

From Software Documentation to **E-learning**: Making a Switch

Are you a software documentation specialist planning to switch to e-learning? Or have you already made the switch but feel puzzled about what you need to do to be comfortable in this domain? Let me share a few tips that helped me make the transition from software documentation to e-learning. The transition can appear challenging at first, but tread well and you will experience the joy of doing the creative work that you always yearned to do in your career.

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Know the Basics

First, understand what e-learning is all about. What are its aims? What are the various components of an e-learning module? What are the processes and methodologies involved? There are various ways to get answers to these questions:

- Take a short-term course.
- Attend workshops and learning sessions on e-learning.
- Invest in a good book on e-learning.
- Read articles on the Internet. During an Internet search, don't just restrict yourself to the keyword *e-learning*. Try

WBT, *online learning*, and *instructional design* as well.

- Search for e-learning glossaries on the Internet. By searching through these glossaries, you can get an idea of the various concepts related to e-learning. Out of these, you can pick the terms that you find most interesting and relevant to your job role, and perform a keyword search to learn more.
- Try out some free e-learning modules on the Internet. Note the impact of each and try to analyze what techniques created that impact.
- Get accustomed to the e-learning terminology. What is a *storyboard*? What are *frames*? What are *adult learning theory*, the *ADDIE model*, *Bloom's taxonomy*, *learning objects*, and *learning theory*? These aren't just "nice-to-know" terms. Some of the most widely used e-learning methodologies are based on them.

Many terms are used interchangeably in e-learning, like the word *e-learning* itself, which is synonymous with *online learning*, as is *course* with *module*. Learn to navigate the maze of interchangeable terms.

Treat Your User as a Learner

The audience for e-learning products differs from that for software documentation. The typical target audience, or users, of the latter will usually skim and skip through a manual or online help to find the procedures they need at the moment. The target audience for e-learning comprises "learners," who use your e-module to acquire new skills or enhance existing skills. A good learning experience is expected to enhance workplace performance. A set of predefined outcomes, called learning objectives, is expected from each lesson (or *submodule*) within the module. It's your job to convert the information or tacit knowledge provided by the subject matter expert (SME) into actionable knowledge. Usability is of great importance, and user acceptance tests are conducted even for e-learning modules. You need to take care of the learner's needs.

Get Conversational

The tone of an e-learning module's audio text is usually more conversation-

al than the tone employed in software documentation. To convey your point, you will be expected to give real-life examples, as you would if you were talking to your peers and friends. Also, the text of a particular frame should logically and contextually link the text with its preceding and succeeding frames.

Hone Your Search Engine Skills

To document a software-related task, technical writers generally install the software, perform the task, and write about it. In e-learning, what you write won't be primarily procedural in nature, revolving around a list of steps. The scope of an e-learning module widens into writing about concepts, phenomena, and other theoretical aspects of a subject. To write about concepts, you will need reliable subject matter to read and understand. While the SME is generally responsible for providing the subject matter, you may still need to gather information on your own to enhance your understanding of the subject. Furthermore, you need to be able to verify and substantiate some facts and statements. You should know how to perform effective searches on the Internet, choosing the right keyword or set of keywords.

Also, you need to be able to search the Internet to find the images of objects and visual depiction of phenomena to enable you to visualize your subject.

If you are developing generic or general-purpose e-learning modules—say, for some soft skills courses—an Internet search can be very effective in providing content ideas.

Refine Your Information Processing Skills

You need to develop an appetite for information. You may have to handle a lot of information, not all of which may be relevant to your purpose. You must know how to excavate information in the first place, distill the relevant information from the irrelevant, separate the "need-to-know" from the "nice-to-know" information, and then structure this information into assimilable chunks. There's always a limit to the amount of information you can put in your module.



Be especially careful in designing information—creating the sequence in which a particular topic will appear, deciding how much information is too much on a frame, and choosing how to hold the learner's attention.

Time is another constraint, and information is almost always available in abundance. So, you need to carefully plan out your content study and map the content to the learning outcomes.

Get Acquainted with Various Media

E-learning modules are characterized by their media richness. The media used in e-learning include text, graphics, animation, audio, video, and interactivity. Know the basics of these media. Be aware of their pros and cons, their effectiveness, and their demand on the infrastructure. Is the onscreen text too bland? Is the video consuming a lot of bandwidth? Is the animation too distracting? Should the arrows in the diagram be sleeker? Is the color scheming too dull or too loud? Such questions should automatically pop into your head.

Know the Multimedia Tools

Know the capabilities of the multimedia tools used in e-learning. Open these tools and observe their menus, toolbars, and toolboxes. Play around and see what is possible. View the demo products created using them. Take a glance at their online help files while focusing more on their capabilities and the effects they can produce. Or read the product literature related to these tools on the Web.

Either you will be working on these multimedia tools, or your graphic artists may be using them to create e-learning modules. Unless you know the capabilities of these tools, you cannot fully exploit their potential to deliver a visually appealing and user-friendly e-learning module.

Learn to Visualize

While developing e-learning modules, you have to present the information visually; otherwise, you run the risk

of giving your learners a passive learning experience by creating “page-turner” modules with little interactivity to hold their attention. While visualizing, you must decide which media you will be employing to present the content, and how. You must determine the best possible way to present the content so that it both engages and delivers value to the learner. For instance, consider using an animation to represent a process, a fishbone diagram to show a cluster of causes of a problem, a flowchart for a series of sequential steps, a simulation to demonstrate a software feature, and audio synchronization of bullet points. You may also want to use tables, graphs, charts, and screen shots.

You can learn to visualize. Just pay attention to all the Web sites you visit, all the TV programs and commercials you watch, and even your surroundings. They can spur your creativity and help you visualize in the most natural ways.

Undoubtedly, visuals enhance the appeal and retention of the learning content. One caveat: visuals should never overwhelm the learner.

Learn to Interact Even More

You will be constantly interacting and coordinating with various people involved in creating the e-learning module. You need to interact with the SMEs to procure the subject matter and understand the scope of the content to be covered in the module. As in software documentation, you need to ask them the right questions. The answers to these questions will either enhance your understanding or will be required for inclusion in the module. You will need SMEs' reviews and sign-offs on the design documents and the storyboard. Ensure that your storyboard clearly specifies the content and its layout.

You will also need to interact with graphics staff, communicating your requirements and expectations to them. You need to provide them with detailed inputs. If possible, besides giving them written instructions in the storyboard,

take some time to brief them on your requirements. Start with the overall intent of the module and then move on to individual frames. Take their suggestions as well. You need to resolve their questions during the development of the module. You can cut down a lot of iterative reworking by communicating clearly.

Learn to Assess

In software documentation, you provide information about a software product, procedures to accomplish various tasks using the software, and solutions for the problems that your user might encounter while using the software. In e-learning, in addition to providing knowledge, you will have to evaluate and reinforce the learner's understanding through assessments. An e-learning module is usually composed of a pre-assessment that is the starting point of an e-learning module, embedded assessments within the module, and a post-assessment at the end.

You should be able to develop assessments that give the learners an idea of what they have learned and what they haven't. Ensure that these assessments cover the maximum possible knowledge imparted in the module. There's room to be innovative while creating assessments. Try some good gaming techniques. You may want to visit Web sites that explain the value of using these techniques; E-Learning Centre (www.e-learningcentre.co.uk/eclipse/Resources/games.htm) and Game Theory.Net (www.gametheory.net) are some good examples.

As an experienced software documentation specialist, you can create online help and support documentation for the e-learning module. You are already armed with effective information design and writing skills. Build upon these skills, acquire some new ones, and enjoy the fulfillment that comes from the application of creativity and instruction design. ❶

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