

How to launch eLearning globally with limited resources

More or less really is possible! Rokas Buciunas shares the lessons he learnt from launching eLearning in 10 countries simultaneously, with no budget for training or travel. He went on to win the Charity Learning Award 2016 for Organisational buy-in, for raising the profile of L&D at the charity Restless Development.

Does launching eLearning with a limited budget and capacity sound scary to you? You are not alone! L&D professionals often need to overcome what at first seems like an unrealistic ask. Yet some of the most creative ideas come from not quite enough time and money.

At Restless Development, a global agency for youth-led development, we have recently launched eLearning from the Charity Learning Consortium to 400 staff across 10 countries and multiple regional offices. We didn't have a training budget, nor a full-time L&D professional in place. Moreover, geographical disparity across our offices was a significant barrier, given our limited resources and time.

Because of the nature of our agency, the majority of our staff are under 32, often hired on potential. Our belief is that young people can and must lead development. We wanted to offer eLearning to them to better support their professional development.

Over the course of seven months, from the approval of the eLearning idea to its implementation in May 2016, we faced and overcame barriers which truly put our vision to the test. As our eLearning site is now up and running, I would like to share the four key lessons we learnt from our global launch with no budget:

1. eLearning is designed by everyone for everyone

Limited staff capacity in our team was seen as an exciting opportunity to seek allies in other departments outside of L&D's remit. Before the launch, we organised a global staff competition to create an exciting eLearning identity, which was selected by everyone in the agency. We asked our in-house marketing department to design our brand. Over 40 volunteers from various teams in every country office were recruited to help our team champion and launch eLearning globally. Our collaborative approach was the most effective advertising technique as the majority of staff were already engaged with eLearning, even before its launch. As other teams helped us build the site, they were essentially creating the platform that they wanted to use and felt the ownership of the project's success. Our call for support was not deemed as a sign of our inability to launch this initiative on our own. On the contrary, other teams felt it was a truly consultative and inclusive process which ensured diverse learning needs across different countries were respected and considered.

2. Junior staff are at the heart of launching eLearning

You may wonder how we managed to recruit so many eLearning ambassadors. We trusted the most junior staff from every country to deliver the project. It was crucial that senior leadership fully bought-into the project, and essential for them to champion eLearning to turn this into a success. But when it came to practical implementation, management teams were stretched with too many burning priorities to give the time and energy that was necessary to launch it.

That was why, under the name of Global Superhero Club, we recruited and supported junior staff from 10 countries who promoted eLearning and trained up other colleagues in their country offices. We presented this as a structured development opportunity for young employees to gain marketing and facilitation skills, and earn more exposure within their offices. This meant a finance officer in Uganda, for example, learnt how to lead a training session for 50 people, when usually he would never have such an opportunity in his work. Programme officers in Nepal were given a chance to increase their profile in the office by teaching their senior management teams how to use our eLearning site. These important drivers created an engaged voluntary task force which drove eLearning success, with immense levels of enthusiasm.



3. The power of fun

Over the course of the project we learnt not to underestimate the power of fun. When you cannot offer financial incentives, nothing motivates people more than a chance to have fun with a task at hand.

That was why our project team was called not a task force but a superhero club. Junior staff loved the idea of collecting points for completed superhero missions, such as inviting a certain number of staff into the project team. They were also excited to wear superhero capes in our project meetings. More staff were proactive in our eLearning name competition than in other office campaigns, perhaps because the initiative was accompanied with a cake for all participants, alongside prizes for the best name nominations. As the project's momentum sometimes dilutes over a longer period of time, our light-hearted games and competitions served as positive interventions, necessary to maintain high staff engagement throughout months of preparation prior to the launch.

Our staff engagement tactics worked well in the London office, where our team was based, but we wanted to share the same level of excitement across nine other countries. Without a chance to fly over to remote offices and meet eLearning ambassadors in person, our training sessions had to be done online. Arranging virtual training for over 40 volunteers scattered across different time zones was no mean feat. As we faced a heavy workload, it was tempting to send a detailed mass email to everyone, with a click of a button. Instead, we challenged ourselves to limit email communications to a minimum.

It was easier said than done. After grappling with an unreliable internet connection, numerous cut offs and many rearrangements, we realised it was a substantial investment in time to meet and brief our eLearning ambassadors

over Skype calls. However, it was the best decision we made. It was certainly easier to explain the launch process in a real-time Q&A. But more importantly, video calls presented an excellent opportunity to connect with our international counterparts and build strong relationships. This resulted in a shared feeling of excitement over the project. In the midst of their busy planning and budgeting season, seeing every step of all 10 launch preparations completed in time was an incredible achievement, considering staff's participation was only voluntary.





4. Your brand is King

We knew from the start that eLearning needed its own identity, to represent our global employee base. We let our staff create and vote for their favourite eLearning name. Maarifa Platform was picked as people’s most liked choice. Representing one of our country programmes, Maarifa means knowledge in Swahili, the official language of Tanzania. We then asked for our marketing team to help us create a logo and a slogan which spoke to our agency’s brand. Once that was done, we dropped the name ‘eLearning’ and now use Maarifa Platform in all our communications. The name quickly became part of our office jargon because the staff themselves voted for it.

The look and feel of our eLearning platform was of huge importance. We personalised everything we could to make eLearning look like an extension of our agency’s website rather than an external entity. Instead of using random stock photos to represent eLearning modules, we captured photos from our field work and ran an office-wide photoshoot to allow our colleagues to become the face of Maarifa Platform. Even the font and colours of the eLearning website represented our agency’s brand. Thinking about the brand was a crucial and rather simple way of achieving more buy-in from our employees.

Prior to the launch, we devised a global communications plan to raise awareness of eLearning on a regular basis. We made eLearning announcements in our monthly newsletters, shared the eLearning news in management meetings and office-wide training days. We even had good old office posters to ensure everyone was exposed to eLearning. But the most effective tool of all was our group of volunteers who started to champion eLearning months before its launch.

The difference we made: launching the culture of learning

After months of training our volunteers, setting up the system and promoting eLearning, the big launch day finally arrived. It was not an email announcement, a poster, or a mere training session for all our staff: tied in with Learning at Work Week, our first day of eLearning entailed 13 launch events, taking place in 10 countries simultaneously around the globe, driven by 40 junior volunteers.

Our eLearning training sessions were turned into a competition where our staff learnt about our new site



as they completed missions, such as finding the right modules and saving their progress correctly. This made our training seem interactive, hands-on and fun. Those who needed more support could later book in one-on-one training sessions with our eLearning ambassadors.

The launch events sparked a change in our agency's culture of learning. For our staff to engage in e-learning, we first got everyone excited about learning and sharing knowledge of any form. During the launch we ran a skill share session during which our employees wrote down the skills they wanted to gain and the skills they were willing to share. A surprising variety of our staff's hobbies, talents and life ambitions, within and beyond their work remit, sparked a huge interest as our colleagues learnt so much about each other. We explored that interest further and organised a series of workshops hosted by our talented members of staff over the entire week of the launch. Our employees got involved in a Swahili language class on Skype with a colleague from Tanzania; an afternoon yoga class from our campaigns team; an Excel know-how session from the head of finance; a lecture on networking from our PR coordinator; and an 'ask me anything' session with Nik Hartley, our chief executive. Learning ambassadors across different countries implemented a similar launch plan, with freedom to tailor the launch to their needs. For example, our employees in Sierra Leone received a motivational speech from a well-known university lecturer on the importance of learning, while the Ugandan team made office-wide pledges to embed eLearning into their working culture.

We saw an incredible attendance rate. Our country directors and global chief executive team showed a genuine interest in this initiative because the event had a strategic focus beyond eLearning, aiming to change the organisational culture. That was why we received their full attendance. Although our launch events were non-mandatory, almost the entire global employee base was part of the launch.

The CEO announced to our staff this was the most successful internal campaign to date and regarded eLearning as our agency's internal milestone. He requested that we run the eLearning week as a recurring annual event to recognise the importance of learning in our agency. After the launch event, Perry Maddox, our chief operating officer, took a vast interest in the future development of eLearning and approved the first investment into a bespoke eLearning induction module. As a result of the launch, our team reached an arrangement with senior leadership and line managers that eLearning will form part of our annual appraisal process and our staff's personal development plans, with a structured time for eLearning. We received external recognition as well, as the success of our eLearning launch was featured in CIPD's People Management Magazine, on Training Journal's website – and we went on to win a Charity Learning Award! Our global launch was a success not only because we introduced eLearning, but because we brought our agency together and inspired our employees to explore a much higher potential of individual learning.

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About L&D at Restless Development

Restless Development is the global agency for youth-led development and our mission is to place young people at the forefront of change and development. Our strength comes from being led by young people and young professionals, from the boardroom right through to the field. We have been working hard since 1985 and over the past 30 years, our programmes have reached over seven million young people directly and indirectly.

- Number of staff: around 400
- Number of locations & where they are based: 10 countries: in the UK, US, Nepal, India, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Sierra Leone
- Particular L&D challenges faced: With no training budget and no full-time L&D professional in place, we aimed to make a non-mandatory platform so engaging that our people would use eLearning of their own accord.