Creating the framework for your online learning strategy

What are the main questions for membership organisations?

By Lisa Minogue-White, Director of Learning Solutions at WillowDNA

Many membership bodies face one or several of the following issues:

1. A decrease in membership as newer generations feel out of touch with the current membership offerings.
2. A substantial growth in international opportunity that may be met by others.
3. Concern over the cost of starting out with creating and offering courses online.
4. Fear over destabilising the current workshop model and the providers of those workshops.
5. Fear of confusing technology and keeping up with change.
6. Concern of doing this badly and ruining a much-treasured reputation.

It is key to start by framing the opportunity and understanding the pitfalls of not addressing the opportunity. If part of your value is offering continuous professional development or learning experiences then you will need to address technology enabled learning in its various forms. It is only a question of when, not whether.

The next step is to develop the framework. A SWOT analysis is the favoured mechanism by the learning consultants at WillowDNA although if you have a preferred alternative for reviewing strategic opportunities then do employ that instead. It is always best to involve others with this. Who are the stakeholders? Is it possible to include the most important of all – your membership? This can be achieved via quantitative methods or qualitative – we usually do both. Surveys are helpful and very available – survey monkey is a useful example and easy to use. Face-to-face sessions can add valuable insight.

Starting from where you are

Having established where you are? What the opportunity is? Where the risks lie? Wry shaping the ideal vision of where you would like to be in, say, 3 year's time. WillowDNA see this as the most critical step. If you don't know where you want to get to, how will you know what the steps are on the way?

Now frame those steps. What will need to happen to get to that offering? Can you break down the project into smaller steps on the way? What do they look like?

How long does this take?

This depends of course, on where you are to start with. Many membership organisations will already have experimented with online learning or may be progressed some way. For some, this will have gone badly and may flavour the view of the merits of online learning. Try attending groups like the PARN institute. There will be many members with positive experiences. Use their inspiration to help build a picture of what good would look like. WillowDNA won the gold award for distance learning last November with a case study from a membership organisation. We are very happy to share that example and any others that feel relevant.

It is easy to underestimate how long your own team may need to participate in the creation of online learning even if you have selected an outside provider. If you wish to appoint a team to provide all skills internally, then that too will take time. If

you would like input on how long this may take for your membership organisation, please do contact us. Our learning consultants would be very happy to advise.

Cost model and options

One of the greatest concerns for people embarking on this journey is the one of the size of the investment and the sustainability of the approach. There is no doubt that it is likely to require some form of upfront investment to get started. But there need not be a large gap in time between creating an online experience and achieving a cost flow to support it. Identifying that project which is likely to be the most in demand is hugely helpful. Also, consider the cost model options. Some charge for each course, others integrate the course with membership, other options are to charge for accreditation only and offer the course for free.

There are many other options too. The one that is right for your membership depends on your context and need not be the same for all courses. Building a framework of experiences that demonstrates your members' growing capability can be very attractive. Ensuring your courses include tools that support your membership in their day-to-day working or living situations can be extremely popular. Online learning also opens up opportunities for people when previously the door may have been closed due to logistics or timing. Appealing to those learners directly may well generate a market you didn't know you had. The opportunities for the international market are, of course, substantial.

What skills does a membership organisation have in the team or is buy in the right option?

Do you build a team or do you seek external help? Start with reviewing the skills you have internally first. You will certainly have subject matter experts already – either internally or closely associated with you. You may have plenty of resources. Don't forget the lectures or seminars that you currently give. Don't forget the content and research papers, white papers, blogs, workshops that you have given in the past. The likelihood is that you have masses of content.

The challenge is to understand whether you can translate that into online courses yourself or whether you require outside assistance. The skills you will be looking for are instructional design, skills with training needs analysis, experience in rapid development tools and a platform. If you require advice on any of these, please do

contact us. You can of course, skill up your own team providing you have enough time to do this. Again, please do contact us if you require any support or training in this area.

END

WillowDNA
Bristol & Bath Science Park
Dirac Crescent
Emersons Green
Bristol
BS16 7FR

Tel: +44 (0)117 370 7735
Email: info@willowdna.com
Web: www.willowdna.com

WillowDNA and The Digital Learning Company are Trading Names owned by Willow Learning Ltd