

Introduction to IMPACT guide

Find out how Brightwave's IMPACT model for success can help you create an engaging, effective e-learning experience.

Creating an engaging, effective e-learning experience can be a daunting task. There are many considerations, the LEAST of which is the technical delivery which most folk normally latch on to. The tools are an enabler, for sure, but the ability to communicate – in words, in pictures, with meaningful interaction, with clarity – is much more important. However, this ability often takes a back seat. Too much of what people experience as “e-learning” makes poor use of the medium, even to the extent of obscuring the key learning messages it intends to convey.

This is a shame as poor perceptions mean that people can come to an e-learning experience already expecting to be bored, uninspired and desperate to secure their “tick in the box” as quickly as possible. It doesn’t, and shouldn’t, have to be this way. It is hard to hold attention, granted. Distractions abound. Learners can, quite rightly, simply click away if the experience we design fails to stir the self-motivation needed to stay focused or return when circumstances allow. Mandating completion is not enough. We have to persuade and engage – and that takes thought, consideration, creativity and care. It is a false economy to ignore the steps to good design practice. You can, with some guidance, learn to design e-learning that has real IMPACT.

The IMPACT model

Over the past few months – at both conferences and webinars – I, on behalf of Brightwave, have been describing a model that can be used to successfully audit existing and planned e-learning projects, and become embedded within an e-learning development strategy.

The IMPACT model provides a structure for considering six key characteristics of effective e-learning design:

- Interaction
- Multimedia
- Personal
- Actionable
- Challenging
- Timing

Let's take a brief look at each one in turn:

Interaction

Interaction is what makes e-learning different from other media. It should be purposeful, bringing alive a key concept and immersing the learner in believable scenarios. It is not just "click next to continue" or "click to reveal more information". Too much e-learning relies on this alone and wonders why it loses its audience's attention at the first screen.

Good examples of interaction include dynamic models that let you play and explore a concept with variables so you can quickly see the consequences of your actions. This does not have to be complex and expensive.

For one organisation, to explain how pensions work, we designed a simple real time graph. The graph allows the learner to change important factors that affect the eventual value of their pension including length of service, contributions and investment performance. Visually simple, the dynamic nature of the interaction quickly demonstrates the effect these have on retirement funds - a frightening one for many people! Note that this learning could not easily be achieved in any other way than with a meaningful interaction. That's a good indicator that you are including interaction appropriately and not just adding unnecessary barriers for your learners.

Multimedia

E-learning can use any digital asset you care to mention. Yet, designers typically settle for text, stock images and clip art. Often there are technical constraints that preclude the use of video and audio. Indeed, there can be learning design reasons why the use of certain media is inappropriate. For example, what about audiences working in contact centres where the telephone is the primary form of customer communication? Here, it would be good practice to design customer care scenarios that are audio only to provide a model of practice that can be more readily transferred to the work environment.

Where possible though, video can be emotionally engaging and realistically replicate real world situations when combined with well constructed interaction. Simulating elements of a job, whether this is real video, 3D animation or an immersive world, or simply photo sequences, can provide a meaningful and applied framework for the learner.

Personal

If your message is too generic, bland or full of alien language that is patronising to your intended audience, it is unlikely to resonate. Context is crucial and

writing clearly in a tone that fits your organisation's culture, values and specific work practices makes a huge difference to learners taking ownership of the experience.

Equally, personalising the content to your learners' specific needs, such as their job role, their accessibility requirements (low, high bandwidth option, screen-readers etc) and preferred media can ensure they feel in control and can concentrate on the key messages rather than the tool they are using to access them.

Introducing social media can further personalise the experience through access to other peers and expert support where available.

Actionable

Too much training and learning focuses on abstract policies, processes, systems and idealised situations which lack the real hooks and context that allow learners to apply new skills and knowledge back in the work place. The very fact they have had to leave the workplace – physically in the case of traditional classroom training, and cognitively in the case of abstract e-learning content – makes it difficult to transfer the learning experience into practice. You can bridge this gap by closely simulating the work environment in which they need to apply the new skills and knowledge.

One example of this is a simulation within a travel agent which trains new staff to sell foreign currency. The simulation brings together all aspects of the role – operating a computer system, understanding currency, regulatory policy, customer service, sales skills and rapport building. By mixing these activities in a way that mimics the actual job, transfer of the virtual practice is much easier than if these elements were separately trained.

Challenging

Too much e-learning is too simplistic. It fails to challenge the audience either in its treatment or the difficulty levels of its assessment. There's almost an unspoken conspiracy that lulls trainers, managers and staff into a false sense of security because they all "pass". Never mind if any lasting change in performance is seen in the workplace. So, Challenge the expectations of the learner and provoke an emotional response. Take a stance, use your writing style to set an attitude, create surprise, laughter, fear, whatever is appropriate for your subject matter and audience. Don't make your interactions too obvious and easy – it's good to make the learner think carefully before they act or answer. But that's not to say we want to frighten learners way – the challenges can be structured to support failure positively and use it as a learning experience to move forward. But foremost make the learning stimulating, cognitively stretching and memorable.

Game designers have evolved highly sophisticated models that make challenges fun, addictive and more memorable for it. In particular, casual games, with their shared leaderboards, multiple levels, and regular achievements/badge collecting can be used to great effect in learning about detail-heavy subjects such as product features and benefits, policies and processes. Here, repeated exposure improves long term retention.

Timing

Repetition matters more than we like to think. Too many training courses – either in the classroom or as e-learning sessions - are deployed as single events. The courses are completed once and we expect our audience to be trained. The fact is we forget most of what we experience with this one-hit, sheep-dip model. E-learning provides a unique opportunity to structure more frequent yet spaced exposure to learning that is interwoven into work practices. This increases learning retention and transfer massively. Thinking in terms of a “campaign” rather than a “course” will change how you design every learning solution towards a smaller, fluid, blended experience. It may have less visible Big Bang, but it will be more effective in building the intended performance change in your audience.

Make an IMPACT

The IMPACT model is a useful framework to review how you can design more effective e-learning. Anyone of any level of experience, resources and budget can benefit from applying this model to their design activities. We all have a part to play in demanding good design.

While the quantity of e-learning undoubtedly will continue to rise, I'd like to see quality rise too so that e-learning can really deliver on its promise.

Also see: www.brightwave.co.uk/impact

For more information or to book your free IMPACT assessment , email enquiries@brightwave.co.uk or call (+44) 1273 827676.