

talking point

Collaboration and risk sharing:

The key to success

by Alan Nelson



Ever since leaving the corporate world of publishing I have been wondering how long it would take me to return to my old ways. There was always something of a thrill about thinking up ideas for new books and then creating them and selling them. Some were well received, others less so, but it was always interesting.

So why has it taken us seven years to launch our new portfolios of online professional development courses for accounting and finance professionals?

Why now if not before?

The advantages of online learning for providing continuous professional development are increasingly well-recognised by all the accounting and finance bodies.

Unrestricted by time or location, online learning is less disruptive and can be fitted around day-to-day work. The introduction of mandatory CPD worldwide has led to schemes that encompass a wider range of learning techniques and activities.

Online learning has benefited from this change and the barriers that remain often have more to do with investment, content and development than a lack of confidence in the medium.

Nelson Croom has been working with professional accounting and finance bodies since it was founded in 2000. Early projects with CIMA and AAT paved the way and a successful collaboration with CPA Ireland provided the final launch pad for a new business model for online learning.

The introduction of mandatory CPD, and the structure of the accounting and finance sector in the UK suggested to us that the time had come to try a different approach.

The publishing approach

Our roots are in publishing. David Croom and I spent years running publishing companies and many of the team were recruited from the sector.

“*Is publishing the new model for providing CPD to accounting and finance professionals?*”

A natural progression perhaps, but how does this relate to elearning? And what does it mean for Nelson Croom's partners?

A publishing approach tends to be collaborative. In publishing you need to have the right content, the right tone, and the right approach. You need the right authors. You need to identify a gap in the market and you need a way of reaching your market.

My confidence in this area goes back longer than I care to admit to. My first job in publishing was as a commissioning editor on an accounting and finance textbook list. Through a combination of good judgement and sheer good luck, the list I created contained some of the leading textbooks around: Colin Drury's *Management and Cost Accounting*, David Alexander's *Financial Reporting* and Steve Lumby's *Corporate Finance*.

My experience then, and the success of a pilot project with CPA Ireland, meant that I knew the online learning model was ideally suited to this community.

We had thought for a long time about partnering with professional bodies to provide online CPD, however we were always uncomfortable with the risk.

As a textbook publisher I would never have put myself in the position of taking all the risk of publication while only having one channel to market. It has always made sense to me that the organisation with the ability to sell the products should invest in their production, otherwise you can be left with a big investment and no way of recouping your costs.

However, the move to mandatory CPD and the preponderance of accounting bodies reassured us that the risk of the publishing approach was acceptable.

- We knew we could create the content – we know how to create effective online professional development and we are well networked with potential authors
- We knew we could reach the market by working with the professional bodies we were already partnering with
- And we knew our partners would welcome our offer to take on the investment risk on their behalf

“ **We knew that the topics would be relevant because we were invited to suggest which courses should be developed** ”

David Fitzgerald, Members Department Executive, CPA Ireland

How does this all work in practice?

Take, for example, our forthcoming course *Due Diligence in Mergers and Acquisitions*. The ICAI identified this as a subject their members would welcome a course on. It seemed an ideal subject for online learning.

We spoke to our partners and contacts in accounting and finance bodies who agreed that this was a course they could use.

We sourced and commissioned an expert in the field to author the course – Peter Howson, Director of AMR International, London’s leading independent provider of commercial due diligence. The course is now in its final stages of production and will be available to learners in July.

By taking this approach – working collaboratively with organisations which represent their members’ requirements – we can produce courses that meet the needs of the audience.

Much in the same way an academic publisher would commission and develop a new text, we work with professional bodies to identify course needs and commission and produce the final result.

How does the investment work?

Online courses can be expensive to develop. But with the publishing approach there doesn’t need to be an upfront investment from the professional body. And the income that is generated can be ploughed back into member services.

Our work with CPA Ireland was set up on a revenue share basis. This meant that they could reduce their initial tailoring costs as well as eliminating ongoing license charges.

Nelson Croom retains ownership of the courses and receives an ongoing revenue stream. We are also able to offer the courses developed to other accounting and finance bodies for their CPD provision.

We have proof that it is working. Since launch in October 2006, CPA Ireland have sold over 1200 access keys. With a membership of around 5000, that makes the project a big success with the members, as well as for CPA and Nelson Croom.

The future

It is clear that some people prefer to learn online, while others just appreciate the accessibility of the online route when they are too busy to attend a face-to-face seminar.

The audience has responded enthusiastically to our Accounting and Finance Portfolio of courses. Perhaps predictably, there was a big surge of registrations towards the end of the year as learners realised that they were running out of time to complete their CPD. Six accountants registered for a course on Christmas Day!

The publishing model has worked and the future looks bright. We are keen to expand the focus of the portfolio, reaching out to other related financial communities and we hope that our publishing-focused collaborative approach will allow us to do just that.

Alan Nelson is co-founder of Nelson Croom. Before setting up Nelson Croom, he was the CEO of Thomson Learning’s activities in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Alan had spent the last 15 years in educational publishing. He has been at the forefront of the development of learning materials on the web.