

talking point

Online learning: The rules for success

An interview with Charles Greenwood



What was the background to engaging in this project?

DOCET (Directorate of Optometric Continuing Education & Training) is a committee set up to administer Department of Health funds and is charged with providing training and learning opportunities to the optometry profession. As such, DOCET produces regular distance learning material as well as "one-off" projects on specific topics. In this particular case, we had some old material which we wanted to update and make available, as we were experiencing significant demand from trainees and new members of the profession, who had not previously had access to the material.

What made you take the decision to move from hard copy to an online solution?

Several reasons. Firstly, you may find this surprising, it cost less. Developing the course online was less expensive than updating, printing and distributing the hard copies. There are also substantial savings to be had in the longer term. The topic is subject to changes in British and European Standards and we need to reflect these changes in our courses. If we used hard copy or even CD-Rom we would incur the same production costs each time the course needs updating. With online courses, the changes can be made quickly (and cheaply!).

By developing an online course and keeping it current, you can be confident that everyone is using the most up to date version.

Was it an easy decision to make?

Yes and no! Deciding to do something new is never easy, not least because we've all heard so many horror stories about projects going wrong. At DOCET we had our own experience of producing a CD-Rom which definitely wasn't plain sailing.

But in the end you have to consider the facts – and there was overwhelming information that convinced us that this was the way to go.

What advantages did you get from online learning?

The ease of updating was a key advantage for us but there were a number of other factors. With an online solution, you are able to track usage – this is important when most

organisations are now looking at compulsory CPD and ways in which this can be recorded. Tracking also allows you to feed information back into your planning cycle for producing more material and it allows you to audit the usage of the material which helps to keep finance departments happy!

“ Deciding to do something new is never easy...But in the end you have to consider the facts – and there was overwhelming information that convinced us that this was the way to go ”

Online learning is more flexible and less linear than traditional printed modules; essential when you have learners with different levels of experience. Good online learning can provide different routes through the material and a much greater degree of interaction. It is much more likely to engage with a wider variety of your membership because they don't all have to plod through the same course. They can dip in and out of the areas where they think they need help.

Were there any disadvantages?

There has been a concern that some people may not have access to the Internet but I do not think that is a problem anymore. However it is important to remember that the

majority of the membership don't have are whizzy, fast connections. To engage with most of your audience you need to make sure that the online programmes are not disadvantaged by the speed of connection. You may need to avoid video or high resolution graphics. In our case we selected a supplier whose learning credentials were second to none and whose approach quite deliberately is designed for normal BT telephone line connections.

“ *My advice would be find a supplier who listens to you and understands the way your organisation works and what you are trying to achieve. Critically, find suppliers who will work in partnership with you.*

Don't take on too much too fast. Start with something self-contained, don't get too ambitious ”

Or perhaps they ask you to approve a dense technical specification. No wonder when the programme is delivered you end up thinking that's not quite what you expected.

My advice would be...

Find a supplier who listens to you. Someone understands the way your organisation works and what you are trying to achieve. Critically, find suppliers who will work in partnership with you.

Don't take on too much too fast. Start with something self-contained, don't get too ambitious.

Did you face any resistance to the move?

Not for this particular project, although we have had concerns expressed in the past. One of the key questions was about costs but in this case the elearning solution was cheaper than printed distance learning.

Another concern was that the membership wouldn't go for it. Some won't, but they are in an increasing minority. Some, of course, won't do anything whatever format it's in! But with mandatory CET, our members will appreciate elearning they can access the material at their own convenience and they will like the cost savings (as it keeps their fees down!)

How did you choose your supplier?

We made sure that we had good relationships with all potential suppliers before even getting to the stage of picking one. It's the only way to establish who you will be comfortable working with. You also get a much better idea of what you might be able to achieve. DOCET contracts have to be put out to tender, but whether or not this is the rule, I would advise anyone to go through this process. You can come up with some good ideas from the tenders. We also had a variety of skills and experience on the panel which helped to cover all the angles.

Why do you think so many people have had bad experiences and what advice would you give to them?

Many suppliers/developers ask you to specify your requirements up front and insist that you stick with them or else pay a stiff financial penalty.

You're obviously really positive about online learning now. Why do you think your experience has been so positive?

Nelson Croom helped me through the process. They understood that my experience was in training – not online – and in professional associations. We worked together, step by step, through a tried and tested process and the results were always what I was looking for.

Charles Greenwood is a consultant working in the health arena and until recently was Head of Training for the College of Optometrists. During his tenure there, Charles took the decision to develop the college's first purely online course. In the following interview he discusses how he overcame reservations and obstacles – faced by many professional associations – to make this decision.