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Summer 2011

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# Can e-learning replace a user guide?

Amanda Caley presents a Case Study about a great e-learning system that played an integral role in a major countrywide training rollout.

Can e-learning tick all the boxes so that you no longer need to develop a user guide and online help?

Had I been asked this question a year ago I would have probably said “No, I don’t think so”.

Now I would say “Yes, you can definitely replace a user guide with great e-learning and what’s more your users will love it!”

Don’t believe me? Read on to see how one company has successfully done away with the need for a traditional user guide.

**Important Note:** This article is about the content, not the tools used to create it. There are so many different tools and platforms out there. Before you rush out and buy a new tool, have a look at what you already have within your organisation. You may even find that you are able to use an existing tool for creating your e-learning content.

In the Resources section at the end of this article I have included some links that you might find useful. There’s some interesting information out there in the e-learning community!

## How do you create great e-learning?

At the Technical Communications UK Conference in September last year one of the common themes was getting your content strategy right and the specialist stream focussed on e-learning.

Many of the presentations I attended emphasised the importance of knowing who

your audience is and carefully crafting clear messages to communicate to them.

At Conference, I took part in a session called ‘You have 3 minutes...Go!’

I used my 3 minute slot to have a rave about how great e-learning can be.

Many of the speakers (Roger Hart, Ellis Pratt, Simon Rae, Chris Atherton, David Potts and Julian Murfitt) mentioned the power of good storytelling. Provoke with curiosity and interest, relate with a good story, reveal a memorable message... and if your readers think they knew it already, all the better!

In particular, Ellis Pratt referred to the power of the 3Ss in his presentation:

- Storytelling
- Simulations
- Scenarios

My message was “If you want to create captivating e-learning then use this 3Ss model. Accommodate the different learning styles. Create something for everyone; for each e-learning task create different options; one for people who like to be shown what to do, one for people who want to be led through with prompts and one for people who just want to dive in and have a go without any clues.”

Did I convince my audience at Conference? Well I’m not sure I did! So I have now put pen to paper and written an e-learning case study based on a project I worked on last year.

## E-learning case study

Last year I worked as a freelance trainer on a fascinating and very successful training project with one of the very best e-learning systems I have ever come across. This was a very large scale countrywide rollout of a new system to over 10,000 users.

This company has definitely proved that you can do it all with e-learning.

They developed an e-learning system with the only documentation being a single sheet, A4 tri-fold, quick reference guide.

Their e-learning really does tick all the boxes and what’s more, the users love it!

## So what makes it so great?

It is easy to use, aesthetically pleasing, well designed, colourful, interactive and has lots of different elements to hold the user’s interest:

- Well written, well structured, realistic and engaging content
- Demonstrations — **Show Me**
- Guided tours — **Guide Me**
- Practical exercises — **Let Me**

Create captivating e-learning using storytelling, simulations and scenarios



Figure 1. Join the community and get involved in the e-learning conversation (Image: The Rapid E-Learning Blog)

### ▪ Ongoing consolidation exercises — **Check I Understand**

- Processes and procedures
- Video clips
- Integration with classroom training
- End of course assessments
- 'Business as usual' tool

#### *Why does it work?*

- A variety of good quality content holds the user's attention.
- Giving users choices about the way in which they learn increases the overall effectiveness of the training.

#### *Engaging content*

The company's e-learning is well structured and modular. Each module contains a number of short tasks. All tasks are based on realistic live situations. Users work through scenarios relevant to their particular role.

The system screens in the e-learning are identical to the live system so the interactive sessions are extremely realistic.

Prior to starting work on this contract I was asked to work through the e-learning system as part of my train-the-trainer induction. I have to admit to dreading the thought of ploughing through hours of e-learning. In the past I have worked through some terribly dull and boring e-learning systems. However, once I got going I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was obvious that much thought had been given to engaging the users and accommodating different learning styles.

The real winner for me is having each of the scenarios available to work through in three different modes:

- **Show Me**
- **Guide Me**
- **Let Me**

As they say, the choice is yours. So depending on your starting point and your learning preference you can choose the most appropriate mode for you. For self-study this works really well. My preference was to first work through the **Show Me**, then have a go at the **Let Me** and when I got stuck I'd then work through the **Guide Me** before having another go at the **Let Me**.

#### *Why does it work?*

- This model works so well because everyone can enjoy their own learning experience.
- Users get to choose what level of hand-holding they want. This prevents users from getting anxious or bored.

#### *Ongoing consolidation*

At the end of each task there is a **Check I Understand** exercise providing you with instant feedback on your progress. If you answer any of the questions incorrectly then you can easily work through the task again to find the right answer.

#### *Why does it work?*

- The users get instant feedback on their progress.
- The trainers can identify any areas that need to be reinforced or re-visited prior to users completing the end-of-course assessments.

#### *Processes and procedures*

For each task, if relevant, there are links to associated processes and procedures. This is an excellent feature not only during training, but also when users go live on the new system.

#### *Why does it work?*

- Having a quick way of accessing up-to-date procedural information is invaluable for 'business as usual'.
- Updates are maintained centrally.

#### *Video clips*

For some of the tasks, associated videos have been created, some of which are simple demonstrations of how to perform a task. There are also a number of paired role-play videos - first 'how not to do it' followed by 'how to do it well'.

#### *Why does it work?*

- The videos provide variety.
- This works particularly well for covering customer service and other behavioural skills.

#### *Integration with classroom training*


The e-learning is introduced to users during the classroom training sessions. Some of the practical exercises are intentionally carried out on the e-learning system rather than the training system. Users are also encouraged throughout the training to look for answers in the e-learning system.

*Accommodate different learning styles*



Figure 2. Give your users the choices they want. (Image created using free resources found on the Rapid E-Learning Blog).

## General tips for creating great e-learning content

	
Don't start without first finding out what your audience needs.	Know what you want to achieve then plan, prepare and create.
Don't use lots of different styles and layouts.	Choose a consistent look and feel throughout.
Take care with outsourcing it if regular maintenance is required (unless of course you have a limitless budget!).	Choose a tool that you can easily maintain.
Don't make it too easy or too hard.	Get the level just right for your audience.
It shouldn't contain too much information.	Create clear and concise content.
Don't create really large modules.	Create small modules with short tasks.
Don't focus on the features of a system.	Create task-based examples that are relevant and realistic.
Don't just use one type of media.	Use a variety of media. Hold your users' attention.
Don't make it too passive.	Let users practice what they are learning.
Don't just present facts and instructions.	Include challenging activities and scenarios.
Don't force users to work through every exercise.	Make it flexible and easy to use. Let users skip the bits they already know.

All the practical exercises covered in the classroom training are available in the e-learning system.

*Why does it work?*

- Users become familiar with navigating their way around the e-learning and are happy to use the e-learning as their first port of call when they need assistance.
- The trainers have a great contingency tool for those rare moments when the training system fails.

*Practical exercises*

In addition to the instructor-led practical exercises, covered in the classroom training, there is also a workbook containing extra practical exercises for users to work through.

*Why does it work?*

- This is particularly beneficial when the trainer has a group of users with varying objectives. Half the group can be working through exercises in the workbook while the trainer works through additional instructor-led exercises with the rest of the group.

*End of course assessments*

At the end of each classroom course, users work through a short online test. Results of the test are stored in the Learning Management System (LMS). Users are required to achieve a pass mark of 80% or over. End of course results

were consistently above average. Any users who did not achieve the pass mark were given additional coaching before being asked to re-sit the assessment. All users were successful on re-sitting the assessment.

*Why does it work?*

- Achieving the pass mark gives the users a great confidence boost.
- The training team can measure and manage users' progress.
- The system goes live with fully trained staff.

*'Business as usual' tool*

The really great thing about this e-learning tool is that not only is it used as part of the classroom training and for self-study purposes for new users, it is also a great asset as a 'business as usual' tool.

When I took part in Go-Live Support work I was able to see first-hand how valuable the e-learning is on an on-going basis.

*Why does it work?*

- E-learning is an excellent self-study tool for new staff.
- Existing staff can very quickly access the e-learning system and refresh their knowledge, or learn something new.

**Other ideas**

There is virtually no limit to what you can include in your e-learning. With the rapid

development of Web 2.0 concepts, there is a growing trend for more collaborative learning. Here are just a few ideas of the sorts of things you could also consider including in your e-learning:

- Social software applications (for example, Twitter, YouTube)
- Podcasts
- Quizzes
- Games
- Web Conferences (Webinars)

### Conclusions

If you want to create great e-learning this case study is an excellent example of the sorts of things you need to think about.

E-learning needs to be easy to use, well designed, and interactive with lots of different elements to hold the users' interest.

I am now a self-confessed convert to the powers of e-learning. So if like me, you were previously a closet e-learning sceptic then perhaps it is time to take another look at this medium.

My first encounter with e-learning was back in the days when it was called computer-based training (CBT). Things have moved apace since then so I would strongly recommend you take a look at what is out there now. You may be pleasantly surprised.

As I said at the beginning of this article, I'm not recommending any particular tools as there are just too many to mention. However, do have a look at what you have already got available at your disposal. It is possible to use PowerPoint as a base tool and if you already use an authoring tool then speak to your supplier. It may be that the functionality is already there or you may just need to buy an add-on.

So yes, you can replace a user guide with great e-learning. It just needs a little courage and the willingness to try something different. **C**

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### 10 Key points:

1. Remember the 3Ss — Storytelling, Simulations and Scenarios.
2. Know your audience and create clear messages to communicate to them.
3. Create engaging content.
4. Give your users choices so that they can learn in a way that suits their learning style — demonstrations, guided tours, hands-on.
5. Give users opportunities to check their progress on an on-going basis.
6. Integrate your processes and procedures.
7. Include different media, for example video clips.
8. Integrate e-learning into your classroom training.
9. Include end of course assessments to boost users' confidence and monitor their progress.
10. Keep it up-to-date so that it becomes a valuable 'business as usual' asset.

### Resources

If you missed the Technical Communications UK Conference in September 2010 all is not lost! There is an opportunity for you to have a look at some of the content from last year's Conference.

Many of the speakers have been kind enough to make their slide presentations available: <http://tinyurl.com/6e4njwo>

Some Technical Communications UK 2010 presentations are available on video. [www.technicalcommunicationuk.com/2010-videos](http://www.technicalcommunicationuk.com/2010-videos)

There are lots of e-learning resources out there on the internet, including some for free. I've just included a few that I like but it is well worth setting aside an afternoon to surf around the net to see what interests you.

How Stuff Works — How e-learning works  
<http://people.howstuffworks.com/elearning12.htm>

Elearning age — An e-learning magazine available online  
[www.elearningage.co.uk/home.aspx](http://www.elearningage.co.uk/home.aspx)

The e-learning coach — tips, advice and reviews for online learning.  
[http://theelearningcoach.com/elearning\\_design/10-sources-of-inspiration/](http://theelearningcoach.com/elearning_design/10-sources-of-inspiration/)

E-Learning Learning — A community collecting and organizing the best information on the web about e-learning.  
[www.elearninglearning.com/browse](http://www.elearninglearning.com/browse)

There is a wealth of resources available on The Rapid E-Learning Blog. For example, I found some lovely little hand-drawn men, hand-drawn letters and other hand-drawn shapes which I have used in Figure 2.

The Rapid E-Learning Blog — 5 time-saving tips from the e-learning community  
[www.articulate.com/rapid-elearning/5-time-saving-tips-from-the-e-learning-community/](http://www.articulate.com/rapid-elearning/5-time-saving-tips-from-the-e-learning-community/)

The Rapid E-Learning Blog — What everybody ought to know about using PowerPoint for e-learning  
[www.articulate.com/rapid-elearning/what-everybody-ought-to-know-about-using-powerpoint-for-e-learning](http://www.articulate.com/rapid-elearning/what-everybody-ought-to-know-about-using-powerpoint-for-e-learning)

E-Learning Heroes — Advice and ideas from the Articulate community. They have a very active forum and blog. <http://community.articulate.com>

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[www.freedigitalphotos.net](http://www.freedigitalphotos.net)