final footage.

Rule #5: Make all revisions to the interface in the prototype.

The first major deliverable from the vendor should be a "rapid prototype" of the software. This will be a working model that includes each major section of the program: main menu, assessment questions, and several screens from the first lesson. Work with this prototype to refine the look and feel and usability of the interface. Examine, test, change, and ultimately approve the colors, fonts, menu structure, location of navigation buttons, and interface metaphors. The interface should be approved and locked-in before significant scripting is completed so the writers will have an accurate sense of screen space when allocating text and specifying graphic.

Rule #6: Make content revisions in the script.

After the prototype, the next major deliverable from the production team is the script or storyboard. This is your opportunity to carefully review the words, pictures, and sounds that will appear in the final program. Many clients give only a cursory glance at this document and then end up requesting substantial changes after the content has been implemented. It is very time consuming and expensive to change content after it is implemented in the program. While it is inevitable that some changes will be required after production is complete, great effort should be made to review the program while it's still on paper.

VI. For more information…

This e-booklet is intended as a quick guide for new training professionals. For more detailed information try:

- How to Write an Effective RFP (http://www.leomedia.net/elearning/rfp.htm)
- Ten Steps to Successfully Selecting an LMS (http://www.docent.com/elearning/tensteps.html)
- Selecting an LMS (http://www.e-learninghub.com/articles/learning_management_system.html)
- *Winning E-Learning Proposals: The Art of Development and Delivery* by Karl Kapp, Ed.D (www.jrosspub.com)

