

Creating Performance Focused E-learning



The Challenge

The benefits of e-learning are numerous and well-documented. It can help an organization achieve its training objectives by improving access, providing tracking, and enhancing performance – all while reducing costs. However, while most e-learning does improve access and helps with tracking, not all e-learning is equally effective in generating the performance and return on investment (ROI) that organizations seek.

Before we can discuss what kind of e-learning delivers the greatest results, we must agree on what kind of results we're seeking. What is the goal of our e-learning? Why do we have training at all? Is the goal to check a box showing completion of a course or achievement of a satisfactory quiz score? Of course not. At least it shouldn't be if we're concerned with ROI.

The goal of e-learning is for learners to master skills, change behaviors or complete tasks. Knowledge alone is not enough. For ROI, we need action. Do passed quizzes necessarily lead to real-world actions? No. This is where e-learning most often falls short. The most common pedagogical approach, tell-and-test, does not realize the full potential of e-learning. If we believe that training *should* produce behavioral changes that improve real-world performance, then we must move beyond this common approach. Not only is good e-learning possible, but it is now easier than ever to produce.

This paper will explore:

- What kind of e-learning experiences deliver the greatest results
- What challenges we face in building such experiences
- How a new type of e-learning authoring system helps to overcome these challenges

Good e-Learning

What does “good” e-learning look like?

Let's start with what good e-learning isn't. We know that passive learning experiences are not very effective. In live classroom training, if the learner is not engaged, the likelihood of success is less than if the learning experience is participatory and engaging. The same is true for e-learning, but even more so, since e-learners must contend with the continually increasing distractions of cyber space. Only by engaging the learner in a meaningful way, can e-learning realize its full potential.

How do we engage learners meaningfully? A common misconception is that interactivity equals engagement. It does not. Having a learner click on the screen does not translate into engagement. Having a learner make a *meaningful* decision with their click does. This is the difference that sets instructional interactivity apart from interactivity for interactivity's sake.

The key to building engaging instructional interactivity is that it focuses not on knowledge alone, but on the application of knowledge. For example, we don't care how well a learner can recall the six golden rules of good customer service. We do care if learners know what to say or do when faced with an irate customer. Standard knowledge recall quizzes (matching, multiple-choice, etc.) are not as meaningful as realistic practice exercises. Learners are far more engaged

when given the opportunity to rehearse the decisions that they must make on the job. They are also more likely to value the learning experience as it clearly translates into real-world benefits. Therefore, with good e-learning, *the body of knowledge becomes a support or aid to the learners as they perform activities to achieve a goal or complete a realistic task*. Such performance focused e-learning will generate greater results and enables training departments to show a strong ROI through measures such as client satisfaction reports, safety reports, sales won, and so on.

There are three key ingredients for creating performance focused e-learning:

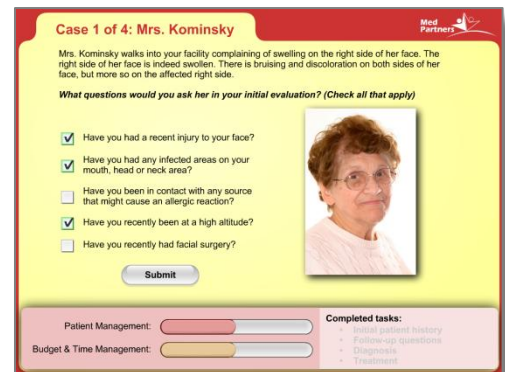
1. Context

First, the context or scenarios used for learning activities should closely mirror the real-world situations that a learner might face. For example, if the goal of a course is to have new consultants become proficient with using their laptops, then a good context may be that the learner needs to help a colleague hook up their laptop for a presentation in the boardroom... and the meeting starts in four minutes!



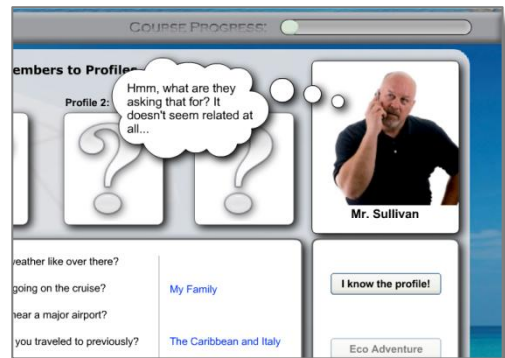
2. Challenge

The second key ingredient is that the decisions the learners face are appropriately challenging and require them to apply knowledge, not just recall it. This often requires the learner to go through a number of steps and draw upon resources to complete a task. For example, to correctly manage a patient, a medical professional might need to first decide on a diagnosis and then a treatment based on various data and information such as the patient's chart and history.



3. Feedback

Third, e-learning should *show* learners the impact of their choices rather than explicitly *telling* them if they are right or wrong. For example, if a learner makes a poor choice in a sales situation, they might see a thought bubble appear above the prospect indicating that they are becoming frustrated and are about to hang up the phone. This type of rich, intrinsic feedback encourages learners to learn from their mistakes in a safe environment, and is far more motivational and memorable than immediately providing explicit feedback like "Correct! C, is the best choice".



In summary, not all interactivity is equal. “Interactive” knowledge-recall, and contextually irrelevant exercises are less effective because they do not reflect the real-world actions a learner must take and do not allow the learner to practice those actions. Students intuitively know the difference between superficial interactivity and meaningful interactivity that is relevant, challenging, and that includes rich feedback. By building such interactivity, you will increase learner enjoyment and improve business outcomes. For ideas on creating good e-learning, visit one of the web’s most extensive collections of e-learning examples at www.suddenlysmart.com/examples.htm.

Technological Considerations

The Flash Player is the most-popular technology for delivering good e-learning thanks to its media richness, interactive capabilities and cross platform compatibility. There are two primary ways of building interactive Flash content.

The first approach is to develop content in the native Flash application itself. This provides the greatest flexibility and power, but is difficult, time-consuming, and costly. It requires Flash programmers to be the main players during the development process. This can lead to bottle-necks, and given their relatively high skill-level, Flash programmers are not an easy resource to scale. So while developing in Flash can lead to performance focused e-learning, it is not an easily scalable approach, and is usually cost-prohibitive.

The second approach to creating Flash content is to use template-based tools. With these solutions, Flash developers build templates that can be filled in via form-fields by subject matter experts, instructional designers and other non-technical users. While this approach is both rapid and scalable, the outputs of these template tools do not meet the criteria of quality discussed earlier. Because these templates must be highly re-usable, they are also generic. They tend to emphasize presentational layouts or generic interactivities, which focus on information dissemination and fact recall, rather than providing challenging, contextually relevant exercises with rich feedback. For instance, will having a sales person play a jeopardy-style game that tests product knowledge lead to as many new sales as a contextually relevant sales exercise where the sales person must ask appropriate questions to uncover customer needs and then suggest an appropriate solution? Probably not.

While many learning activities have similarities, appropriate context, challenge and feedback almost always require customization based on the subject matter, learning objectives and audience. Template based tools lack the flexibility and power to do this without the involvement of a Flash programmer. In short, template based tools are attractive on the surface, but only allow an organization to more efficiently build less effective training content.

When evaluating e-learning or e-learning tools, ask yourself, “Are the learners being challenged to make a meaningful decision in a realistic context? Do they see the impacts of their choices on a real-world measure that they care about, and do they have the chance to learn from their mistakes?” If the answers are no, then the e-learning will probably not lead to the results you seek.

The Key to Better e-Learning

So, how *can* organizations rapidly and cost effectively create performance focused e-learning? Organizations need a tool that:

- Simplifies and accelerates the process for creating meaningful interactivity
- Empowers a wider range of people in the development process
- Fosters collaboration

These goals have been the inspiration behind the creation of SmartBuilder, the first object-based, Flash authoring software for e-learning. SmartBuilder is an award-winning tool that allows instructional designers and developers to efficiently and collaboratively develop custom, performance focused e-learning, without needing to know ActionScript, the programming language behind Flash. Using SmartBuilder, organizations can:

- **Empower non-technical users** – Smartbuilder provides an intuitive interface for layout and design, so users can position and configure objects anywhere on a stage, much like when using PowerPoint. Users can create content from scratch, or start with a template from the large built-in template library. Unlike traditional templates, SmartBuilder templates can be edited in any way that is desired. Organizations can also create their own custom templates.
- **Simplify and accelerate the process of creating meaningful interactivity** – SmartBuilder provides a visual logic interface, where authors use simple menus to configure objects to “talk” to each other – a process that is like “scripting for dummies”. This means that users can quickly build whatever they want, and thus have the power and flexibility to incorporate customized context, challenge and feedback into their e-learning exercises.
- **Save time with specialized tools** – To further streamline the process of creating e-learning interactivity, SmartBuilder provides a unique flow chart tool for creating branching scenarios, an easy to use drag-and-drop object for creating highly customizable drag-and-drop exercises and a quiz engine that automates question pooling, weighting, sequencing and reporting.
- **Report and track learner performance at almost any level of detail** – Users can choose what data to report (via SCORM, AICC or custom protocols) and when to report it using object menus. For example, aggregate scores or question-level data can be reported, or completion status can be reported whenever is desired.
- **Simplify content translation** – Organizations can re-purpose content for different languages or brands. Users can create translation versions, assign translators, track progress and maintain version control from a single interface. Text can also be exported to XML or Excel to streamline the translation process.
- **Enable collaboration** – Taking advantage of its web-based architecture, SmartBuilder fosters collaboration and content re-use via a centralized repository which enables teams to share assets like graphics, videos, audio files, reference documents, templates and other resources. Administrators can centrally manage the development process with features for roles and rights management, check-in/check-out, meta-tagging and version control.

SmartBuilder is based on over a decade of cutting edge Flash development at Suddenly Smart and on insights gleaned from working with large training organizations. It is used by visionary organizations like Google, Cisco, RedHat, the YMCA, UPS as well as numerous government and educational institutions. It has won multiple industry awards for innovation in content development.

Conclusion

Organizations are increasingly embracing e-learning thanks to its capabilities to improve access, provide tracking and reduce costs versus classroom training. However, to realize its full potential, e-learning must also engage learners with interactivity that is contextually relevant, challenging, and inclusive of rich feedback. To cost effectively create this type of e-learning, organizations need to empower instructional designers and developers with tools that are powerful and flexible enough to create customized interactivity, without requiring them to become programmers. SmartBuilder is an e-learning development platform that provides a unique object-based authoring environment and visual logic interface. It is intuitive to use, yet is incredibly flexible. It also provides a suite of content management and collaboration tools to further streamline development. By enabling organizations to cost effectively create instructionally sound interactivity, SmartBuilder helps organizations to engage and motivate learners, promote behavioral changes and drive performance improvements that generate a strong positive ROI for e-learning initiatives.

For more information and ideas to help your organization with its specific training needs, please contact Suddenly Smart at 1.800.690.4259 or visit us on the web at www.suddenlysmart.com.