

A Guide to **Creating eLearning Content Efficiently**

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Introduction

There's more than one way to skin a cat and there's more than one way to create eLearning. As most organizations look to automate and improve efficiencies in all aspects of their business, many neglect the importance of doing the same with their learning programs.

Keep reading to learn about the benefits and best practices that high-performing L&D teams use to optimize and automate the way they build eLearning to drive business value, build high performing teams, and deliver great learning experiences.

Delivering Business Value

The value of creating eLearning content efficiently stretches beyond the training department and is critical to business and employee success. Efficient content creation will improve the overall effectiveness of the entire organization by:

Developing Business Agility

Having an efficient learning program means that your business is well-positioned to quickly make any necessary adjustments as a result of market conditions or changes in the business. This can come in the form of improving support to customers, changes to processes, and any other important factors that require immediate knowledge transfer to improve business outcomes.

Enabling Learners

It's no surprise that enabling learners is a key benefit since this is the main goal of most learning programs. However, doing so efficiently with the most up-to-date, relevant and personalized training can mean your learners achieve a greater level of understanding and improved productivity so they can spend more time doing their jobs effectively.

Cutting Costs (Saving Money)

Like most companies, you're always under pressure to cut costs and ultimately save money for the business. An efficient learning program and development process will accelerate projects and require fewer resources.

Benefits of Creating Content Efficiently

Automating Development and Delivery

We're currently at the beginning of the age of automation. Everything we do is being automated, from buying groceries to driving a car.

To be successful with automation, every piece of information needs to be organized in an understandable and standardized format so that all your content works together as one.

In the world of eLearning, this means organizing your content in one central location. Sometimes referred to as a Learning Content Management System or cloud-based authoring tools that utilize a central library, most often cloud-based as a public, private, or hybrid solution.

It's important to understand that when you make the decision to automate and manage content development and delivery, you're undertaking what could be a substantial shift in the way you develop content.

And while great technology and tools can go a long way, it will take more than technology to make a successful transition. This may require but not be limited to, creating new processes for developing eLearning, training and applying a change management strategy to ensure a successful transition and take advantage of the technology.



Managing Content Centrally

Many organizations still have content creators and teams that lock content away on servers or on their own hard drives.

Content that sits in desktop folders and shared drives rely on people to follow proper processes to ensure content is up-to-date, accessible, backed up, and secure. In this scenario, applying permissions, managing access to content, tracking versions, ensuring files are properly backed up, and making updates can be a nightmare.

Organizations have much more flexibility and greater control over their content when authors store all learning assets to a central location.

When content is stored centrally and integrated with a content management system, these problems are easily prevented, provided each team member understands the value of placing content at the center of your learning strategy.

Protecting Company Assets and Retaining Knowledge

You won't find a salesperson that doesn't use a CRM System (Customer Relationship Management) to gather and store all prospect and customer information. Companies pay salespeople well to collect this intelligence. If a salesperson were to move to another company without this crucial information stored in a CRM, years of work can walk out the door along with them.

The same can be said for training assets and expert knowledge that can be found within your training content. What happens if an employee leaves the company or their computer crashes? Could this employee leave with the information or delete it? Is there a backup strategy in place?

If you've ever had a consultant or outside subject matter expert (SME) work on an eLearning project or ever plan to, then this is something that needs to be considered. Companies need to ensure that these assets are protected and stay with the company.

You can't build content efficiently if you can't find it. Storing content centrally solves this problem by ensuring all your content is developed using one system that is accessible and easily found.



Security, Permissions and Roles

Learning content like most content can contain sensitive information that needs to be limited to the right people.

It's equally important that the right roles are provided to the right people when the content is being created so that someone can't inadvertently make a mistake.

Mistakes like these cost time and money and produce headaches, not efficiencies.

Most modern systems will provide a robust set of permissions and roles by projects that ensure the right people are working on the right content. Many will also allow you to manage versions so that in the event that individual pages of content are overwritten, changed, or deleted, you will be able to undelete and roll back to a previous version.

eLearning Standards

Any company that's creating eLearning, and has a lot of learners is most certainly using a Learning Management System (LMS) for administration, tracking, documentation, and reporting. Not to be confused with a Learning Content Management System (LCMS), which is generally reserved for creating and managing learning content.

Once content is created it is generally launched from within the LMS. In order for the LMS and content to communicate, they follow an eLearning standard or specification such as SCORM, xAPI, or AICC. The content is packaged and sent to the LMS for delivery. By following a consistent set of standards when communicating with your LMS, you can alleviate any deliverability and tracking issues that could arise.

Updating Content and Managing Versions

Today's learning organizations must adjust to the rapidly changing content requirements of their audiences. Whether it's evolving regulations, product updates, or changing business drivers, training departments must deliver content that is relevant and useful — with little or no delay.

With content managed centrally, you can update a content element once, and that content then replicates on each and every 'page' in which it is presented. Compare this to the task of updating a logo on the "master slide" in PowerPoint and having it replicate on the header of each slide versus having to go into each slide and make the change. Now imagine the productivity benefits of having that power to manage all course content. On the other side, imagine having to manually edit in hundreds or thousands of places.

Leveraging Better Data

Understanding how your learners use and interact with training is a modern and often overlooked way to create content efficiently. Imagine you invested the time and money in a series of 10-minute videos and created 100s of these videos and only later learned that 80% of them were never viewed past the first 30 seconds. This would mean a lot of time and money wasted for no real value. That's the power of data and understanding how to better create the right content for the right moment of need. Without this data, you may never know.

Having a lot of data about your users and how they interact with your content is great but only if you can make sense of the data. By storing your content in a central location you'll ensure that each piece of content was created, stored, and provides consistent data that can be leveraged to gain a better understanding about your learners and how best to improve knowledge transfer.

Scalability

Something every organization should consider planning for is the inevitability that your business and learning program will grow. As you grow, so to will:

- The amount of content that needs to be managed, including courses, job-aids, images, audio, video, and much more.
- The number of authors, subject manager experts (SMEs), reviewers, and other stakeholders.
- The number of regions and languages where your content will be delivered
- Additional requirements for other types of content.
- The need to continually revise and update content across hundreds or even thousands of courses.

Getting Started Creating Efficiently

Questions to Ask Before Beginning a New Project

There are many things that should be considered before a new project begins and proper planning in advance of any new project can save substantial time and money down the road. Here are some things to consider at the start of a new project:

- 1 Do we have any existing materials that we can leverage in our new project within our own department or other departments within our organization?
- 2 How can we create new content that can be applied to future projects?
- 3 How can we create content to accelerate knowledge transfer?
- 4 Can we apply assessments to understand existing knowledge or make some content optional?
- 5 Can or will this content be used for other training applications such as partner and customer training?
- 6 Can or will this content be used for other training applications such as partner and customer training?
- 7 Can content be used for different delivery formats such as instructor-led training, product guides, presentations, course manuals, or print materials?
- 8 If content was packaged in a different way could it be used by Sales, Marketing or other departments and create additional efficiencies across the organization?



Audit Existing Content

If you've already made eLearning and have content hiding in different parts of your organization, then you're going to want to do an audit to see where things stand.

This may include, but no be limited to:

Understanding what eLearning courses or other types of digital learning content, are actively being used or in production.

Understanding what region or language each piece of content is being used for.

Understanding what group is responsible for each piece of content.

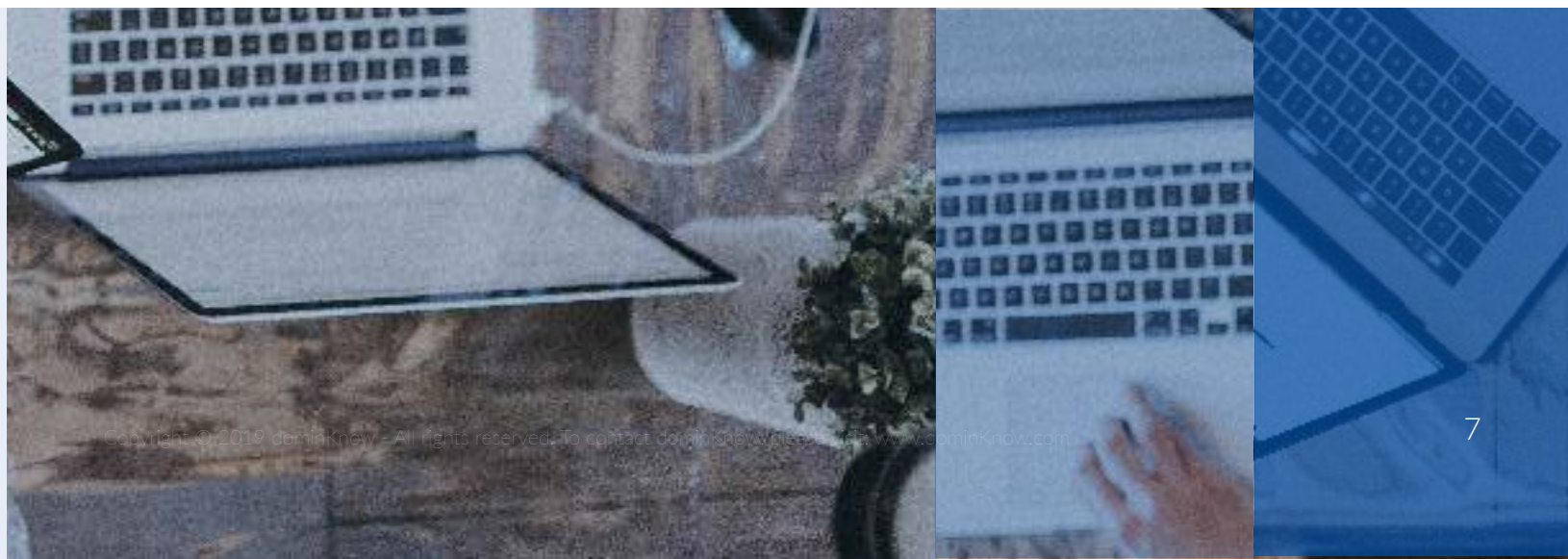
Understanding what outside consultants were involved in projects.

Understanding the audience for each piece of content.

Understanding the purpose of each piece of content.

With all these factors considered, you'll be in a better position to organize the content going forward.

Taking special care to do this audit and organize the content properly will pay dividends down the road when you're scaling your learning.



Project Management and Managing the Lifecycle of your Content

As with any project, an eLearning project should be well defined with processes, deliverables, budgets, assignments, and timelines in place to ensure your projects stay on task and on time.

You may already have existing methodologies in place that you can leverage with some authoring systems that have built-in tools to help you manage people and projects in the same system.

Some common steps in the lifecycle of eLearning development can include:



To really optimize the way you create content, understanding which phase of the lifecycle a course is in, how long it takes to move between lifecycles, managing when to update content, and how content reuse is leveraged, are all important factors to improving the development process, reducing duplication, and eliminating bottlenecks.

Many systems will track and report on these areas, and allow teams to continually improve the way they develop content.

When done properly, management integrated with your authoring system can lead to dramatic improvements in efficiency.

Collaboration and Review

Almost every eLearning project involves multiple team members, and while there are still content developers that work alone, team-based development models have become the norm because they can leverage the collective skills and expertise of many team members.

Many organizations struggle to produce rapid learning, due largely to the time needed to gather content from SMEs and manage review cycles.

By adopting a collaborative, cloud-based workspace where all writing, editing and reviewer comments are input and available in one place, a content production team can greatly reduce the time needed for production.

Imagine eliminating the need for amalgamating multiple versions of tracked changes in a word processing document, or worse, having each reviewer try to describe their edits in an e-mail. More advanced workflow functionality comes complete with the ability to automatically notify team members of assigned tasks.

To make the most of the time and dollars spent on learning programs, all learning stakeholders (authors, subject matter experts, sponsors) need to be able to easily engage in the development process. Without effective collaboration and review workflows, it's common to experience prolonged projects, unnecessary meetings, uncertain tasks, and confusion over versions. Built-in collaborative workflow and reviews can:

- Reduce or eliminate confusion having everything organized in one place.
- Accelerate the development process.
- Easily identify all feedback in one place
- Allows multiple authors/contributors to work on a project at the same time.
- Provide project workflow to allow for collaborative content authoring and controlled review, edits, and publishing cycles.
- Allows the project manager to assign roles, assign tasks, send notifications, set deadlines, track changes and provide reporting on the status of a project.
- Easily add new reviewers that can provide feedback through a simple interface that doesn't require any experience with the tool.

Like any project, an eLearning project's success and speed of development can be greatly affected by collaboration. And while there is no replacement for proper project management methodologies and processes, a good tool will enable your team to work effectively and efficiently together.

Leveraging Single-Source, Multi-Purpose Content

Stuck in inflexible pages, much of today's learning content remains trapped in traditional formal vehicles like eLearning courses or presentations. As a result, learning content and the time and effort that goes into it is often poorly leveraged. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Organizations are understanding the importance content plays as a competitive differentiator and are using tools and processes that allow them to gather, create, organize, disperse, and re-use learning content in multiple ways, across multiple learning vehicles, and devices. These tools leverage the central management of content, learning objects and other assets to support the creation of single-source, multi-purpose content for both formal and informal learning experiences for different moments of need:

- Web content and information oriented materials available anytime anywhere on demand
- Presentation-oriented content used to facilitate instructor-led events
- Printable versions of content for quick guides and use in areas where electronic devices aren't appropriate
- Supporting materials for before, after and during instructor-led events
- Performance support portals for searchable access to content on demand
- Formal learning content in an LMS
- Mobile ready content for offline access
- Micro learning exercises, with content broken into smaller chunks enabling on the job learning programs

Content that takes advantage of content managed centrally, resides in a database. Each content object is tagged and stored as a unit of information that can be pulled into different themes and templates to create these different learning experiences.

This is one of the most powerful ways to gain efficiency while creating different types of content for different moments of learner needs.



Reusing and Updating Content

Reusing content is a fast way to create new content or use existing content for a different purpose.

No matter how new a course may be, there's often elements of another piece of content that can be reused from another pre-existing source.

It's relatively easy if there are only a few content developers who share files, but it can be quite complex with numerous developers and courses. Especially if this content resides on a network, PC, or in an unknown location. Content often changes over time, requiring manual re-entry. Something as simple as a logo update or a policy change can affect hundreds or more versions of a course, requiring hours of manual updates. With a system that manages all of your content together, this can mean minutes instead of hours.

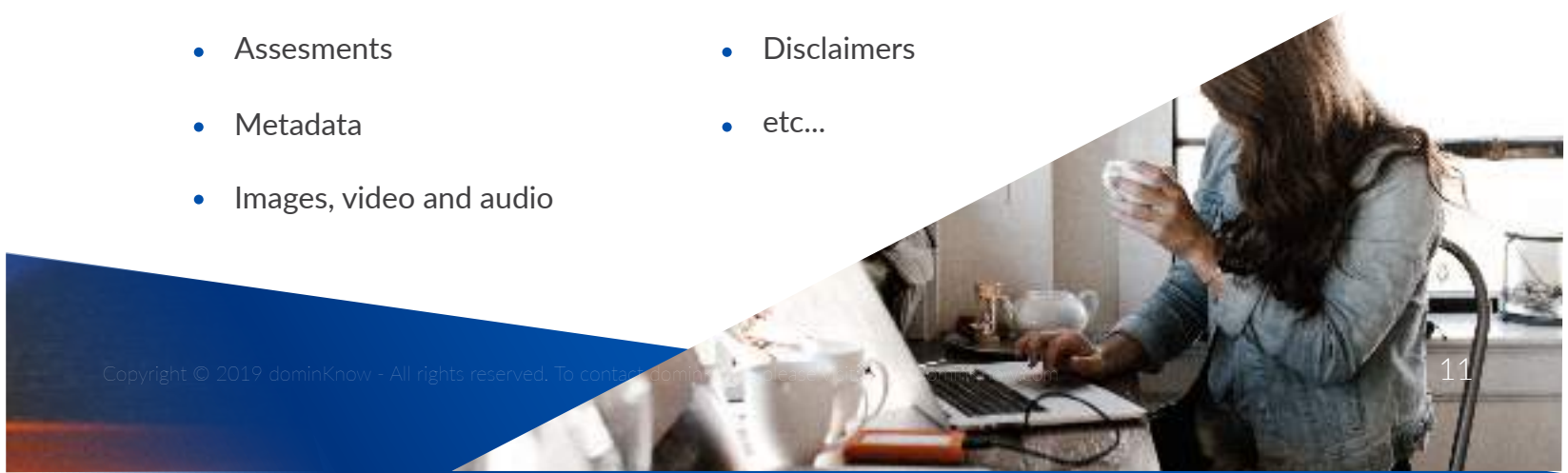
Manually locating and updating content defeats the point of reuse. Saving time, reducing rework, and sharing learning content across all projects are pivotal to efficiency and the pillar of cloud-based systems. Asset libraries promote flexible keyword tags and categorization, ensuring that content is consistent, logical, and easily searchable. Updating content one time results in automatic updates in every location.

With this content-centered approach, learning objects exist in a central repository where authors can reuse, repurpose, and share content to quickly create new content and eliminate duplication of work. Asset reuse generally involves:

- Centralizing storage of media files
- Tracking usage
- Simplifying update processes

Content is created and stored as reusable learning object components:

- Learning content
- Assessments
- Metadata
- Images, video and audio
- Navigation
- Disclaimers
- etc...



You'll need your training team to completely buy into the strategic value of content reuse and once your strategy is in place, you need to educate the rest of the organization on the possibilities that exist. To illustrate, in most organizations the training department or decentralized training group has little influence to create a new product offering. They may not see the opportunity to create new content by converting learning content for internal staff to content for customers/partners. You may need to be the champion for change in your organization.

Serving Multiple Audience Needs

If you're already creating content for global audiences, you know the challenges this can present when creating, managing, and updating content for different regions and different languages. And, if you're planning to expand your training program as your business grows, then you'll want to plan for it.

Choosing the right system that takes advantage of centrally managed content will allow you to organize your content, manage versions, and enable your translation team to easily work together as part of the content development process. Content is organized hierarchically based on master versions and localized versions enabling for easier management of your overall program and the ability to reuse elements (ex: graphics) that don't need to be localized.

If you want to create a new version, you'll still be able to manage the core content and easily make updates to images, logos, buttons etc, without having to make changes to individual courses.

Building Modularized Training

Creating modularized training means creating content in smaller bite-sized chunks that can function independently, or by taking existing longer form content and chopping it into individual chunks. Whereas traditional long-form content can take a scaffolded approach as one piece of content is dependant on the other.

The idea of modularized training has been around for years as is another model often used to explain how the majority of learning comes from on-the-job experience, known as the 70-20-10 model. The 70-20-10 model is the reality that most learning (70%) comes from on the job experience, (20%) from developmental or social learning, and (10%) from informal training that has been organized. On the job experiences and social learning benefit greatly from having the appropriate information and content to support these experiences, but traditional designs and deployments don't typically meet this need.

The modularized approach can help authors tap into this additional 90% of learning that happens through the creation of informal learning that is smaller, just-in-time learning which can be deployed in an on-demand searchable format that doesn't disrupt the normal flow of work like formal training can.

There are several reasons why this approach is more efficient and effective:

- Flexibility to use content for formal or informal training.
- Ability to adapt training to different audiences and groups.
- Smaller chunks of content can be easily assembled and deployed quickly without having to start from scratch.
- Smaller chunks of content are digestible and more suited for solving a specific problem versus detailed objectives and information, making it easier to create multiple types of informal training.
- Content is easier to share when it's in a smaller format.
- Modularized content can allow users to pick and choose from more specific areas of focus without being forced through more content than required.
- Content can be updated and revised without pulling existing content offline.

Again, it's important to plan in advance and take a wider view of other existing or future requirements that could take advantage of this approach.

Creating Responsive Content

With more and more learners using mobile devices or switching between different devices for learning, the need for authors to design responsively isn't just a trend, it's a must.

Not only does content created responsively improve learning experiences across all device types and screen sizes, but also means that authors only need to create content once. This can improve efficiency and the time it takes to design content since responsive content adapts seamlessly across different devices like smartphones, tablets, and desktops. Whereas, a traditional formal course may only be optimized for desktop screens. Further, responsive design opens up countless new ways of designing content that better fits the needs of informal learning situations and micro learning.

Of course, when it comes to designing responsive content, designers are dealing with a different set of rules compared to the traditional course or slides-based approach. Here are some factors to consider:

- Pages work as a fluid grid (not exact positioning, as there are no traditional layering designs).
- Design for the smallest size screen first.
- Use flexible images that are appropriate for different device widths.
- Optimize images for quicker loading time.
- Only include essential information and simplified navigation.
- Ensure buttons are large enough to click.
- Making sure interactions can be easily performed on the smallest device.
- Open yourself to designing longer content pages, searchable topic-oriented designs, and leveraging new possibilities for content approaches responsive design offers.

Using Standardized Themes/Templates

Creating standardized themes and templates is another way to create efficiencies as well as keeping content consistent and following brand guidelines. Companies can create different templates for different purposes so that there is more than one design depending on how the content is to be used.

Standardized themes and templates allow authors to quickly get started while keeping a consistent look and feel with branding associated with their organization. Organizations can create baselines of templates and themes and target them towards different teams so they get a jump start on their content development and retain the consistent approach preferred by the organization.

Be careful your content doesn't get stale and be sure revisit your templates at least 1-2 times per year.

Final Thoughts

It's About Creating Great Learning Experiences

How your organization gathers, creates, organizes and disperses content to support its business, training, and individual goals can mean the difference between market leadership and failure.

Keep in mind that it's not just about creating great eLearning, it's about building and sharing great learning experiences and maximizing your content use and value throughout the organization and across departments.

No matter what method you use to create your training or how efficiently you create it, it's all about creating great learning experiences.

So, at the end of the day if the learning experience is poor or incorrectly targeted, then no amount of efficiencies will help.

