EIGHT TIPS FOR MULTIMEDIA EFFECTIVENESS IN PERFORMANCE-BASED ONLINE LEARNING

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Remember the thrill of getting that giant big box of crayons as a small child? You know that special box of crayons – the box with a very large palette of colours and hues. Not the box of ten shiny, perfect crayons that fit in the box with the wrappers still intact, but instead, the giant box of well-loved crayons with torn wrappers that never seemed to fit back in the box. That humungous box of crayons provided hours of amusement – even playing peacemaker in sibling crayon wars. Best of all, that box of crayons provided the basis for a lot of learning through color experimentation.

Just as with that box of giant crayons, online learning offers a palette of design opportunities to enhance on-the-job performance through the use of effective multimedia elements that stimulate the senses, emotions and promote learning. To help remain competitive in today's world, online learning has become an effective way for many organizations to provide rapid, cost effective workplace training. Frequently, however, we observe the misuse of multimedia elements. Given the prevalence of online learning as a viable and important method of delivering workplace training, it is important to ensure that multimedia elements do not simply entertain learners, but add to a deeper understanding of required workplace performance.

The following eight tips present recommendations for using multimedia, online learning programs to increase workplace performance:

1. **Ensure multimedia elements provide value.** To be considered for inclusion, a multimedia element should promote knowledge construction and a deeper understanding of job concepts and job processes.

2. **Ensure you create context for visualizations.** A picture really is worth a thousand words. Animated/annotated diagrams and pictures provide excellent means for learners and build a mental image of hard-to-understand, abstract workplace concepts and processes. Diagrams and pictures deliver to learners a glimpse into the internal workings of things otherwise not perceived by the naked eye. However, as a caution, ensure you incorporate the context for these pictures and diagrams so that workers understand the performance connections.

3. **More is not necessarily better.** You do not have to employ all 64 crayons to make the point.

    (a) **Do not clutter the screen.** Focus on the object of discussion clearly and concisely. Consistent navigation with clear instructions about where to click to see more, allows the learner flexibility and control. Linear presentation-style slideshows are sometimes a form of instructional rigidity. While they may assist in image-building, they lack flexibility to delve deeply or explore the content enhancements that stimulate retention and performance.

    (b) **More multimedia elements do not increase learning.** Multimedia elements (also known as "seductive elements") such as music, animation or pop-ups in a course do not necessarily improve workplace performance, unless those elements add value in specific ways. See point number 1.

4. **Video can be a powerful learning tool if used properly**. Video has the capability of affecting several senses simultaneously. It can even motivate learning through emotional channels.

    (a) **Write a script and/or lesson plan** for the video portion and ensure the video content connects with the learning objectives.

    (b) **Know your learning audience well.** The content of the video has to intrigue the learner sufficiently to pay close attention to what is being presented. Dialogue, images and humor must match learner demographics.

    (c) **Sound quality of your video must be excellent.** The picture can take a hit of bad lighting and your learner may still watch, but tainted sound guarantees an abandoned video.

5. **Be careful with the use of "talking heads."** All too often, we hear people question the value of a talking head. My friend, Harold Stolovitch, always emphasizes that, "Telling Ain't Training." He's right. A talking head ain't training, either. If you plan to use a talking head, be sure to engage the learner. The learner should understand the purpose of the talking head. Don't just insert it in your learning material without careful consideration of the desired impact.

    (a) **Limit the duration of the message.** No one wants to sit motionless in a classroom with non-stop talking for long periods. Learners in an online environment have the freedom to ignore the message, so keep it short and to the point. If the necessary content is long, consider breaking it into a series of shorter videos.

    (b) **A talking head can add workplace relevance.** A talking head can add value if it presents an important element of relevance for actual workplace performance by providing context or validating the importance of the concept. You can increase impact by including text or questions on the screen that lead the talking head into the next topic or by adding other engaging visuals to the video.

    (c) **Use caution when considering an animated cartoon character.** If you are considering making the talking head an animated cartoon character, analyze your target audience and the subject matter. The younger, multi-tasking, computer-proficient, gaming generation of today may accept a cartoon character, but other audiences may not. In addition, the serious nature of a subject may dictate that a cartoon character is an inappropriate choice and may lessen credibility for the lesson.

    (d) **Add relevance by showing workplace performance.** Seeing is believing. Demonstration videos can be very effective. Consider including video or photo content with a speaker demonstrating actual workplace situations while the speaker continues with the message.

6. **Be careful with the use of sound.** As mentioned earlier, sound quality has no room for error. Make sure the quality is perfect. You can't have any exceptions with this rule. Overuse of sound dulls its effectiveness. Poor choices of sounds can mislead learners.

7. **Incorporate practice, practice, practice.** If practice is done with a performance-based focus, simple or complex simulations and scenarios provide an engaging way to see how certain concepts can be applied in different workplace situations.

8. **Plan your use of multimedia elements.** The most important component in producing an effective online learning experience continues to be the quality of instructional design and content – the actual media is a vehicle.

Just like the giant box of crayons, visual and auditory multimedia elements can enhance the online learning experience, as long as these elements add value by increasing learning and overall performance.

The HSA Express Guest Author Series features articles by various professional colleagues. The July 2010 series is by Linda Waddell., President of TecKnowledg-e Learning, Inc. (www.tecknowledg-elearning.com) and Danielle Turner, Principal of Velvet Pumpkin Productions (www.velvetpumpkin.com). Linda specializes in analysis, design and development of online workplace training programs. Danielle specializes in producing various types of videos for professionals and businesses. You can contact Linda at info@tecknowledg-elearning.com and Danielle at info@velvetpumpkin.com.