

Four Be prepared

10 steps to creating your ideal online community

What do you need to start an e-learning community? How do you sell it to potential users? To help you to start building, this section looks at:

- making the case for your online community
- selecting who to consult
- choosing the learning activities
- piloting the project

Whether or not you are an e-learning enthusiast, the chances are that many others in your organisation will find the concept revolutionary and potentially daunting. Some will be interested but wary, while others may suspect it is an expensive novelty or another case of technology for technology's sake.

To make the development of an online community a success, you need to show that it is none of these things and that it will help your organisation to achieve its ambitions. You need to garner staff support in general and liaise closely with your ICT team in particular at an early stage.

Toolkit

Basic facilitator skills

Community purpose

Learning message

Spell out how e-learning can support your organisation's ambitions.

10 steps to implement an online community

- 10** Evaluation – is it effective?
- 9** Marketing – have a workable plan
- 8** Pilot – have a big picture but start with small pilots
- 7** Facilities – personal requirements of participants
- 6** Managing your learning environment – how will this be done?
- 5** Technical infrastructure – assess IT network and access
- 4** Choosing and developing learning activities
- 3** Learning outcomes – clearly identify the learning need
- 2** Stakeholders – encourage buy-in and commitment
- 1** Set objectives – align e-learning with critical and organisational objectives

1. Set objectives – align e-learning with critical objectives

Match the project to your organisation's objectives so people know what the point of it is. In the medium to long-term, you should be thinking about how e-learning and online community can support all your activities so it becomes part of the **framework** of the organisation.

Consider how the success of an online community will be measured, in particular, learning. Quick wins are important here as it's much easier to get people on board if the advantages are swiftly visible.

Even if you follow the above, be prepared to encounter resistance to the idea of an online community. Some people will already have a **networking system** that has served them well for years — email, online messaging or a chat in the staff room — and will question why they need a new one. Others will be wary of exposing their lack of competence in ICT. Regardless of what the norm has been in terms of communications, resistance to change will underpin many of the challenges you face.

2. Stakeholders – encourage buy-in and commitment

Whip up the support of your ICT and leadership teams. They must be genuinely committed to the project by talking about e-learning, promoting it in briefings and planning sessions and in allowing time for it to take place. Potential e-learning champions (see chapter 6) will also be critical to success, so assess their capabilities and examine what further training they might need (see chapter 5).

3. Learning outcomes – clearly identify the learning need

These online communities are all about providing a much wider opportunity for learners so stress what you expect the results of the project to be and how these will enhance what you already do (see chapter 8). Align to the 'teaching and learning' policy and emphasise that it is the policy not the technology that is driving change.

Toolkit

Blended learning

4. Choosing and developing the learning activities

For your target audience, you need to consider what experience its members already have of e-learning and what preferences they have. What are their learning styles? Are you dealing with multi-cultural audiences? What kind of mentoring and coaching support is needed?

Bear in mind that people are accustomed to a range of learning activities, not just different versions of one type of learning. There are many ways of developing content and activities in an online community so compile a checklist of all the considerations to compare all possible ways forward.

5. Technical infrastructure – assess IT network and access

Liaise with the ICT team (and/or your e-learning specialist team, if one exists) at an early stage. Ensure that the ICT infrastructure can bear your proposals, that the online community software you want to use is supported by your organisation's technology platform (Windows or otherwise) and that there are no clashes with firewalls or other ICT security constraints.

Keep checking your plans with the ICT team so that any technological obstacles are spotted swiftly, and think about what kind of technical support your e-learning project will require once it is up and running (for more on software, see chapter 5).

6. Managing your learning environment – how will this be done?

If you have a managed learning environment (MLE), the look of your new online community should meet the same standards. Think about how far you want the two to integrate. For example, will people be able to use the same user names and passwords? Can you influence the development of the environment through user group meetings?

7. Facilities – personal requirements of participants

Think about where the actual learning activities will take place, as resources should be available all day, every day. The workplace is not always ideal, so should there be a dedicated room or should it be accessible from home? In particular, think about how learners can gain immediate, **just-in-time access**, usually for no more than 10 minutes.

You also need to consider whether the online community will be hosted internally or by a third party and, in either case, who in your organisation will be responsible for managing its use.

In terms of who inputs the data, will it be designated individuals or will anyone be able to load material into the community?

In terms of human resources, think about the requirements for teachers, mentors, tutors and administrators to support your e-learning community along with any child protection related issues.

Make sure help and support is readily available. This may be through online resources, online help, email or telephone support.

8. Pilot – have a big picture but start with small pilots

Choose from:

- a project or training need that people recognise is having high strategic importance and, therefore, attracts good publicity. For example, support for GCSE revision or access to key members of the wider community – maybe a hotseat with the town mayor or a high-profile educational professional in another country
- something low key and of limited strategic value with a lower degree of risk, for example using the community to support meetings such as the school council or extra-curricular groups such as sports teams

Think about the target audience and focus on those people in the organisation who you believe are **open-minded and receptive** to new ways of doing things.

Make sure you present the pilot in a positive light whether it confirms what you are doing is right or highlights where changes are required.

9. Marketing – have a workable plan

Use newsletters, magazines, email, letters and memos from senior managers supporting e-learning to build momentum and create excitement about what you're doing.

10. Evaluation – is it effective?

There's not much point in putting energy into your online community unless you know whether it has worked or not. The evaluation needs to be more than a tick in a box indicating that someone has completed a course online or logged on X number of times. Consider developing a formal evaluation process in which you assess the learning at different points (see chapter 9).

Toolkit

Basic facilitator skills

Monitoring and evaluation

For further information, references and guidance, go to www.ncsl.org.uk/elearningfacilitationtoolkit