

The Spicy Learning guide to e-learning:
70 top tips from Saffron Interactive





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Top five tips for measuring the value of learning

Evaluating the effectiveness of a learning intervention is often where projects fall down – it can be hard to know how to prove a return on investment. But isn't it about time we had some common methods to evaluate and measure the value of learning? Here are Saffron's top five tips for measuring that all important ROI.

1. Define what success looks like

To measure the right thing, you need to first know what the learning aims to do. Is it about mitigating risk or improving productivity, for example? Are you trying to reduce the number of security breaches or are you attempting to improve performance relating to targets or sales metrics? What does success look like for your organisation?

the business needs are, and how the training is intended to address those needs, and align the measures of success to this.

2. Align the metrics to the business needs

When identifying ways to measure success, keep them simple but try to think beyond typical LMS measures such as completion and assessment data. Make sure you know what



3. Set the baseline

Ensure you have robust baseline data at the start of the project so that you can assess the performance impact of the learning. Capture results over agreed time periods and against pre-determined success factors. Then turn this on its head and ask how the business would be performing without the training. What would happen if you didn't do anything?

4. Look beyond average scores

Use a variety of qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools and techniques. Compare the performance of a group of training users against a control group who didn't take the training. Complement this with happy sheets, feedback forms and gathering verbatim comment. And get line managers reporting on behavioural change on the ground.

5. Consider what's appropriate

Proving ROI from social learning is our next challenge. There is no LMS to draw data from and you can't test learners. Instead, have polls to determine the usefulness of information, rate and rank posts, and measure the learning outcome rather than the ROI because perhaps this should be more about the individual learning process than the organisation's return. Our advice is to trust the learner!

Top ten tips for managing an e-learning project

Effective project management is often the deciding factor when it comes to e-learning project success. Here are Saffron's top ten tips for making sure that you always deliver!

1. Have a formal project kick off

Before you start the project, make sure you understand the learning objectives, the client's expectations, the timelines and the risks. Also make sure that the client understands the approach that you are going to take.

2. Start with the end in mind

Define the end goal and end date first and then plan backwards from this point. If you have to deliver a working course by 20 March, when do you need the pilot? If the pilot is needed by 12 February, when do you need the first build?

3. Keep it simple

Your instinct may be to use project plan software – resist this at all costs. Create a simple table of deliverables and feedback dates – something that is easy to maintain and easy to understand.



4. Take an 'it's either done or it's not done' approach

Track your project using milestones – tangible deliverables which are either done or not done. Avoid using percentage complete. Ask yourself what 80% complete means, when the other 20% will be done and how much effort it will take.

5. Manage risks

The key to risk management is to ask: what could go (horribly) wrong? Once you have a list, don't leave it in your desk drawer. Actively manage it and try to mitigate the risk.

6. Communicate, communicate, communicate!

The biggest reason for project failure is lack of communication. Often people on projects just don't talk enough, becoming overly reliant on emails, plans and reports. As a minimum, arrange weekly team conference calls or meetings.

7. Manage the subject matter experts

Subject matter experts, who are balancing their role with their day jobs, can cause delays to your project and need to be managed. Communicate the process to them and make your expectations clear. Put your project dates in their diaries.

8. Don't forget prototypes and pilots

Your stakeholders will really understand what you are proposing when they see it. This is a good thing and helps to narrow requirements. Therefore you should build prototypes and you should always have a pilot.

9. Don't be shackled by the plan

Project management is a people business. Don't spend all your time updating the plan and documenting the process. Spend your time working with your team, understanding their issues and managing the risks

10. Watch your optimism

It's natural to be optimistic and to believe that everything will go right. Try to keep a lid on this and keep asking yourself, what could go horribly wrong and how will I manage the situation if this happens?

Top five tips for gaining buy-in for learning with social media

We've all heard stories of or witnessed the powers of social media, so why not create your own success stories by embracing these technologies and embedding them in your learning strategy? Often, the problem is how to get buy-in from the business. So here are Saffron's top five tips for taking the first steps towards winning support in your organisation.

1. Build a solid, measurable plan

Ask yourself what your learning and development goals and objectives are for engaging in social media. This will give you ammunition for building the case in the first place.



2. Do your research and put it to the test

There are so many social media apps out there, so decide what features you're looking to utilise and seek 'business friendly' alternatives to these. Then, once you've found out all you need to know, why not try it yourself? Write a blog, post on a wiki... start with the simple things.

3. Choose your words carefully

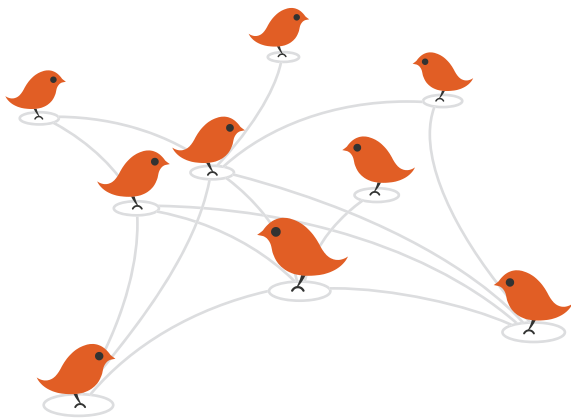
There are still reservations surrounding social media, so try to stick to more familiar terms. For instance, instead of 'social networking', consider replacing it with 'online forum'. Also, present social media in the context of building capabilities, collaborating and exchanging knowledge within your organisation – this will be far more persuasive!

4. Blitz the stigma

Social media apps are worthy tools for enhancing learning – it's not all fun, fun, fun. Yes, people use them for dating and socialising but they can also be applied for embedding and retaining learning more effectively, consequently shifting the learning culture in your organisation.

5. Educate the decision makers

Show them how social networks can be used in business and learning, and iron out any myths and misconceptions. Explain your plans to create a community of practice and develop members' capabilities through sharing knowledge.



Top ten tips for excellent instructional design

We all want our e-learning to be a positive experience for the learner and deliver results for the business. Here are Saffron's top ten tips for delivering engaging, effective, excellent instructional design every time.

1. Set testable, behavioural learning outcomes

Before you start designing the course, make sure you understand what you want the learners to be able to do by the end of the course. Do you really want them just to understand something, or do you want them to take action?

2. Put yourself in the learners' shoes

At the start of the project, ask yourself what the learners already know about the subject and what questions they are likely to have. Then make sure you answer those questions in the training.

3. Emulate the best in classroom training

Great classroom training is often down to two key things – shared experiences and human interaction. Apply these lessons to your e-learning: use case

studies or testimonials from real life, and build up a dialogue with your learner.

4. Remember: content is king

All good training is interactive – most people will switch off if they're just reading, or listening, not actually doing anything. But make sure the interactions are driven by the content, not the other way around.

5. Use technology to enhance (not define) your solution

Likewise, there are near endless possibilities offered by technology these days and they really can turn something good into something great, but don't let them define your solution – the strategy, not the technology, should drive the design.

6. Include scenarios to demonstrate relevance

The best way to change behaviours is to use scenarios that put the learners in a realistic situation. Ask them to make a decision, identify a problem or suggest a solution – this way, you're equipping them to do the right thing in real life.

7. Test and tell, don't tell and test

The model of telling someone something and testing them on it shortly afterwards tests memory, not understanding. It's more effective to ask learners to think for themselves and draw on their own experiences to reach the right answer.

8. Make it easy for learners

No matter how engaging the content or innovative the design, if the course can't be navigated easily or if it's not accessible, you'll give your learners a negative experience.

9. Speak the learners' language

You're designing a training course, not an instructional manual. Strike a conversational tone and speak in plain English – you're much more likely to engage your learners than if you take a formal tone or use lots of legal or business jargon.

10. Get a second opinion

It's hard to be objective when you're the one who's written the content. Before declaring your storyboards finished, ask a colleague or friend to take a look. Their first impression will give you a good idea of how learners will react later.



Top ten tips for writing effective e-learning questions

Whether they're for an assessment or part of the training course itself, writing questions can be a tricky business. Read on for Saffron's top ten tips for creating effective questions that test learners in the right way, on the right thing.

1. Draft the assessment before the content

If step one is defining the objectives and learning outcomes, step two is drafting the assessment. Make sure each question maps back to the outcomes and then focus the training content on the assessment.

2. Randomise the assessment

Ideally an end of course assessment will have a pool of questions, with a random selection drawn on each attempt. This means, if learners fail once, they can't simply memorise where they went wrong but are actually tested again.

3. Remember: quality not quantity

When it comes to assessments, it's better to have 10 excellent questions than 40 substandard ones. Likewise, multiple choice questions generally work best with four options – don't go below three or above five without a very good reason.

4. Use questions to drive the learning

We're big believers in the value of the test and tell approach. Don't just give learners information and then test them on it. Instead, ask them to think for themselves with a question before correcting or confirming their answers.

5. Focus on behaviours

We're in the business of changing behaviours. This means we need to enable learners to do the right thing, not just to remember facts and figures. Make sure every question relates to a choice or decision learners will face in real life.

6. Make it challenging...

If the right answer is three times as long as the rest, or the wrong answers are likely to make learners laugh not think, there's no point even asking the question. Yes, coming up with plausible wrong answers is hard, but it's worth the effort.

7. ...but keep it fair

Don't try to trick learners or give them an impossible choice. Negative questions, options that are identical except for one word, and questions on topics that weren't actually covered in the course are neither fair nor effective.

8. Avoid yes/no questions

Giving learners a 50% chance of guessing correctly is not the most effective test. If you must use them, include a couple more options and make sure that 'yes', 'no' and 'maybe' are qualified, so learners have to justify their choice.

9. Help people learn from their mistakes

Don't just use ticks and crosses to show how learners have done. Provide constructive feedback to reinforce the message if they answer correctly, and explain where they went wrong if they answer incorrectly.

10. Keep the learners' experience in mind

Focusing on behaviours is one way to answer the 'what's in it for me?' question. But there are other ways – for instance, pre-tests assess existing knowledge and point towards the most relevant training units. Time efficient and effective!

Top ten tips for using video effectively in e-learning

Videos can be a great addition to e-learning packages – but only if they're used in the right way. Here are Saffron's top ten tips for making sure videos are adding value to your e-learning rather than just adding megabytes to your course.

1. Keep videos short and to the point

Unless you're making the video interactive, keep it short and focused so your learner doesn't switch off. This is especially true for monologues given by company executives: keep the learner engaged by keeping it short and sweet.

2. Use videos for emphasis

Don't overuse video. Always ask yourself 'is this the best way to illustrate the learning?' Video can be more memorable than text so use it for emphasising and reinforcing key learning points.

3. Make videos interactive

If you're considering including a longer video then make it interactive, for example by pausing it intermittently to ask

the learner questions. This keeps them involved and focuses their attention on the learning points you want to emphasise.



4. Follow up with questions or a summary

If you don't make the video interactive in any way then make sure you follow it up with a brief summary of the key points covered. This should help to prevent any key learning points slipping through the net.

5. Use videos to demonstrate how to, or how not to, do something

A video can be a great way of illustrating how not to do something and then getting the learners to spot the mistakes. Depending on time, you can then follow up by showing them the correct way of completing the task.

6. Use actors not real employees

Your video will only be as good as the people in it and employees may be nervous or forget their lines. Use professional actors but make sure you send scripts through in advance, giving clear instructions on character and costume.

7. Be creative

Think about how television programmes are filmed and consider whether you can mimic their style. For example, try using different camera angles to break up long speeches or reinforcing key points by having text appear on screen.

8. Include a transcript

Providing a transcript makes a video accessible to everyone, such as learners with hearing difficulties or those without headphones or sound cards. It also enables learners to refer back to the content without watching it again.

9. Be technically clever

Compress video files as much as possible to avoid learner frustration whilst waiting for them to load. Consider creating a low bandwidth version for slower internet connections, perhaps using photos rather than video, or lower quality video.

10. Make videos downloadable elsewhere

Get the most out of your video by including it as a downloadable resource, either in the course or from an intranet site. That way, the learner can refresh their memory of the key learning points without completing the whole course again.

Top five tips for designing engaging graphics for e-learning

Creating original graphics for an e-learning course can be a challenging task, particularly when anything that's created has to comply with strict branding guidelines. An engaging graphic environment is essential for an interesting and successful learning experience. Read on for Saffron's top five tips for achieving this.

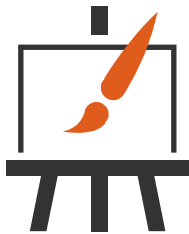
1. Work on the concept

A strong concept is a must for any design. An interesting theme that runs throughout the course can help keep learners focused and engaged in the content. While the idea should be based around the subject matter, using metaphors and indirect associations can often provide the most attention grabbing results.

If the budget is tight, using free software like Google SketchUp can help add new elements to your work.

2. Explore different technologies

Advances in technology have created new opportunities in every field of design, including e-learning. Subscribe to blogs, magazines and training websites like www.lynda.com to make sure you stay up to date with new software and techniques.



3. Never stop experimenting

It is easy to get comfortable with a proven style or concept that you know has always worked in the past. Attempting something new might not always be as successful as your proven techniques but exploring new creative methods can lead to improved and more exciting graphic solutions.

4. Do not decorate – communicate

Each visual element should serve a purpose – it should help to communicate the message (the content of the course) and contribute to the overall design concept. Check your work carefully to ensure there are no elements that serve a purely decorative purpose as they can be distracting for the learner.

5. Make it unique

While stock photography can be useful, relying on it entirely can often result in dry and unoriginal work. Use your own photographs to assemble interesting compositions. Ask a colleague to be a model for a photo that can then be used as a reference for an illustration. Include scanned and hand drawn elements to add a personal touch to your work.

Top five tips for writing XML for beginners

XML can be a great tool when used correctly, but it does sometimes suffer from being a development buzzword. The trick to understanding how best to use XML is to remember that its focus is to provide an independent structure for a collection of data. What happens with that data is a problem for other programming languages that need to work with it. Here are Saffron's top five tips for XML beginners.

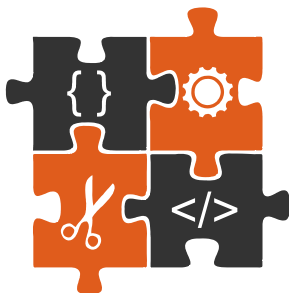
1. Create a stylesheet

XML can be viewed in many different formats but creating a stylesheet is a great way to ensure that the data is displayed in a readable way. Using tools like Microsoft InfoPath it's possible to create a customisable view that will allow users to make updates to your XML document using familiar form-based controls like text boxes and drop-down menus.

books, you would want to create an element labelled 'books', then create sub-elements within the group to hold the information on each specific book.

2. Group data

When using elements that belong in a group it's best to create an element to represent that group. For example, if you wanted to create an XML document to show information on a series of



3. Use elements and attributes appropriately

When choosing between elements and attributes, try to remember that elements should be used to group or hold data and attributes should be used to store meta-information for a specific element. Also, try to avoid starting any names in your document with the letters XML or any punctuation characters.

4. Ensure compatibility

There are various ways to encode XML, such as ASCII and ISO/IEC 8859, but to ensure greater compatibility it's generally best to make sure your documents are saved encoded as UTF-8. You can usually see how your document is encoded by opening your XML document in a simple text editor and checking the encoding attribute in the first line.

5. Experiment with your software

You don't always have to have expensive dedicated software to edit your XML documents correctly. Programs like Microsoft Word are capable of transforming an XML document directly into a familiar looking editable document that you can save onto your PC.

Top ten tips for accessibility

An inaccessible e-learning course risks non compliance, frustration, anxiety and lost productivity. Saffron's top ten tips will help you avoid all that and build something accessible, usable and ultimately more effective.

1. Revise your definition

Yes, accessibility is about catering to users with disabilities. But it pays to take a broader view: accessibility is about usability. Everyone benefits from easy-to-use interactions, intuitive navigation, clear language and a considered design.



2. Build accessibility into your plans

A lot of people believe an accessible course is an expensive course, but this doesn't have to be the case. Consider accessibility from the outset, plan how you'll build it into your design, and you'll find that the investment pays off.

3. Aim for accessibility, not perfection

It's worth finding some guidelines, like the W3C standards. They apply to websites rather than e-learning, so create your own test plans that tick as many of the boxes as possible and find alternatives if you can't meet a particular requirement.

4. Don't be tempted to build two versions

Creating a separate version of an e-learning course isn't inclusive, so it opens you up to equivalence issues. It also adds to your workload, which impacts on the timescales and bottom line, and it can compromise testing procedures.

5. Be aware of the common mistakes

Don't create interactions that require intricate mouse control. Don't design a course that relies on an awareness of the visual layout. Don't use descriptions that will be lost on visually impaired users ('click on the green box on the right...').

6. Offer alternatives to multimedia elements

Audio and video are commonplace in e-learning these days, but not everyone can benefit from them (and not everybody wants to). Give your users options, such as audio they can turn on or off, or captions and transcripts of videos.

7. Create a user friendly design

When designing your course, think about font size, scroll bars (and how to avoid them) and colour blind users. Summarise graphs, charts and tables so nobody loses out, and make sure your design is consistent and intuitive.

8. Speak in plain English

Accessibility isn't all about technical features; the language used is equally important. Content that is complex, full of jargon or out of context can put off any user, regardless of disability – including those whose first language isn't English.

9. Don't assume 'accessible' means 'limited'

As designers, we're creative within the parameters of brand guidelines, corporate voice and technical constraints every day. Accessibility's no different – a good designer can create something attractive, exciting and accessible.

10. Test, test and test some more

By all means make use of the accessibility testing tools available, but don't exclude human intervention. Ask a diverse pilot group to test thoroughly for accessibility and usability and, if possible, build more than one test into development.

For more on what we're thinking, doing and talking about, visit the [Spicy Learning Blog](http://www.saffroninteractive.com/blog), which explores hot topics from the world of technology-supported learning in the workplace:



www.saffroninteractive.com/blog

To find out more about how **Saffron Interactive** can help your business find innovative and effective ways to meet your learning, training and communication needs, contact us:

info@saffroninteractive.com /
020 7092 8900



Not sure how to get started with e-learning?

Want to take your solutions to the next level?

We've put our heads together to produce this handy guide to all things e-learning, including:

- Strategy and management
- Instructional design
- Design and development

Take a look inside for 70 top tips to help you deliver engaging, effective e-learning.

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