E-Learning Authoring Tool Guide

Is an e-Learning Authoring Tool Right for Your Organization?

This guide will help answer this question, and help determine what type of licensed authoring tool can best meet your training needs and accomplish your instructional learning goals—by providing you with an overview of the skills required to utilize each tool, the amount of time and effort each one requires, and the kind of final product you should expect.

We welcome the opportunity to speak with you to clarify your training needs, and help you select an optimal authoring tool. To schedule a call with a LeanForward representative to discuss your needs, please contact us at info@leanforward.com or (877) 594-6300 x 120.

Setting Realistic Expectations

When evaluating if developing an in-house e-learning program makes sense for your organization, it's important to ask:

1. How much time can your organization devote to developing e-learning?

   AND

2. What level of instructional quality do you need to ensure your training meets your goals?

Pitfalls of E-Learning Development

- **Failure to Recognize Time and Resource Requirements**. E-learning development requires a commitment of time and resources. Many organizations underestimate the resources and skill level required to develop sound e-learning programs—and their efforts fail usually due to a lack of time, difficultly in becoming and maintaining authoring tool proficiency, and/or a lack of computer-based instructional design skills necessary to develop effective e-learning.

- **Failure to Apply Different Instructional Models.** Many overlook the fact that computer-based training requires a significantly different instructional model than instructor-led or even on-the-job training. This oversight often leads to the development of ineffective programs that fail to generate the desired results.

  Computer-based training has many instructional advantages, including its ability to allow the learner to progress at their own pace, and its ability to interact with the learner more often than an instructor could in a classroom setting. Computer-based training also has its' limitations, however, because it can't anticipate all possible learning scenarios, nor can it connect with a learner on an interpersonal level.

If your organization does not have expertise in developing e-learning programs, we recommend staff training on computer-based instructional design principals, or suggest you contract with professionals to assist with your first project. These measures will help ensure your e-learning development initiative achieves its intended objectives.

If an e-learning program is critical, your organization may be best served by hiring professionals to create the e-learning for you.

Clarifying User Levels

To help set realistic expectations for e-learning development efforts, we classify prospective users into two distinct categories—casual users and e-learning enthusiasts. A clear understanding of what category your authors fall into is crucial to selecting the best authoring tool for your organization.

Casual Users do not have a lot of time to dedicate to learning how to use an authoring tool, and will spend only a limited amount of time creating e-learning. These users may be experienced trainers but have little if any formal education on computer-based instructional design.

E-Learning Enthusiasts can dedicate a couple of weeks or more to mastering an authoring tool, and will spend a significant amount of time creating e-learning on an ongoing basis. To ensure effective e-learning, e-learning enthusiasts should also have formal training on computer-based instructional design regardless of if they are experienced trainers.

The Right Tool for the Right User
Selecting a tool that is too basic for the user can lead to ineffective training and quick loss of e-learning initiative support. A tool too advanced for the user often leads to frustration and tool abandonment.

E-Learning Standards

Technical standards—created to enable conformant courses to function properly on platforms that support the same standard—have contributed significantly to e-learning's growth and usability. These standards are not perfect, however, and place some limitations on the development process.

SCORM
Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) is the most prevalent e-learning standard. Developed by the U.S. Department of Defense to harness the power of modern information technology, we strongly suggest licensing a SCORM-conformant authoring tool in order to deploy courses you develop across the widest range of platforms.

This is especially important should you ever have to change platforms—as content developed in a proprietary system may function on one platform but not others. Got to http://www.adlnet.org/ for more information about SCORM.

Types of e-Learning Authoring Tools

Basic Authoring Tools for Casual Users

Cost: *$300 to $1000 per user*

Learning Curve
- ***To do the basics:*** *2-6 hours*
- ***To become proficient:*** *2-3 days*

Course Development Time *(not including Instructional Design time)****:*** *Several Hours to a Couple of Days*

Sometimes referred to as rapid-authoring tools, these don't require computer programming skills, and users can learn how to use them quickly—from a few hours to a couple of days. Familiarized users can then create basic e-learning equally fast. These tools are good for developing quizzes, tests, and surveys, and for converting PowerPoint presentations into basic e-learning programs.

Quiz/Test/Survey Making Tools have all of the logic required to create a quiz, test or survey already built in—users simply enter content into the appropriate template to create the quiz, test or survey.

PowerPoint® Conversion Tools automatically load PowerPoint® presentations into a rudimentary e-learning shell. Users can then add questions, narration, and other basic interactions.

NOTE: A whole other class of basic e-learning authoring tools enables casual users to insert text and basic multimedia elements into a rudimentary e-learning shell. While easy to use, these offer little for developing learner interactivity and we do not recommend them.

Comprehensive Authoring Tools for e-Learning Enthusiasts

Cost: $1800 to $4000+ per user

Learning Curve
- *To do the basics: 2-3 days*
- *To become proficient: Several weeks or more*

Course Development Time (not including Instructional Design time): 2-6 weeks

These tools require little if any computer programming skills and users can learn how to do the basics in a few days. However, due to their robust functionality, it will likely take users several weeks or more to become proficient. Once proficient, users can create a basic one-hour course in anywhere from two to six weeks depending on the level of interactivity desired.

These tools include screen and course templates, as well as a number of preassembled elements such as navigation buttons—enabling users to select a template, insert their content and pre-assembled elements to build their e-learning programs.

NOTE: To get the most out of these authoring tools, users must also understand computer-based Instructional Design. In addition, many projects may entail development of multimedia assets to be embedded in the course so it is helpful if the developer is also proficient in multimedia design tools including:

- *Graphic Design software such as Photoshop*
- *Multimedia programming languages such as HTML or Flash*
- *Audio editing software*
- *Video editing software*

If the elearning developer is not proficient with these other tools they may require someone else to prepare the multimedia assets for them.

Specialty Authoring Tools

Cost: $1000 to $2500+ per user

Learning Curve
- *To do the basics:* 1-2 days
- *To become proficient:* 2-4 weeks

Course Development Time (not including Instructional Design time)*:*
1 week to 1 month

Specialty authoring tools tend to be really strong in one area, such as software training or video-based training. Some also offer additional functionality but we have found that they are best used just for their primary purpose. Therefore specialty authoring tools are most often used to compliment other more comprehensive authoring tools.

Specialty tools tend to require little if any computer programming skills and most users can learn how to use them in a few weeks. Once familiar, users can create a basic one-hour course in anywhere from a week to a month depending on the level of interactivity desired.

Specialty authoring tools incorporate specific features that enable them to easily capture activity on a computer screen or embed video clips into an e-learning shell.

NOTE: While casual users can use these tools to create basic software tutorials or video-based programs, we recommended them for the e-learning enthusiast in order to create engaging interactions.