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INTRODUCTORY: *This Book!*

Introductory content is intended for those who lead their organization's learning initiatives but who are new to the subject. You may be a department executive director or a senior executive outside the traditional chief learning officer or training context. This content typically includes preliminary or step-by-step instructions on how to get started with an online learning program and understand its fundamentals. After reading it, you will be able to ask informed questions to begin moving forward with a training program.

INTERMEDIATE

Intermediate content is for decision-makers who are familiar with the subject but have only basic experience in executing strategies on the topic. For example, you may have completed an online degree and understand first-hand what college-level online learning instruction is, but you have not yet built a training program. After reading intermediate content, you will feel comfortable making decisions in order to create a program.

ADVANCED

Advanced content is for decision-makers and online learning practitioners who are, or want to be, experts on online training. Advanced content covers advanced features of learning management systems and strategic planning, and will help you on your quest for complete mastery of the subject. After reading it, you will feel ready not only to execute educational strategies but also to teach others how to be successful.

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ONLINE LEARNING: BEGINNER'S GUIDE

BY MONIQUE CUVELIER

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Monique has written professionally for over 20 years, and her work has been featured in dozens of top-tier publications, including USA Today, Wired News and more.



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INTRODUCTION

So you want to train your team online?

So you want to train your team online. Whether you've worked remotely before or you were forced to move online since the pandemic, it's no secret that hybrid or fully remote teams are now the norm. Health teams are likelier to thrive online than ever before — including training and professional development initiatives.

Furthermore, investing in learning and development is a proven way to increase staff satisfaction and also improve their capacity so they can make real improvements in your community. Whether your goal is to provide state-mandated training for certifications or offer career advancement opportunities, offering training opportunities to your staff is a fruitful investment.

That said, an online training program can be a huge success — or it can fail miserably. Embarking on an online learning project is a long process that requires preparation, investment and buy-in. That's where this guide can make your job much easier. Whether you're doing the preliminary research for training a new team or you're ready to take your existing program to the next level, this guide will serve as your guide to decision-making and strategizing.

Successful online learning programs start with a vision that matches organizational goals. The better you are at understanding at the beginning what your organization's or department's goals are, and the people who will be accountable for the results, the more successful you will be in establishing a training program that lasts and rewards. Setting up an online learning environment does not represent a goal, but an outcome. The reasons behind setting up a program that aligns with organizational goals should drive the move to online learning. Helping you ask those questions and understanding your current limitations is what this guide is meant to do.

There are five important components in a well-developed online learning strategy that are highlighted in the pages that follow. This guide will serve as your resource for defining your online learning strategy so you can successfully embark on a program.



ONLINE LEARNING DEFINED

First, a definition. What is online learning? Online learning, e-learning, virtual instruction, distance learning, distributed learning, web-based training -- whatever you want to call it, online instruction shares one commonality: it happens online. The industry more or less agrees on a definition of distance learning, such as this one from the United States Distance Learning Association:

The acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction.

In an ideal world, everyone would have access to the best education that is convenient, cost-effective, and personally tailored to their needs. The reality is that most workers seeking professional development are constrained by money, time, and geography.

Online learning offers a solution to those constraints. An online learning program can provide cost-effective access to a group of people who may be far away from each other while allowing them to fit study time into their schedules. An online course facilitator can provide personal and group feedback and guidance remotely while encouraging collaboration within a group.

SIX COMPONENTS OF AN ONLINE LEARNING STRATEGY

NEEDS

A needs assessment helps understand the needs of leadership and learners.

GOALS

Set measurable goals that align with organizational goals.

BUY-IN

Programs must have support from funders and executive leadership.

LMS

Choose a learning management system that supports your goals and needs.

STAFF

Staff well, and create a plan to sustain the program.

EDIT

Analyze, evaluate and review for greater success the next time, and the time after that.

1

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Most health-based organizations know that they need to train new workers, but many neglect the important first step of asking what purpose the training program should serve, what kinds of problems it should solve, and how it should look. This first step is to perform an internal needs assessment so you understand what problems you'll be solving with an online learning program.

Begin with conversations internally before researching any training curriculum. If you like, develop a questionnaire and send out copies to everyone on the team (from junior staff to the executive director). Have everyone fill it out independently and decide together with a small committee what the final version should look like.

Here are topics you should consider including in your needs assessment:

- **Attitudes about computer-based education.** Is there any prejudice about learning online that could prevent a project from succeeding?
- **Computer access.** Is your community in a remote area where workers will have difficulty completing activities on computers? Can you provide terminals to allow participants to complete work?
- **Problems with the existing training system.** What's currently working, and what isn't? Are you on the brink of hiring workers and needing a systematic way of training them?
- **Standards or certification.** Are there standards or guidelines that you need to train to? Do you live in one of the few states that offer certification for health workers and need to meet specific requirements?
- **Gaps.** What gaps do you have that need to be filled? It could be inexperience or a new area of focus.

Also, include in your needs assessment who will "own" the project--determine what department and person will be responsible for its success. Ownership and engagement are critical to the success of any online learning program (see more in the section called Buy-In).

2

SET GOALS

Think back on every one of your failed New Year's resolutions. The reason you failed probably had something to do with abstract, unspecific goals: get thin, exercise more, enjoy life more. Without clarity, it's nearly impossible to figure out how to succeed. Thus, you're doomed by January 2.

The same kind of thinking can harm a new online learning project. Unspecific goal-setting can prevent you from knowing if your online learning project is a success. If before you begin developing your community health worker training curriculum, you specify abstract goals like, "train staff," "put our PowerPoint presentation online," or "set up online learning infrastructure," you're bound for failure. Instead, think about what success looks like, think about how you'll arrive at success, and you'll know if your online training program is doing what it should.

An easier way of arriving at a list of goals is to pose these simple questions to yourself and your team:

- Why do you want to do the training?
- What will your learners get out of it?

When you answer these questions, make sure to attach a number (like a percentage) so it's measurable, and a due date so you have a focus and target—a must for continued funding.

MEASURABLE, ACTIONABLE AND REALISTIC ONLINE LEARNING GOALS

As soon as you pose meaningful questions to your team, you will find it's much easier to create measurable, actionable, and realistic online learning goals. That will also help you keep spending in check and calculate the return on your online learning investment. Training programs are expensive, so you need to be able to show how well your new online learning initiative works.

What might those goals look like?

- Transfer 50% of training programs into an online format by the end of the next fiscal year.
- Train 95% of employees in cervical cancer screening guidelines by January 1.
- Increase awareness of healthy eating habits by 25% among clients by the end of the quarter.
- Successfully aid 75% of clients in signing up for health insurance by October 1.

See how easily you'd be able to know if you met those goals or not? Prefix each list item with "Did we ..." and you can answer each by a simple yes or no. Also, setting goals from the beginning makes it much easier to see your targets when you begin putting together your training curriculum.

3

ATTAIN BUY-IN

Without the proper support from executive leadership, an online learning program will dwindle and fail. Having buy-in is the critical force behind any successful staff training program.

However, even the most energetic cheerleader may need to apply a little technique when it comes to starting a new online learning program. Focus on the benefits of online training to your organization's stakeholders, not simply the features.

FOCUS ON BENEFITS

You may be positive that an online learning program is perfect for your team, but when it comes to delivering that message to your colleagues, you'd do better focusing on the *why* rather than the *what*.

Why? Benefits make more sense than features. It might be great that your learning management system has blogs, easy-to-follow forums, and granular tracking and analysis. But most people want to know how that program will solve their problems.

Here are some examples of some of the biggest features and benefits of online learning to prime your next discussion:

Instead of: "It's remote learning."

Try: "We can save \$20,000 per year by eliminating regular in-person training sessions, and the savings will accumulate over time."

Why it's better: Explain what happens when you allow people to take an online learning program as needed. In practical terms, it might mean that you can save on trainer costs, you don't have to buy training materials, you no longer need to block out a certain amount of time for instructor-led training. Figuring out how much money that saves will help you make your case.

Instead of: "Accommodates multiple learning styles."

Try: "Retention is improved because the information is presented in various formats."

Why it's better: In this case, it makes sense to strike the jargon about learning styles and explain the outcome. If you're trying to give your staff new skills, it's critically important they remember those skills. That's much more important to your organization than pedagogical jargon.

Eventually, your discussions will be broken down into key features and if they'll work with your organization. In the beginning, however, it helps to think about what kind of effect a new online learning program will have and why.

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ONLINE LEARNING TECHNOLOGY

Online learning is hard to pigeonhole. Online learning can be in a variety of modalities, ranging from YouTube videos to online chats to full-blown distance college courses. In essence, online learning breaks down into two groups:

1. **Traditional online learning**, which are highly produced web courses, like the ones that universities offer, and the ones that Talence specializes in.
2. **Rapid online learning**, which refers to quickly produced web courses, such as a video. Rapid online learning can be either asynchronous (student-directed and self-paced) or synchronous (with a set time for phone or internet sessions).

This chart explains the key areas where the different groups of online learning differ.

Rapid online learning	Traditional online learning
Content rapidly changes or is updated frequently	Content is fixed, or rarely changes
Content may or may not be generic or have a short shelf life	Content is generic or has a long shelf life
Limited or non-existent budget	Larger budget
Just in time information – hot topic	Deeper exploration of a topic
Quick production time for delivery	Longer lead time

ESSENTIAL DOS AND DON'TS

Use the following as a checklist while you're evaluating online education tools. It's an excerpt from the book *Teach Beyond Your Reach* by Robin Neidorf.

DO:

- Ask informed questions.
- Demo a tool before you commit to using it.
- Try freeware or open-source tools.
- Go for low tech whenever possible.
- Ask potential students for their input.
- Network with other instructors; ask them what they use; compare notes, success stories, and battle scars.
- Keep up with changing technology; treat yourself to an occasional seminar or conference.
- Stay open, creative, and flexible about your teaching.
- Assume that you will find the right solution (although it may not be the one you thought you'd find).

DONT:

- Use technology for its own sake; it must enhance the learning and instructing experience or it will be merely distracting (at best) or a barrier (at worst).
- Change your requirements, objectives, or audiences without keeping your partners (especially your technology partners) informed.
- Assume everything will work as promised; test and retest (preferably with members of the learner population) before the course begins.
- Ignore the unwillingness of your students to use a tool; sometimes they're not just ready and you may need to take smaller incremental steps than you'd like.
- Let failure or challenges discourage you from believing in the possibilities of distance education.
- "Get married" to a particular tool or solution; it might not be all things to all situations.
- Use the tool as a substitute for good course design and delivery.
- Migrate content from one tool to another in a cut-and-paste approach.

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SUCCESSFUL STAFFING

One of the first questions we at Talance ask during the kickoff of a new project is, "Who's taking ownership of this online learning project?" It's incredible how many times that answer is, "Nobody."

Involvement is crucial for a successful online learning program. Appointing no one as the champion for your program will have one of two outcomes: no one will do anything and your program will be wasted, or someone will do everything, but you'll never respect or realize the amount of work they do.

Managing an online training program is a big job. Bigger than you may realize, and it is specialized work. The online learning manager is often the go-to person for scheduling, managing updates, coordinating review staff, and answering all questions. If anyone wants something done, it falls to the online learning manager.

Look for someone who ...

Has learned online. All the better if they have taught online or at least earned a degree online.

Knows a little (but not necessarily a lot) about learning management systems. You may choose to handle technical updates in-house or contract out to a provider like Talance for managing.

Is wildly organized. This person should keep schedules and be good at documenting methods for updates and changes. They should have systems for organizing content and pictures. They should remember passwords. They should be good at follow-through.

Is a good promoter. Your manager should also be savvy about promotion. Even if you have a marketing department, your manager should know something about making connections, promoting internally and outreach.

A good online learning manager can pay for themselves several times over. You'll be glad you started taking this position seriously.

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EVALUATE & ANALYZE

At the end of your first pilot program--and at the end of every offering after that--is the time to look back at the goals you set during the beginning of the project and see how well you met them. Remember, this is why you were so careful to create *measurable* goals--so you could measure them when the pilot course is at a close.

You can evaluate a program by measuring against your goals, but also by examining course performance. Here are three important points to cover during your analysis.

- **Ask the learners what they thought of the course.** Good ideas come from the people who have just completed the program.
- **Did the class go smoothly?** Were there errors that need correcting?
- **Ask supervisors.** Structure a separate review cycle in which you ask supervisors how the team changed their job behavior.

Take the results of the evaluation and fold them into the next course offering. Over time, your course will become better.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Curious about what a health worker training program would look like for your organization? Training teams has never been easier, more convenient or affordable with new online courses.

Request a demo of the learning management system to see how Talance can help you train your staff easily and on budget.

<https://talance.com/contact/>