Everything you need to know before you start a **bespoke e-learning project**

The ultimate guide to getting your bespoke content right, everytime

KALLIDUS

Introduction

Maybe you're looking for your first piece of flagship content to showcase your new learning management system, or you're at that point in time of needing to extend your e-learning offer beyond the suite of off-the-shelf content that you've been using for some time.

Perhaps you're designing a new blended learning offer to support a major strategic project that is unique to your business, or you need to respond quickly to a regulatory change and cannot afford to wait for existing content providers to catch-up.

Whatever the reason, if this is the first time you've considered procuring a piece of **bespoke e-learning content**, you will undoubtedly have lots of questions.

In this eBook we'll look at the twelve most popular concerns cited by L&D professionals, and how these can be remedied so you can have complete confidence to progress with your bespoke e-learning project.

1

I've never commission a **bespoke e-learning project** before

If you've never commissioned a piece of bespoke e-learning content, then it is natural to have lots of questions before you start. The great news is that the bespoke e-learning content development market is a mature one, with many established vendors.

Their experience is invaluable when providing the information you need to make an informed choice. As well as being able to answer all your questions, they will have well-defined approaches that will make your project easy to manage.

Their support, wealth of knowledge and experience should help to reassure you as you embark on your first e-learning project.

If you're not getting this feeling from your e-learning vendor maybe you should reconsider before signing an order!

2

How do I know if I should **invest** in a **bespoke e-learning course**?

You may be faced with three choices:

1. **Should I build the course myself?**
2. **Should I buy this content off-the-shelf?**
3. **Should I commission a third-party to develop it?**

Deciding on the most appropriate approach requires that you start with considering your goals for this piece of learning.

How high a profile will this learning attract?

If the desired end-results are considerable and the target audience size is large or of strategic significance, then the returns from commissioning a piece of bespoke e-learning are often very high.

These types of training projects demand that sufficient thought and time is given to them and that impartial third-party expertise is brought in as they can provide the valuable external perspective, innovative thinking and dedicated resource to ensure success that an already stretched internal team simply can't deliver.

Why should I use an external vendor?

If you've never created a piece of e-learning in-house, then there are advantages to first engaging an external vendor to create your first project:

- Work with you to create a house style.
- Analyse your learner and their preferences.
- Develop a set of design guidelines that you can then use for your own future developments.
- Set clear objectives.
- Help you to focus on what matters.
- Make your project look and sound engaging.
- Help to speak your learners' language.
- Support beyond creation with campaign based learning to help promote and ensure the project has sustainability.

If you have already developed your own in-house content, then you should reflect on your internal expertise and capabilities and decide whether they can rise to the challenge of delivering the learning that supports this project's core goals.

Do you have the time required to deliver a successful outcome?

Why should I use bespoke content?

Whilst there may well be lots of off-the shelf content in the chosen topic area, this will – by its very nature – be generic and the challenge will be to find content that gets as close as possible to covering all you need.

- If it covers too little, then you will still have lots of gaps to fill.
- If it covers too much, then you will need to find a way to limit what learners study, otherwise they will be spending additional time learning content that is not relevant.
- If the terminology used differs from your own internal vocabulary, then this will only confuse your learners.
- If the content is off-the-shelf, learners will not enjoy a personalised experience, reducing the relevance of courses.
- Will you be able to buy the content modules you need, or will you be required to buy a bundle of content that may well have no relevance to you?
- Ultimately, will the off-the-shelf content get straight to the heart of what you are looking to achieve?

It goes without saying that a **bespoke e-learning project** will be developed to meet all of your requirements and take into account all the different factors that should ensure that it delivers the results you desire. If your desired outcomes are of strategic importance to your organisation, then this is by far the best way to address them.

If you're looking to embed this learning into one overall initiative, then commissioning content that totally dovetails into the rest of your campaign is the best approach.

3

Am I going to spend a lot of **budget**?

The good news is that the cost of developing a bespoke e-learning course is not as expensive as you may imagine and experienced vendors are well-versed at producing the best solution in line with your budget requirements.

If you're able to, then do share your budget expectations with your vendor up-front. This will enable them to come back to you with a well-thought-through proposal that will deliver value for money. They will also be able to share with you examples and results of projects that were completed in a similar price bracket.

If you've not yet decided on your budget – or would prefer not to share that information up-front – then ask your vendor to show you examples of content from projects that had a low, medium and high price point. You can then judge the value for money you might receive at each level of investment.

Top tip:

Keep a contingency sum help back from your budget. Even the very best planned projects are subject to some small changes that are made along the way. Making sure you have a contingency sum held back will keep your project running smoothly and create a better working relationship between you and your chosen vendor. Typically, 10-15% of your overall budget is a good contingency figure to cover any project variations.

4

Will my learners actually **like** the bespoke content and use it?

The right external partner will empathise with your concerns and will use their expertise and experience to ensure that learner uptake meets your expectations and delivers the outcomes you seek. Learning designers will immerse themselves into your organisation's world, using collaboration and extensive checking and testing during the early days of prototypes.

With fresh eyes, they will be able to understand your audience and their motivations, and will be able to draw on their experience of working with other organisations to develop a solution that will attract its intended audience and sustain their interest in the content.

Bespoke content should be designed and written in terms of your organisation's environment in order for learners to be able to resonate with the content. In doing so, content will be memorable, and engagement rates will increase as learners recognise and understand realistic and possible scenarios related to your specific organisation.

Top tip:

Look to include your learners as part of the project team, seeking their feedback at key decision points along the way.

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Will this take up too much internal **time**?

One of the drivers for outsourcing e-learning content development is to reduce the time burden for you and your colleagues. The more established external vendors recognise this too and are also keen to work with their customers in such a way as to ensure that customer-contact time is well-planned and that each interaction is as productive as possible. You will further benefit from an efficient knowledge transfer process, learning more about successful engagement in learners whilst developing your organisation's learning strategy.

At the outset, you should have a good understanding of what your time commitment will be:

when, who, why and for how long?

An experience vendor will be able to tell you how much time you will need to put into the project to achieve success.

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Will this project be delivered in a **reasonable timeframe**?

Of course every project will be different, but choosing an experienced external content developer is a sound way to establish a realistic timeline for your project. They should be able to reference other projects and provide you with the timeframe for each.

It is also important to remember that delays can arise due to your internal availability. Holidays, sickness and other conflicting priorities often interject delays into the best-planned projects, so it is important to factor these in and build in contingencies.

Top tip:

Make sure to confirm a project timeline with your preferred vendor that details project milestones and deliverables.

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Will we achieve our learning **goals** and **objectives**?

It is understandable to have concerns about whether – ultimately – your bespoke e-learning solution will deliver the results you need. Firstly, you need to be able to fully articulate what it is you are trying to achieve.

- What is the business itself trying to achieve?
- What will success look like?
- What will learners – if the learning has done its job – be doing or saying differently?
- How can the business tangibly measure all of this?

If you lack any clarity on any of these points, then you should work with the project stakeholders to close any gaps.

You must then be able to communicate this to your external development partner and have them confirm their understanding with similar clarity, by showing how their proposed solution meets these goals and objectives. Involve all stakeholders in these discussions so that all parties are informed and arrive at a shared consensus that the agreed plan will feasibly be able to deliver on its promises.

Finally, you need to ensure that your project will be a success through its utilisation by the business. An experienced bespoke e-learning developer knows that the end result is not only achieved through the quality of the content itself, but also on its launch. They will understand how communication and promotion need to be developed alongside the content; how a campaign should be structured around the content; and how important it is to consider reporting, evaluation and analytics up-front, long before the learning is released.

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I don't know what 'good' looks like

How do you know if you're getting the best solution? Of course, this can be very subjective, but the more experienced vendors will have built up a track record of commissions that should enable them to make reference to other projects that have been successfully delivered into similar organisations, to meet similar needs or been targeted at a similar audience, so ask to see these.

Ask your vendor to propose two or more differing treatments. One approach is to ask to see something quite traditional – but proven to work – alongside something a bit more innovative. The former should enable you to compare the overall qualities and capability of your vendors; the latter will show which are capable to delivering over and above that, even if it is to be held back for another later project.

Top tip:

Industry awards are also an excellent indicator of quality. The bar is set very high when it comes to shortlisting and most awards are made primarily on the achievement of the intended results, alongside the quality of the underlying instructional design. Choosing partners with a long line of industry accolades should provide you with the reassurance you need and – hopefully – result in you winning the next award!

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I don't know what **questions** to ask a potential vendor

If you've never worked with an external e-learning development partner before, knowing what questions to ask can be a challenge. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the better vendors will know exactly what questions they should ask of you, so that both parties have a productive dialogue.

Good questions to start with include:

1. What similar projects have you undertaken in the past?

2. What feedback have you received from these clients?

3. What are the different ways you could treat this subject matter?

4. What involvement will you require from our team?

5. What would be the typical timeline for a project of this nature?

6. What ways would you propose to measure the success of this project?

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How can I minimise and mitigate **risk**?

Of course, we work in a dynamic environment where things can change rapidly with knock-on consequences. The more experienced bespoke e-learning content developers will have encountered most of the issues that can challenge your typical project and should be able to discuss ways to avoid them.

For the more complex projects, you might want to mutually agree the ways of working and how to handle change requests should they arise, or should other influencing factors change.

Making sure you have the full commitment of all your internal interested parties is a good first step. Decide up-front how often you want updates from your vendor and how you'll measure progress and the achievement of key milestones to ensure expectations are managed sufficiently. As previously mentioned, consider keeping a contingency budget in reserve and build in some extra time to ensure you can still deliver the solution around the original deadline.

Top tip:

Give yourself a couple of week's buffer on your hard deadline (just don't tell your e-learning vendor!). This ensures that, even if your project overruns, your partner will be working towards their perceived completion date and save you a lot of stress with a couple of weeks' grace before the project is launched to your learners, giving you plenty of time to work through any snags.
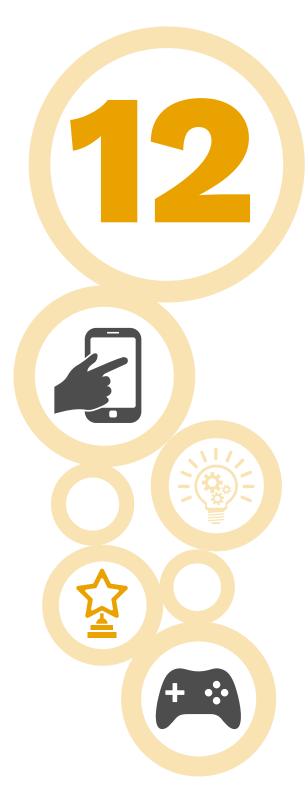
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How can I ensure **a great working relationship** with my provider?

Great working relationships have trust.
With professional trust being defined as delivering on promises, one of the best ways to develop a productive working relationship is to establish a clear project plan with confirmed key deliverables through the project. This goes both ways of course, so both parties need to agree to their responsibilities and commitments.

Great working relationships are also built on mutually shared expectations, so there should be regular touch points where the work-in-progress is shared to confirm that expectations are being met. Prototypes and interactive development are newer approaches that can be usefully employed in bespoke e-learning projects, along with including a formal pilot of the final learning solution prior to the final rollout.

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What other **traps** could I fall into?

One of the easiest traps to fall into is to get caught up with the latest industry buzz. Gamification, micro-learning and virtual reality are some of today's buzzwords and can conjure up a lot of hype.

Whilst the more experienced vendors recognise that they are not hype, they appreciate that they can only deliver the results you need when they are used appropriately. They should never be used just because they are possible options or to attract some excitement around the learning solution itself.

There will always be very valid – and often less expensive and simpler – alternatives to using gamification, micro-learning and VR, which any trusted advisor would discuss with you; but where there are clear-cut arguments for using one of these newer approaches, the established vendors will be able to clearly articulate their use. This will allow you to appreciate the additional value for money and return on investment you'll receive.

Another trap is to not be as clued up as you could be on the latest bespoke e-learning development lingo, so make sure you do some homework to learn some of the more popular terms and phrases and don't be afraid to ask your vendor to clarify anything you don't understand.

Finally, resist content creep.

Often this comes from the internal subject matter expert who will always push for more. Experienced bespoke content developers know that the saying "less is more" is largely true. Once the structure of the course has been agreed and developed, adding in what might ostensibly be tangential content can often complicate the user experience, as well as add cost, time and complexity to the final piece of learning.

Conclusion

Whilst bespoke content may be new to you, embarking on your first project needn't be a daunting task. With our 12 top tips, you can ensure to be on the road to successful bespoke content learning implementation!

1. Trust in your vendor

2. Consider your options

3. Know your budget

4. Keep your learners at the forefront of your considerations

5. Know your availability

6. Pre-plan your expectations

7. Decide on your goals

8. Ask to see all options

9. Communicate with vendors

10. Minimise and mitigate risk

11. Build a relationship

12. Stay savvy and avoid any hype traps

Find out more

Any further questions or concerns? Our award-winning content team would be pleased to speak with you and find a bespoke solution to your e-learning strategy.

https://www.kallidus.com/content

info@kallidus.com
+44 (0) 1285 883900

Twitter: @kallidus
Facebook: facebook.com/Kallidus
Linkedin: linkedin.com/company/kallidus

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