Guide to Identifying Good Training Content

hsi

"Does my training make a difference?"

Look at your training program and ask yourself,

"Is this stuff any good? Is it making a difference for my employees?

How do we know if we're not sure what to look for?"

Online training vendors are everywhere. Deciding which courses to buy and which to avoid is as confusing as buying a used car. Unfortunately, buying a lemon in training is just as easy as buying one with a used car. And, you won't know you have a lemon until you've used the training for a while – when someone makes a mistake, or an accident happens.

The good news is, whether you're searching for online or instructor-led training, you can look for concrete attributes that are more reliable than kicking the tires.

5 Key Questions for **Identifying Good Training Content**:

1. Is it developed by instructional designers and subject matter experts?

2. Does it have measurable learning objectives?

3. Does it have clear evaluation standards?

4. Does it have the content you need without extra fluff?

5. Does it stick?

1 – Is the Training Developed by Instructional Designers and Subject Matter Experts?

Many people think they can design and develop training, but, in reality, quality instructional design takes education, experience, and skills the average person doesn't have. Just because someone can use training development software, doesn't mean they're an expert. Just like someone who can throw a football, isn't Tom Brady.

However, instructional designers aren't experts in all content areas. They need subject matter experts, or SMEs, to provide accurate, detailed knowledge to the training.

Instructional designers and SMEs work as a team to determine what to teach and how to teach it.

To make sure you're investing in the best training for your employees, ask "who designed it?" Does the development team include professional instructional designers? Do they follow a systematic approach to training, which includes analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation? Skipping any of these steps can lead to disorganized, ineffective training.

The SME brings personal experience and workplace knowledge to the mix. In many companies, internal training is often designed and delivered by industry veterans. These trainers understand the subject matter, contributing content level and accuracy, but usually have little experience in basic instructional design and delivery.

Here's where the partnership comes into play: instructional designers help SMEs craft the message to encourage interaction and knowledge retention. Take the utility industry: an SME may be an exceptional system operator with a stellar engineering background and loads of information on a specific topic. This is great for training content, however the information must be organized and designed to make sense to the learner, not to mention delivered with visual representations so employees can understand the content.

Instructional designers and SMEs make sure the training provides a balanced level of content – between ensuring the workforce is adequately trained, but not wasting time and money on information that isn't critical.

Without equal input from both instructional designers and SMEs, you'll be dealing with a training lemon.

2 – Does the Training Start with **Measurable Learning Objectives**?

Is there an objective to all this? Like most things, developing good training requires good planning. Designing and developing effective training has many tried and true methods, but most of them have a common thread. When you're looking at training courses, you should be able to easily see that thread. Look for three basic parts:

ONE **Desired Behavior**	TWO **Behavior Condition**	THREE **Performance Level**
What the learner will be able to do/demonstrate	Under what conditions the behavior will occur	Criteria for evaluating how well the behavior will be performed

Desired outcomes can take many different forms, but in most common training programs, it means goals and objectives. Learning objectives can cover a wide spectrum of outcomes. For instance, you might need workers to memorize the steps of a procedure or recognize different colors associated with safety signs.

Memorization and recognition are usually considered low level learning objectives. However, you might need an employee to gather evidence at an accident scene and use sophisticated analyses to determine the root causes of the accident. That training would need a high-level objective.

We could spend a lot of time covering the proper way to develop and write learning objectives, but we have a separate white paper that does that. _(See Writing Learning Objectives)._ For our purposes here, we'll keep it simple.

Whether a training program has been designed to help learners achieve high level objectives or low-level objectives, or any level in between, the objectives for the program should all have the same characteristics.

Training objectives are no different than any other goal we set. Whether through an evaluation, activity, or knowledge check, we need to know if we got there.

Learning objectives should:

- Be stated as simply as appropriate for the intended audience, using language and terms the learner understands

- Use specific, active verbs such as analyze, describe, increase

- Be specific and unambiguous, so the intended outcome is clear

- Be measurable

Learning Objective Examples
Here are good and bad examples of learning objectives.

Task – the learner will learn to drive a car

☑ **Good:**

The training will demonstrate how to safely drive a car in accordance with vehicle manuals and state highway safety laws

☒ **Bad:**

The trainee will safely drive a car

Task – the learner will direct transmission switching

☑ **Good:**

Given a set of initial conditions, the learner will be able to direct transmission switching without error

☒ **Bad:**

The operator will direct switching

Task – the learner will use a ladder

☑ **Good:**

The learner will safely use a ladder following company procedures

☒ **Bad:**

The learner will use a ladder

3 – Does the Training Have Clear Evaluation Standards?

How do you know your training works? Most workplace training should use evaluative tools, like exams, to determine if workers are reaching an acceptable level of knowledge to be safe and productive in the workplace. For effective training, learning objectives and evaluations must fit together.

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The learning objective tells the learner what must be achieved, and the evaluation tells the learner if they achieved it.

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When you're looking for quality training content, compare the course objectives to the methods of evaluation. Each learning objective must be evaluated – and it must be evaluated in proportion to the importance of the objective. For instance, an objective that requires learners to "list primary colors" is probably less important than one that requires the learner to "list the color of wire to cut to defuse this bomb." For the second objective, you want to be sure the learner demonstrates the proper knowledge.

Not only should learning objectives be measured, they need to be measured properly. For example, you can't measure someone's physical skills using a multiple-choice examination. You also don't want to waste time and money measuring simple knowledge objectives with elaborate simulation. When you buy online training, don't pay for things you don't need.

If your training courses focus on understanding concepts and are evaluated with tests, make sure the test bank has enough questions. The training should have enough questions to create three or four versions with a 50% difference in questions from test to test. The questions should also be randomized.

As a rule, each objective question pool should have at least twice as many questions as will be asked for that objective on each test.

Bottom line: training vendors should be able to easily prove their evaluations confidently measure learner achievement against established learning objectives.

4 – Does It Have the Content You Need without Extra Fluff?

Now, all you have to do is make sure the course content matches the learning objectives and evaluations and you're done building your online course, right? Not quite. Remember when we talked about how important it is for instructional designers and SMEs to work together as a team? Content development is where it really shows. Effective content design is a balancing act between not enough and too much. The training should have all the content learners need to meet the learning objective, but not so much they have trouble identifying the key points.

In the training world, unbalanced content usually translates into extra costs for you.

It's easy to see the challenges coming from training with not enough content. You have to compensate with additional materials or programs. Nothing is more frustrating than providing training for your employees, just to find out you have to add on because it didn't cover everything they need to know. You're incurring additional costs, whether it's purchasing training to cover what's missing, taking experienced workers off their job to provide additional on-the-job training, or having employees sit in additional classroom training instead of meeting their responsibilities.

But how does too much content create extra costs? Like not enough content, too much content takes workers away from their day-to-day responsibilities. Training that could be completed in two hours but takes four hours because a trainer is throwing in everything related to that topic eats into your team's productivity. Plus, they have to sift through the information to find the key pieces they need to perform their job safely and efficiently. Instructional designers are critical to helping trainers determine **Need to Know** *versus* **Nice to Know**.

Since technical accuracy is a must for any training, we won't dwell on it here. However, keep in mind that you're ultimately responsible for the training you provide to your employees. Most vendors make a good faith effort to keep their content current and accurate. You should keep track of events, such as changes to state or federal regulations, which might affect your training content. Make sure any necessary changes are made to your programs, or you're working with a training vendor who tracks new developments related to regulatory requirements and updates course content accordingly.

5 – Does the Training Stick?

"Tell me and I'll forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I'll understand."

Your training program's goal is to make sure your workers have the skills and knowledge they need to be safe and productive on the job. Good evaluations based on clear learning objectives assure you your employees have an acceptable level of knowledge at that time.

What about six or eight months down the road? Two weeks? Skills and knowledge retention from training is critical. Interactivity and engagement are training program attributes that can impact retention. A good training program will have activities at key times that require the learner to demonstrate or practice relevant skills. These activities can be as simple as questions or as complicated as full simulations.

Training program development should be anchored by this maxim: at least one interactive activity per learning objective. More important objectives should have several activities.

How to Engage Learners

Activities don't have to be difficult to be effective, but they do have to be relevant and support the learning objective. The activity's objective shouldn't get lost in the design, especially in eLearning.

For instance, we once designed a training program where the objective was to familiarize the learner with a series of warning signs and the potential hazards each
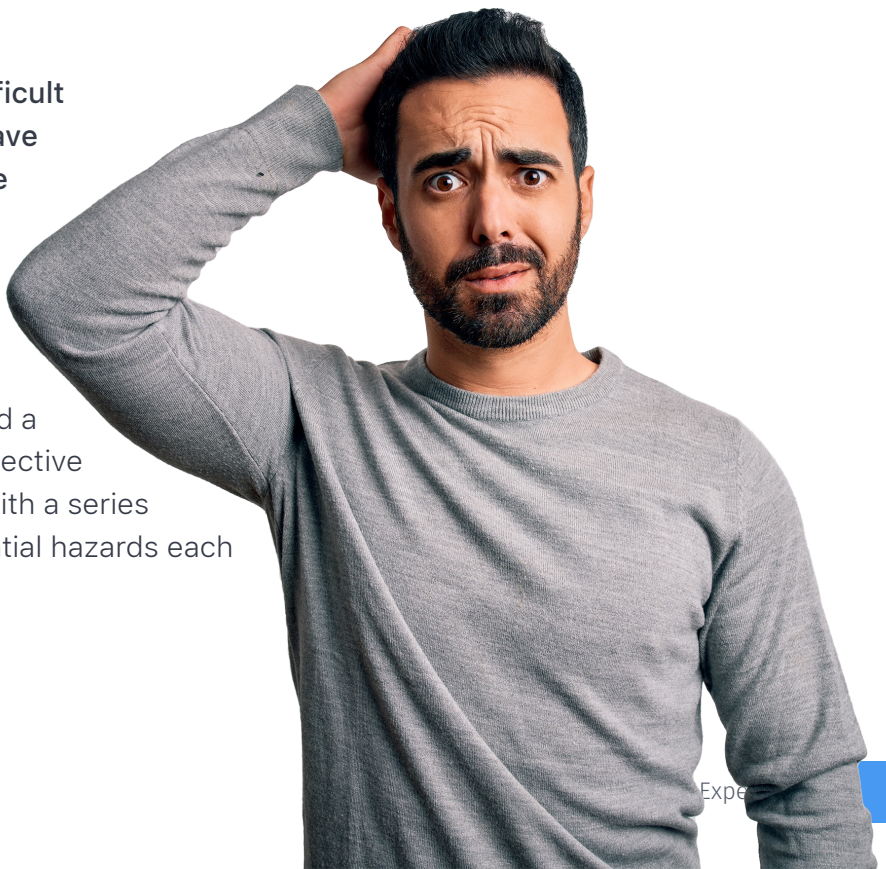
sign represented. We designed a concentration-style game where the object was to match signs and reveal the puzzle underneath. While the activity was fun for the learners, we soon realized it didn't help them reach the objective. After completing the activity, the learners still couldn't recognize the signs and match them to the hazards.

Building Engagement:
Better Training, Smarter Workforce

Most of today's workforce grew up with easy access to entertainment. It seems to take increasingly sophisticated programs to keep learners engaged because their expectations are so high. We've been involved in the design and development of hundreds of training classes over the last 20 years and can tell you designing engagement is almost always the hardest part of the project. We've used comedy, drama, emotion, games, history, music, friendly characters, and more.

Of course, the real problem is people themselves. **Different things are engaging to different people, and everyone learns differently.** Some people are annoyed by things other people find engaging. For example, for one course, we created a humorous medieval theme, complete with knights, damsels, and horses. We received so much feedback we decided to survey the learners. We were surprised to find the results were evenly split; half the learners loved it, half hated it, with no middle ground. The half that loved it said it was engaging and fun. The half that hated it said they thought it was a waste of time and money. (Of course, we think the latter half is all scientists and engineers.)

Organizations typically purchase more than one course for their workers. They invest in a library of courses. If every course in the library is developed the same way, even with a high level of engagement, solid learning objectives, and a fair and clear evaluation, the training would get boring. Many regulatory driven courses

must be taken annually by employees – does your training vendor create content to keep annual training engaging and interesting, increasing its stickiness?

The best online learning for adults in the workplace should have multiple courses on key topics, providing different styles of course design and multiple levels of interactivity. Not every topic is taught best in the exact same way. You don't want to teach understanding harassment the same way you teach the proper way to wear a safety harness. Variety is the spice of life and can be a key factor in memorable training that connects with every employee.

The lesson:
Uniquely themed courses should be used sparingly and mixed in with other themes.

How long does it take to build eLearning?

Many industry professionals use a specific ratio as a baseline. One source for the baseline is the Chapman Alliance .

According to Chapman, eLearning training can take anywhere from 49 to 716 development hours to create one hour of training. That's a wide range, but the hours depend on how complex the training is, including the level of interaction, animation, and simulation. As the industry gathers more data to better understand the development process and the type/level of content being developed, discussion will continue about how long it takes to develop eLearning.

Stages of Interactivity in eLearning

Below is a summary of eLearning Industry's four levels of interactivity.
The first three are most commonly used in organizations.

Level 1   Passive eLearning Interactivity

This level doesn't have interactivity. It is direct, clear, content-based training. Learners are furnished with various content-based assets such as broad research and prevalent web journals. This level may include connections to recordings, podcasts, basic pictures, and illustrations. It may include test questions.

Level 2   Limited eLearning Interactivity

This stage has limited participation. In this level, learners might be required to associate with the learning condition through interactive problem areas, movements, and interactions with sight and sound. This interactivity provides a level of control to the learner.

Level 3   Moderate to Full eLearning Interactivity

Moderate interaction takes place at this stage. Learners have marginally more control over their learning knowledge. These eLearning courses are more modified and modern. This level may include energized video, altered sound, complex simplified cooperation, reenactments, stories, scenarios, and multimedia.

Level 4   Full eLearning Interactivity

Learners may have full control over their learning environment. They are required to collaborate with the screen at each progression of the instruction. They are given appropriate feedback that guides them in basic leadership.

Interactivity at this level includes interactive diversions, recreated work execution, modified sound or recordings, symbols, stories and situations, and interactive media.

Let's summarize the attributes you should look for when selecting training courses.

1. **Check the credentials of the design and development teams.** Instructional design education and experience is a must. SME involvement is also critical – they make training relevant and accurate.

2. **Learning objectives should be clear and measurable.** Learners must understand what they are expected to learn in their training.

3. **Evaluations should tie back to the learning objectives and measure knowledge and skills appropriately.** Don't use a multiple-choice test to measure a physical skill.

4. **Content needs to focus on the objectives**. It should be clear, accurate, and complete. It should also have the correct balance of content – not too much and not too little. Remember, need to know versus nice to know.

5. **Training must engage the learners through interactivity.** However, the interactivity needs to be focused and relevant. Engaging content is a plus, but not if it's overdone. Evaluate the engagement for your employees and decide if it fits your environment.

Training is a big investment, and you want to maximize your efforts. Use these five attributes as a guide, and you will be rewarded with a productive, reliable workforce.

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