

How to design awesome elearning

The best practice guide



29% of workers find online content uninspiring, and many struggle to find elearning that's relevant to their needs, according to Towards Maturity. So, how do you design engaging and effective elearning that meets end users' needs?

This best practice guide provides practical elearning tips and lots of elearning examples for those designing online learning solutions - whether you call yourself an instructional designer, learning partner, performance consultant, or training manager.

Effective elearning design takes into account modern learner trends and dives into the needs and habits of its end users. Long, passive, click-through elearning? No thanks. Awesome elearning is active, relevant and personalized. Read on for instructional design best practices.

"In order to engage with your learners, you need to meet them where they are. If they want short and sweet learning, then offer them that. And critically, it needs to be timely and relevant – learners need to access learning at the point of need." [Towards Maturity](#)

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What is elearning best practice?

The modern learner has around 20 minutes a week for learning at work ([Bersin & Forbes](#)). That's a mere **1% of their working week**. This might not even be 20 minutes in one go or one place. So, a really crucial aspect of what makes effective elearning is that it respects its audience and makes good use of this time. After all, elearning effectiveness is measured on whether it makes a difference to a person's behavior or performance habits. It needs to drive change!



How to design elearning: Get to know your learners

At the heart of an effective elearning experience is a deep understanding of your audience's particular needs and performance context. So, it's vital you always research your end users as part of your elearning development process. This will drive the particular "ingredients" your elearning design should include.

But it should also take into account the general best practices informed by the habits of modern learners. We share 5 best practices below.



Awesome elearning: 5 best practice principles

1. It helps you do something

Elearning should always have a clear purpose and outcome, rather than being a tick box exercise. And learners agree, with [93% of them wanting learning to be 'on the job'](#) - practical. So ask yourself: 'How will I know this elearning has been successful - what will have changed in the organisation?'. Then make sure your elearning content and activities are designed to help learners achieve that outcome. Focus on what learners need to do with their knowledge, not just what they should *know*.

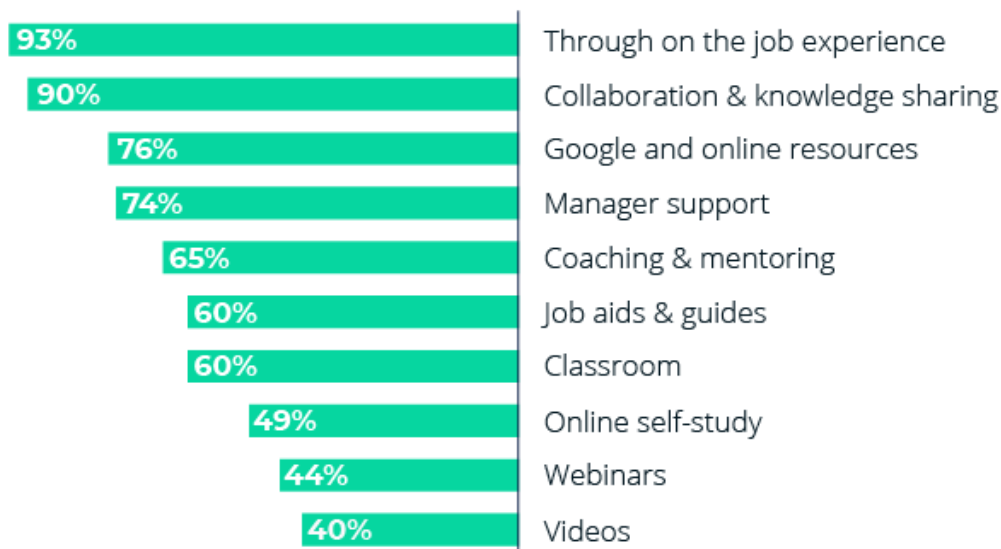


Active learning experiences where new information is being applied in realistic situations



Theoretical or abstract content that leaves learners wondering what they should do with it

Learners preferences



2. It makes you care

With busy learners only able to spare approximately [1% of a typical working week](#) for learning it's crucial that your learning grabs their attention and makes an impact. Learners are more likely to buy in to the need to change behaviours or learn a new skill when they see how it impacts real life. Weaving realistic stories, relatable characters and memorable anecdotes into your learning can transform it from words on a page to something tangible learners care about and can imagine incorporating into their working life.



Real stories from peers or experts within your organisation about their experiences or lessons learned



Stories that feel irrelevant or unbelievable, or are too short to have an emotional impact

3. It's relevant

It's important to create an experience that meets the needs of the audience using it. In fact, we know that modern learners are actively seeking out content that's tailored to their needs. One of the best ways to do this is by creating elearning that ensures learners are only served up content that's relevant to them. This respects their time as well as shortening overall time spent on training for the business.



Adaptive learning experiences that take learners down different pathways based on their needs, or allow learners choice over their pathway



Generic elearning courses that aim to apply to everyone and, as a result, don't feel relevant to anyone

Wants **personalized,**
timely, quality content



Users want content **tailored to their needs**...but it has to be the **best**.



And they give content just **7 seconds** to decide if it's for them or not.

4. It makes you think

Passively consuming content isn't the same as learning, so it's important to encourage learners to stop and think rather than just read. Thinking, guessing and failing all increase how likely we are to remember the learning point that follows. It shows us what we already do - or don't! - know, which can increase motivation to learn. Thinking through situations in a safe, digital environment ahead of time also prepares us for the real deal.



Frequent, unassessed questions that encourage learners to reflect and apply what they're learning



Page after page of material to read or watch with no opportunity to actively engage

5. It fits in around work

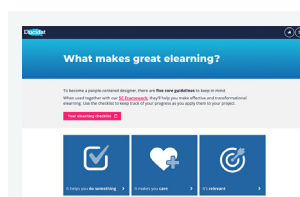
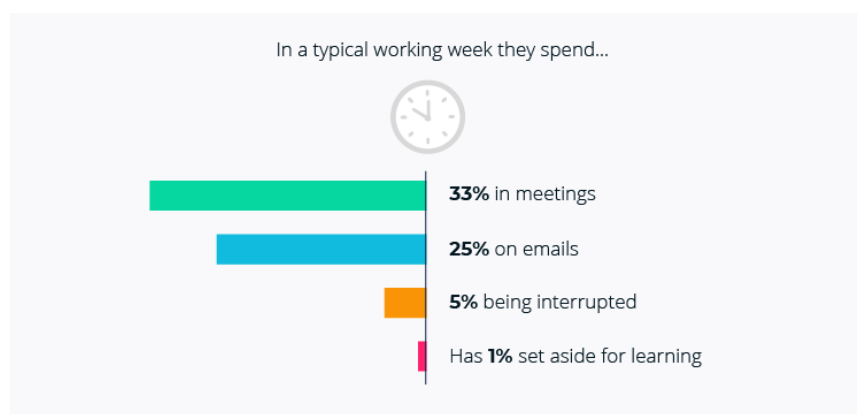
Modern working life is full of distractions. Emails, meetings, customers and more make it increasingly hard to find periods of time to focus. By dividing your module into short, manageable topics, learners are more likely to stay engaged with the content. It empowers them to work through the module at their own pace, dipping in and out as required around their work schedule. It also means the elearning can double up as refresher training at the point of need.



Short, sharp learning experiences that focus on the must-have content and allow learners to complete them in multiple sittings



Long elearning courses designed for imaginary employees who have 40 minutes to spend on it at a time



For more best practice elearning tips, check out [this resource built in Elucidat](#).

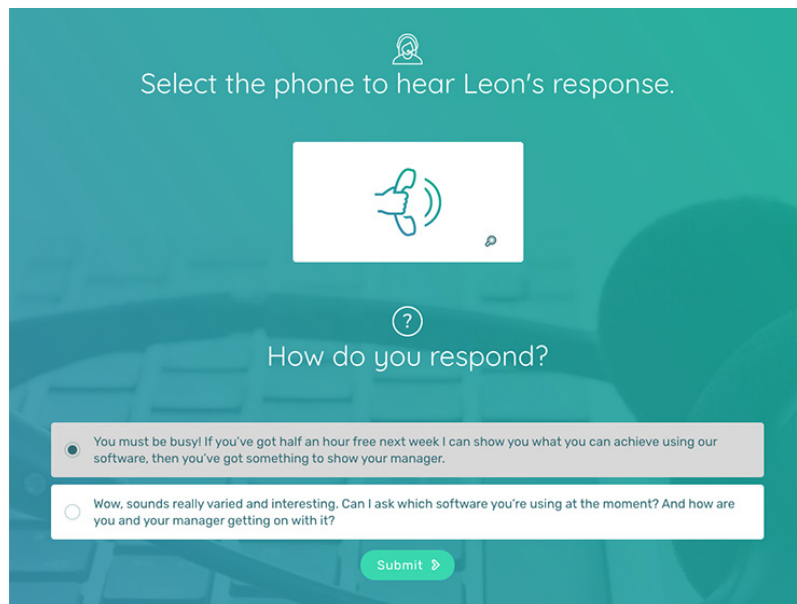
7 modern elearning examples to inspire you

Elearning can take many forms, from on-the-job performance support resources and diagnostic surveys through to microlearning skills training and immersive simulations. Here are a few highlights to provide some immediate elearning inspiration.

1. Active, first-person scenarios

Learners are in the driving seat in this active elearning module that's made up of a series of first-person scenarios. It's a great example of 'learn by doing'; learners play the role of a salesperson and have to choose how to respond to a fictional customer.

Branching routes show them how different responses lead to different outcomes, and they receive targeted feedback about their performance throughout.

The screenshot shows a teal-colored interface for a first-person scenario. At the top, there is a headset icon and the text "Select the phone to hear Leon's response." Below this is a white rectangular button with a blue icon of a hand holding a phone receiver. Underneath the button is a question mark icon and the text "How do you respond?". There are two radio button options: the first is selected and reads "You must be busy! If you've got half an hour free next week I can show you what you can achieve using our software, then you've got something to show your manager."; the second is unselected and reads "Wow, sounds really varied and interesting. Can I ask which software you're using at the moment? And how are you and your manager getting on with it?". At the bottom right of the options is a green "Submit" button with a right-pointing arrow.

 [Giftable](#) | [See this first person scenario example](#)

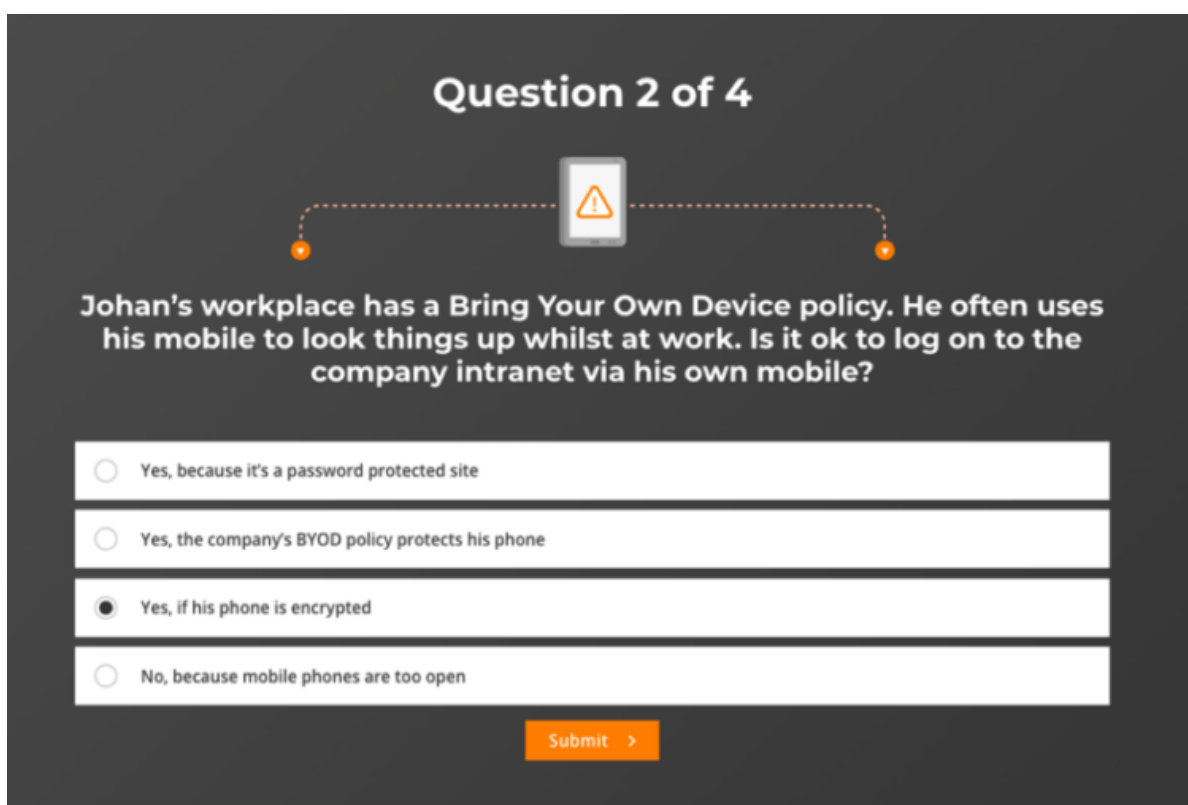
A great learning approach for:

- Learners who are keen to get stuck in and have a go!
- Practical content that can be easily simulated e.g. sales conversions, customer complaints, performance reviews.

2. Adaptive pretest

We're all familiar with assessments at the end of elearning modules to test understanding, but have you tried an assessment at the start to determine who needs to learn what?

This example shows how an upfront quiz can be used to show and hide relevant follow-up content based on the questions that a user passes or fails. Adaptive content like this is win-win for you and your audience. You can reduce overall seat time while retaining confidence that everyone sees the learning content they need, and your users won't have their time wasted on content they already know.



The screenshot shows a quiz interface with a dark background. At the top, it says "Question 2 of 4". Below this is a small icon of a smartphone with a warning triangle on its screen, connected by dashed lines to two small orange circles. The question text reads: "Johan's workplace has a Bring Your Own Device policy. He often uses his mobile to look things up whilst at work. Is it ok to log on to the company intranet via his own mobile?". There are four radio button options: "Yes, because it's a password protected site", "Yes, the company's BYOD policy protects his phone", "Yes, if his phone is encrypted" (which is selected), and "No, because mobile phones are too open". At the bottom right is an orange "Submit" button with a right arrow.



[Giftable](#) | [See this adaptive pretest example](#)

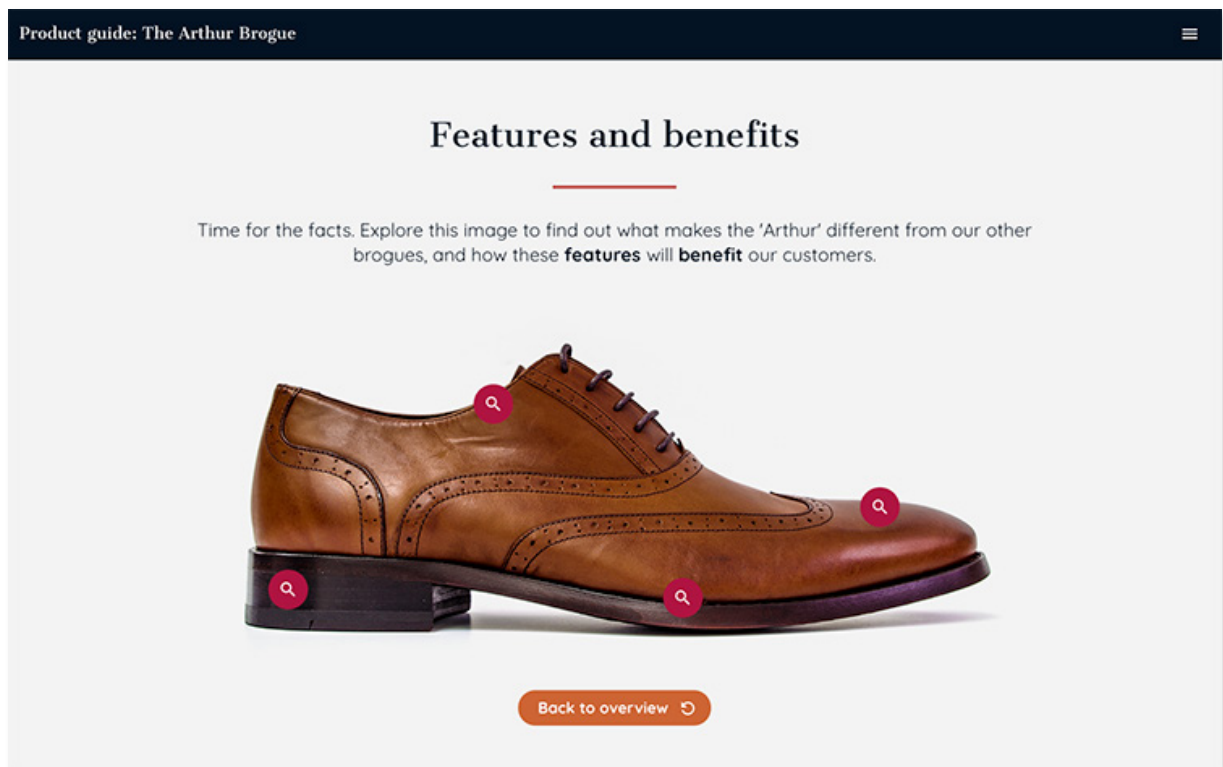
A great learning approach for:

- Broad audience groups with a wide range of prior knowledge.
- Content that needs to be tested or revised regularly. Think compliance, policies, procedures.

3. On-the-job microlearning

Learning shouldn't be separated from the day job. Short, snappy performance support resources designed to be used while working can keep the learning alive. They often go down well with learners too, as they're designed to be succinct and useful above all else.

This example shows how a quick digital resource could be used for just-in-time support for sales advisors working on a shop floor.



 [Giftable](#) | [See this on-the-job microlearning example](#)

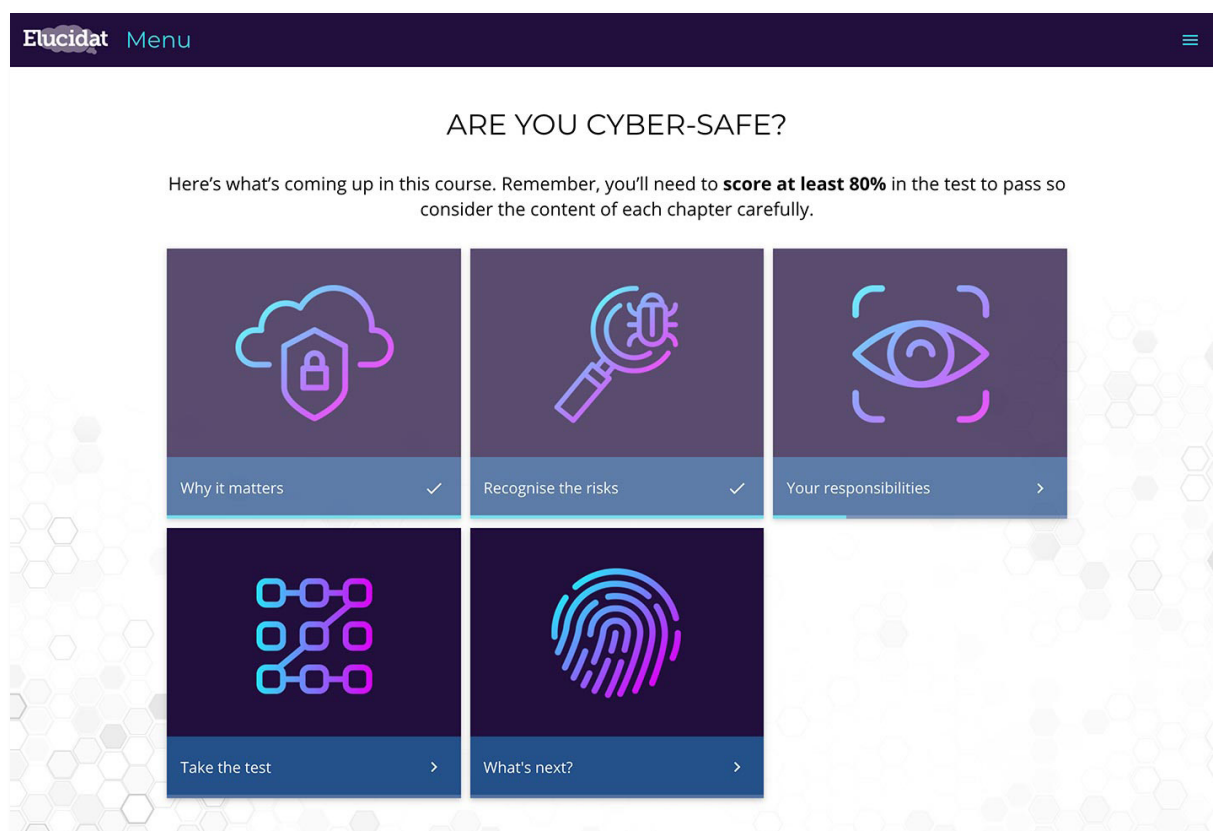
A great learning approach for:

- Audiences that have a lot to remember and are likely to need reminders. Audiences that respond well to learning 'in the moment'.
- Theoretical content that needs to be made practical; think new procedures or change management. Or factual content that learners might need refreshers on; think product or systems training.

4. In-depth content in bitesized chunks

Not all content can be covered in a quick overview. Sometimes you've got to dive into the detail – and that's where a clear menu structure becomes crucial. Breaking the details of a process down into manageable chunks means learners can walk through the steps one at a time.

In the example below you can see how the mix of presenting information and encouraging practice helps learners to apply the content and embed the learning, getting them up to speed quickly.



Created from an [Elucidat Blueprint](#) | [See this in-depth content example](#)

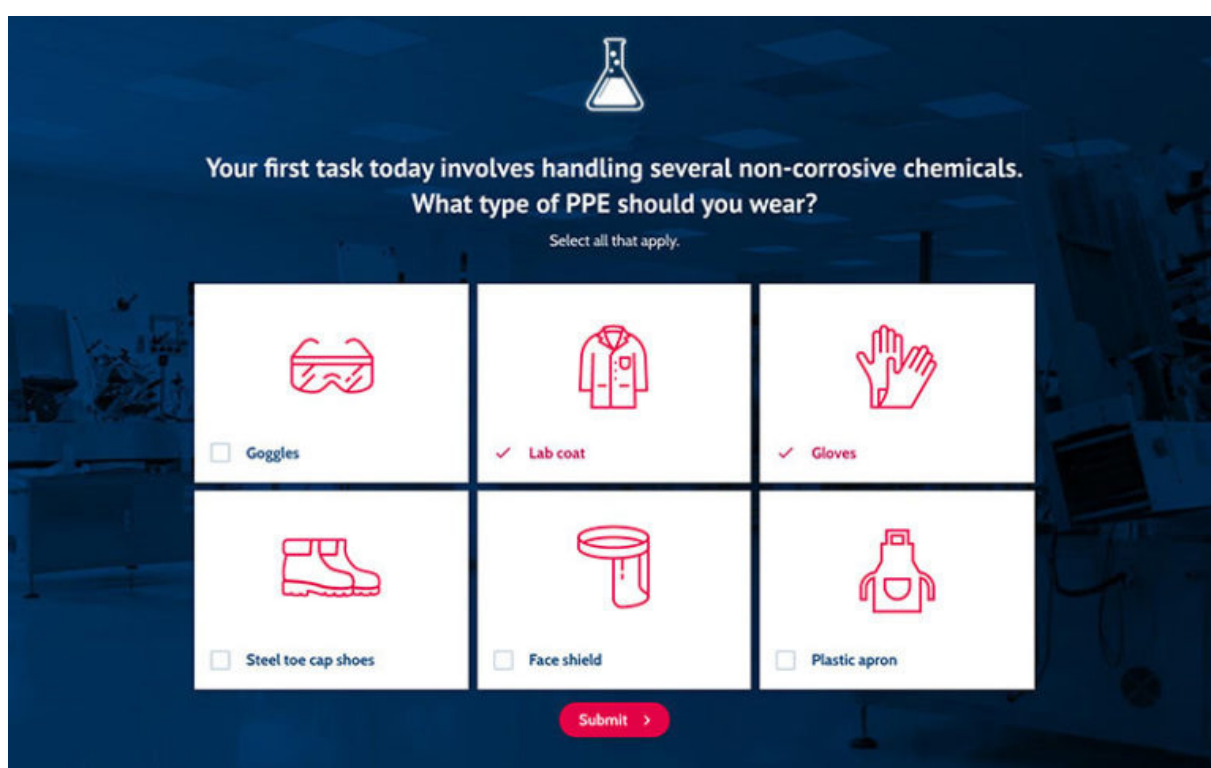
A great learning approach for:

- Topics that require detailed explanation, visual descriptions or have multiple steps.
- Audiences who are likely to work through content across several sessions

5. Robust assessments with question pools

Assessments are often critical, especially where compliance is concerned. But how do you make sure they test your learners thoroughly enough? And how do you reduce the likelihood of sharing answers? Question pools are a great solution to this.

In this compliance test, question pools are used to create a robust assessment. Question pools mean that when a learner retakes the test, they're unlikely to see the same questions again. This helps ensure learners truly understand the content – they won't be able to simply choose a different answer on a second attempt. It also makes it harder for learners to share answers as it is unlikely their colleagues will have been posed the same set of questions.



The screenshot shows a digital assessment interface with a dark blue background featuring a laboratory scene. At the top center is a white icon of an Erlenmeyer flask. Below it, the text reads: "Your first task today involves handling several non-corrosive chemicals. What type of PPE should you wear?" followed by the instruction "Select all that apply." in a smaller font. The assessment consists of six white square buttons arranged in a 2x3 grid. Each button contains a red line-art icon and a label with a checkbox. The top row includes "Goggles" (checkbox), "Lab coat" (checked with a red checkmark), and "Gloves" (checked with a red checkmark). The bottom row includes "Steel toe cap shoes" (checkbox), "Face shield" (checkbox), and "Plastic apron" (checkbox). A red "Submit" button with a white right-pointing arrow is located at the bottom center of the grid.

 [Giftable](#) | [See this question pools example](#)

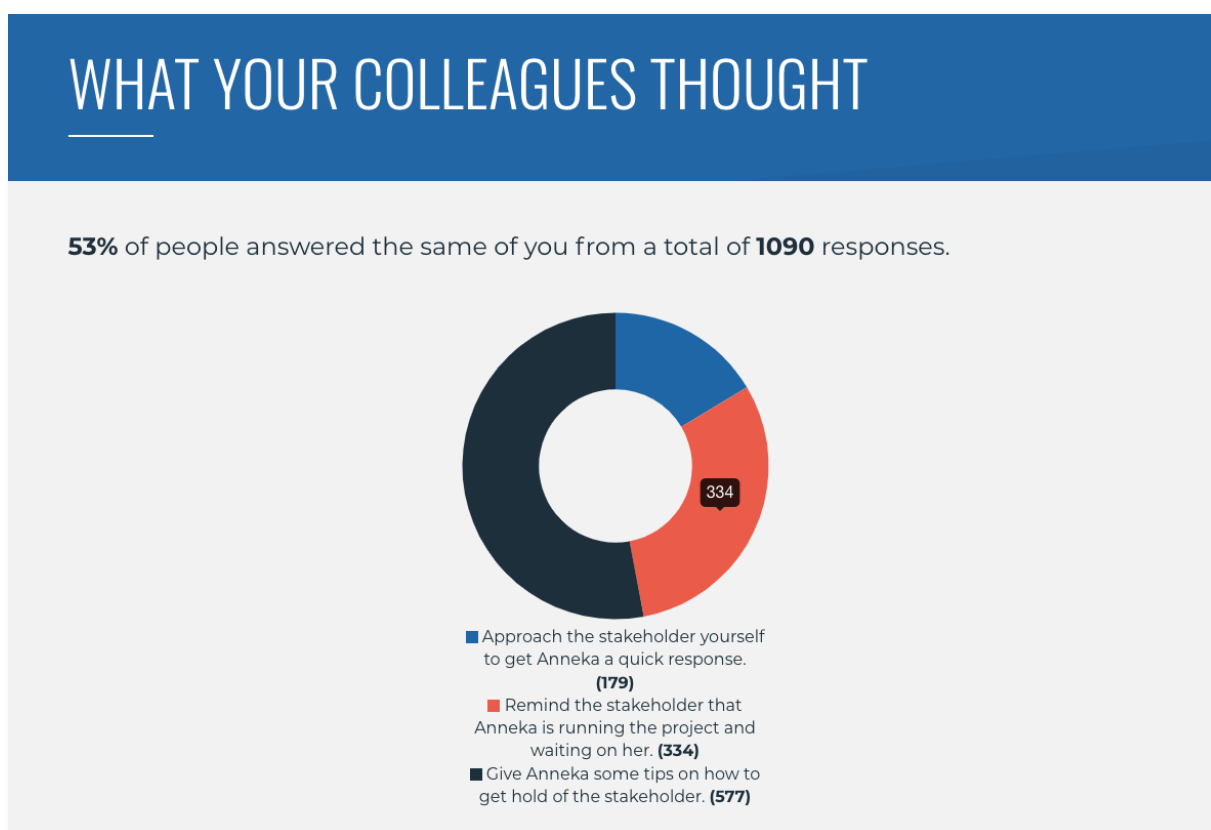
A great learning approach for:

- Business critical content that needs to be tested, such as compliance rules and regulations.
- Audiences who need to prove a thorough understanding of a subject before starting a particular task.

6. Reflective social experiences

Adding an element of social sharing and comparison to a learning experience appeals to the natural curiosity in all of us. Poll questions are an effective way of encouraging learners to stop and think about a topic, submit their opinion, then share other users' responses with them in an impactful – yet anonymous – way.

This example shows social polls that compare the audience's opinions as a way of showing the grey areas in a subject. Social polls also make great attention grabbers at the start of a module or an effective way of making a quiz competitive by sharing correct and incorrect stats after each question.



Giftable | [See this reflective, social example](#)

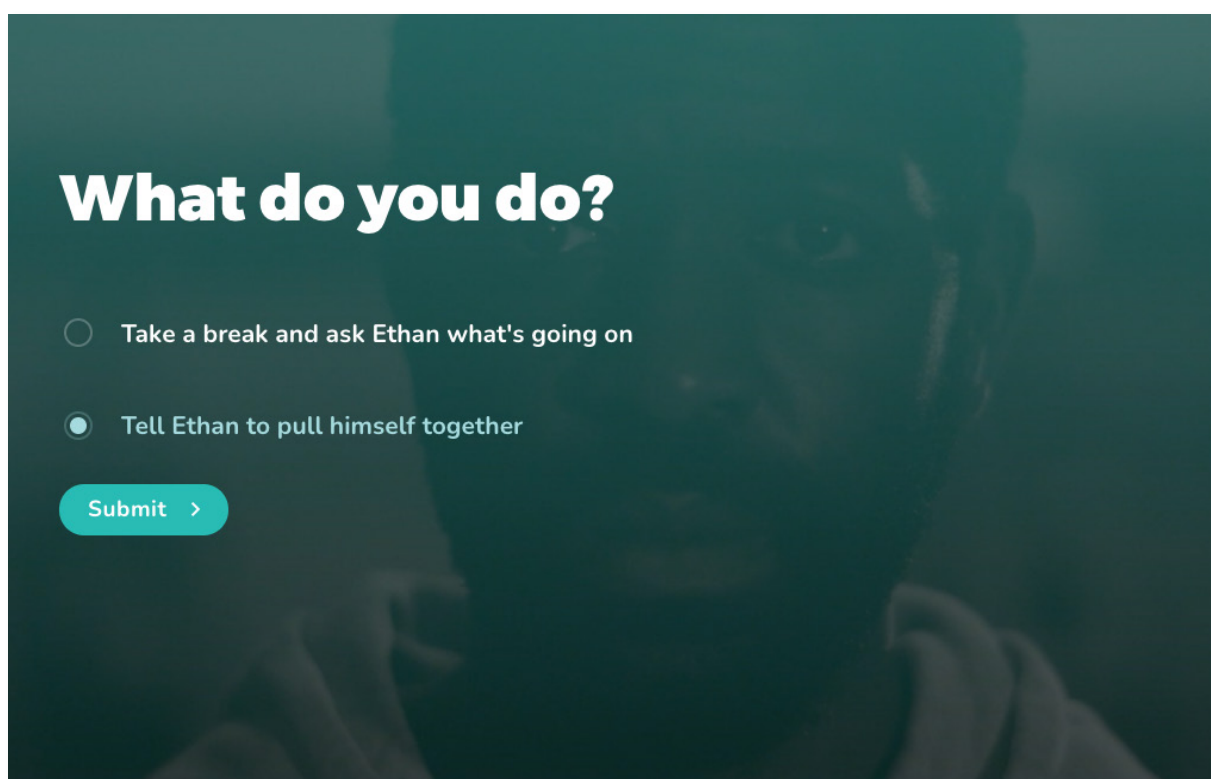
A great learning approach for:

- Audience groups that you're trying to unite and get to know each other better, or competitive audiences that would enjoy seeing how they compare with others.
- Content with grey areas and no 'right or wrong'.

7. Choose your own adventure

Immersing learners in a scenario is a great way of increasing the emotional impact they have, making behaviour change more likely. 'Choose your own adventure' style scenarios like the example below immerse users in a story and allow them to make decisions that control the outcome. This approach allows users to learn through experiencing consequences rather than being informed of them.

This video-based elearning example shows powerful video scenarios interspersed with decision points and the ability to see the impact of your decisions. Remember that audio or text-based scenarios would work just as well.



[See this choose your own adventure example](#)

A great learning approach for:

- Audiences that respond well to experiential, active participation.
- Content with real-life decisions and impact. Think soft skills and ethical dilemmas.

How to design awesome elearning

So how do you reach an end result like one of the examples above? What should you have in mind when you approach a new project?

Here's a tactical guide to achieving elearning best practice.



Start with clear goals and user profiles

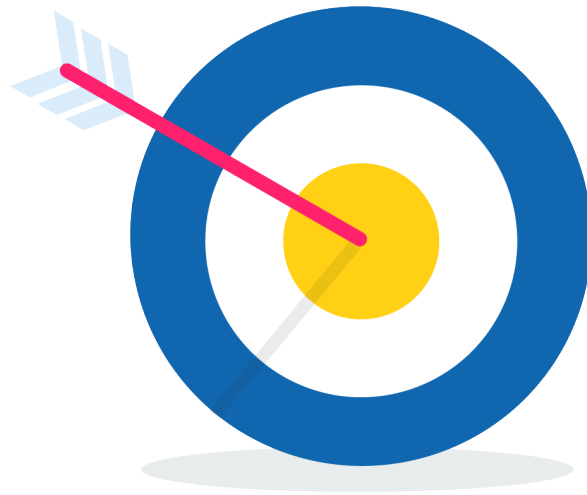
All elearning - in fact, all training - should be aiming to improve performance or solve a problem within the business. It goes without saying that unless you know what problem you're trying to fix, you're unlikely to be able to fix it. So every elearning project should start with identifying a clear goal and a clear audience.

Ask yourself:

- Why is this project needed?
- How would I know it had been successful?
- Who, within the business, needs this course?
- Why? What do they need to be able to do differently afterwards?
- What would help them, specifically, to get there?

Gaining clarity on these questions at the start of your project will set you off on the right path. [This free needs capture template](#) will guide you through this process.

TOP TIP: It's a great idea to identify a goal and audience collaboratively with the whole project team - SMEs and stakeholders included. This will make sure you're all aligned and pulling in the same direction throughout the project.



Identify target behaviours

Next, drill down to focus on the behaviours you would need to see from learners in order to meet your goal. For example, if your goal is to improve your customer support feedback ratings, perhaps you need your customer facing team to resolve particular issues more quickly and demonstrate empathy to customers.

Ask yourself:

- Who is already meeting this goal, and what are they doing that works?
- If your audience were already experts at this, what would they be doing differently?
- If your audience was going to change three things after finishing the elearning, what would you want them to be?

A list of actions helps you stay focused on helping your audience learn and improve specific skills rather than drifting into simply creating content for them to passively consume.

TOP TIP: Creating a spider diagram with your goal at the centre and behaviours around it will help ensure every behaviour links back to the goal.



Create content and activities

You might be surprised that content doesn't come in until this stage, but it's deliberate. Why? Well, with your goal and behaviours in place, you may well find that you don't need all of the content you had originally planned to include. If you've got any content that doesn't directly support your goal, really question whether you need it. It might just distract your learners and make your elearning longer than it needs to be.

As for activities, when you've identified behaviors it's much easier to come up with activities that give learners a chance to practice those behaviors.

Ask yourself:

- Does this learning point directly support one of my behaviors and my overall goal?
- What's my 'must have' content and what's 'nice to have'?
- What could my audience look up in the moment, rather than have to remember from this elearning course?
- How can I simulate realistic situations so my audience has an opportunity to practice?

Use the elearning examples above as inspiration for your own activities. From simulated conversations to branching scenarios, the opportunities are endless!

TOP TIP: If you're nervous about cutting out content, remember that you don't have to remove it completely. At the end of the elearning, you can direct your audience to the policy document or intranet page where the additional detail lives and encourage them to look it up when they need it.



Add stories and perspectives

As humans, we tend to find information more credible when it comes from a trusted source. This holds true for your elearning. You know that your content has come from reputable subject matter experts, but your audience doesn't. They're much more likely to sit up and pay attention if the elearning includes stories and perspectives from people they trust.

Ask yourself:

- Which experts could I ask to provide a quote, video, or audio snippet?
- Are there any colleagues in the organisation who already do this well and could share their perspective in the elearning?
- Can I draw on sources such as customer feedback, real reported incidents etc to anchor the content in real life?

Remember, sharing perspectives doesn't mean the whole course has to be narrated by an expert. Use your resources wisely to include perspectives where they'll add the most value.

TOP TIP: You don't need a camera crew to get a short video from your SME; low-fi contributions work well too. Ask them to record a 1 minute explainer using their webcam, or record a voice note which you can embed alongside a photo of them.



Test with your audience

You wouldn't wait until you've served dinner to a group of friends before checking it tastes nice. So don't do the same with your elearning! Aim to create a prototype version first that you can test with a sample group of learners for feedback. It doesn't have to be polished, and it doesn't even have to be the whole course, just sharing a few key pages will give you a lot of valuable feedback.

Ask your sample group to narrate their thoughts as they work through the e-learning - they could record this on a self-recorded video - then follow up with some specific questions at the end, such as:

- How would you summarise your key learnings?
- How could this experience be improved?
- How easy did you find it to use?

TOP TIP: Try to be open to all feedback that comes in, even if it tells you some things you don't want to hear. Honest feedback will result in a better outcome for you, your audience and the business.



These steps all fit into our 5C Framework for creating successful digital learning. Find out more and access a free guide to walk you through each step of the process [here](#).

Summary

Awesome elearning is about more than slick presentation. It's about behavior change. It motivates and instructs learners on how to make changes that will improve their performance in the workplace. With that in mind, best practices for designing awesome elearning all come down to behaviours too.

1. Set a goal.

Ensure that each piece of elearning has a performance goal behind it.

2. Translate it into behaviours.

What do learners need to do in order to meet that goal?

3. Get to know your audience.

Talk to them and find out what will help them reach that goal.

4. Make sure you're on the same page as your stakeholders.

Alignment is key.

5. Design activities and supporting content that help learners practice behaviors.

6. Make your audience care.

What's in it for them?

With these best practices behind you, **you can create awesome elearning!**

We can help you do it!

Get the tool your team needs to produce learning that excites and engages your audience. We'll tailor your demo to show you how we can solve your biggest learning challenges.

Book a Demo Today



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