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Our guide to delivering formal online learning programmes

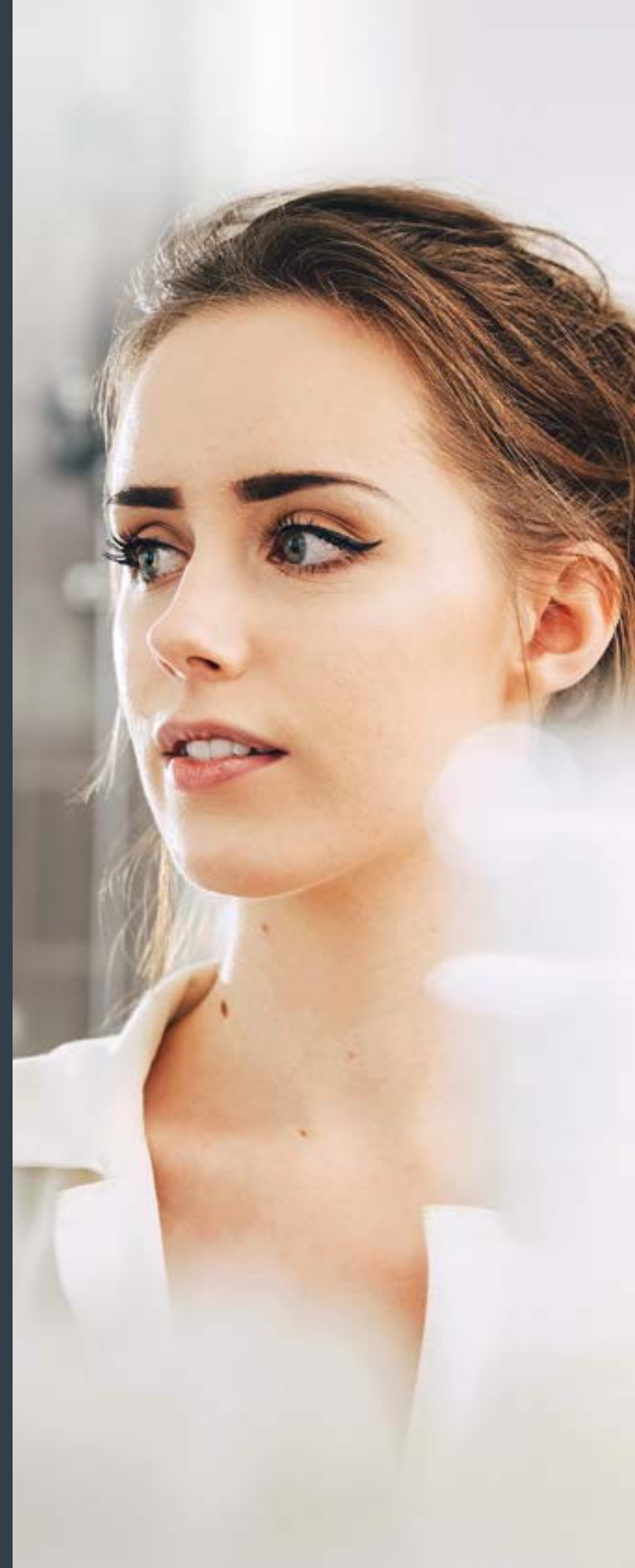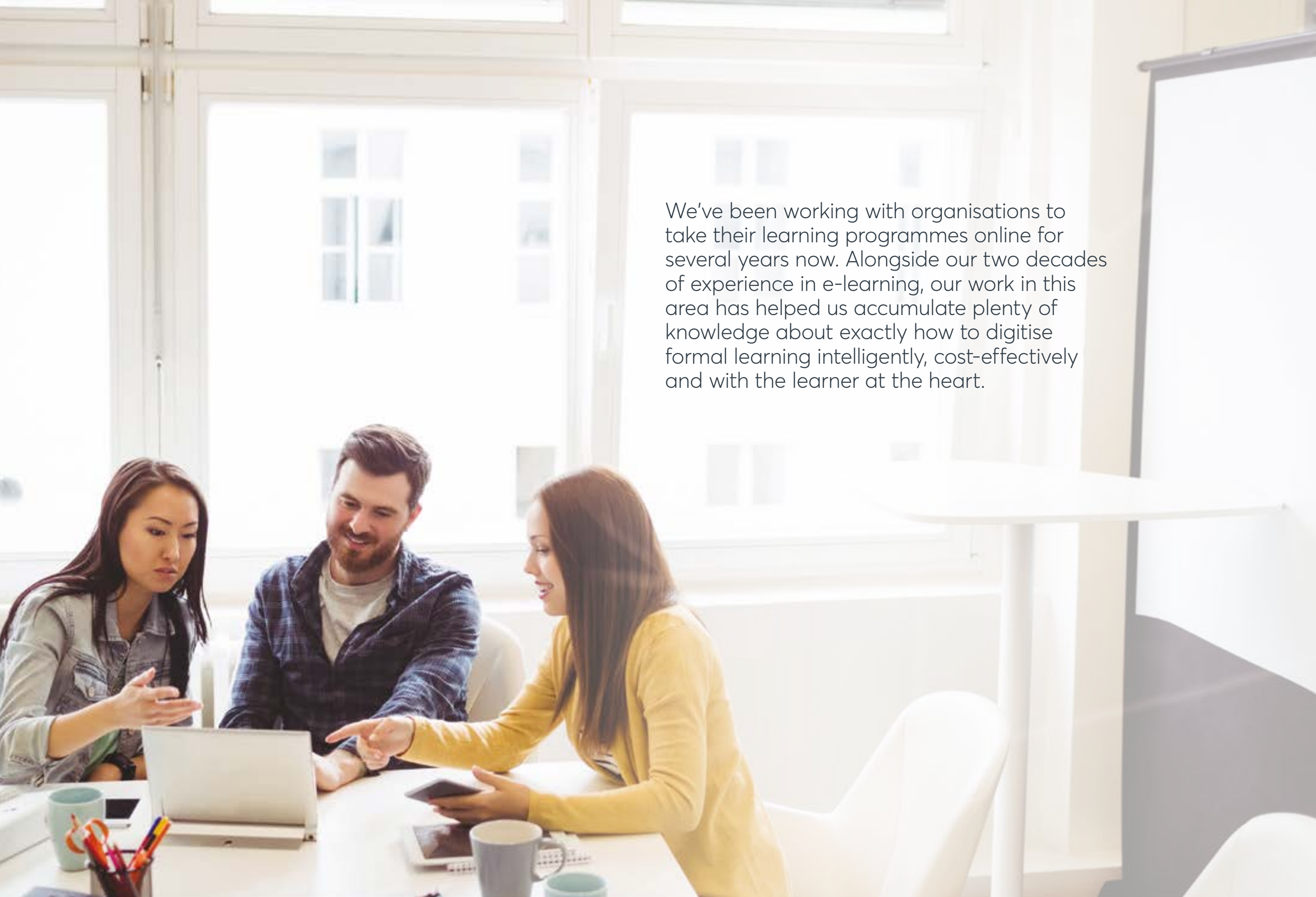Inspiring learning for all

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We've been working with organisations to take their learning programmes online for several years now. Alongside our two decades of experience in e-learning, our work in this area has helped us accumulate plenty of knowledge about exactly how to digitise formal learning intelligently, cost-effectively and with the learner at the heart.

It's also given us a considerable insight into the challenges your organisation might be facing as they approach this new project. Constraints on time and finances, a lack of communication between teams, learners who require training which fits around their work, plus the complexities of professional body and accreditation frameworks – all of these can add up to a series of seemingly insurmountable barriers to 'going digital' with your training.

With this in mind, we've drawn together some essential information to help you in preparing for your next digital learning project. It includes ways you can help convince your colleagues in different teams to get on board, key trends to be aware of, advice on how to analyse what your learners need and plenty of ideas on how to get ready for your first conversation with a new e-learning partner.

We give you this information because we know how daunting these projects can be, and we'd like to make them less intimidating for you. The more confident you feel in your e-learning partner, the higher the chance of success for you, your organisation and your learners.

Five reasons why going digital is good for your learners

The digital revolution is happening across every industry, and most of us understand it's the way forward for our organisations. However, the upskilling and operational changes associated with going digital can be perceived as time-consuming, costly and perhaps even irrelevant. In the 2018 'Inside the Skills Gap' report from BCS, The Chartered Institute of IT, CEO Paul Fletcher notes:

'Digital transformation is often presented and debated as a negative and draining force, a burden on organisations. It shouldn't be viewed like this. Rather, savvy leaders see and seize the opportunities that transformation offers – be that for the organisation itself or for the people and teams within the organisation.'

We spoke to our Operations Director of Virtual College Apprenticeships Melanie Thompson to understand what the benefits of digital transformation are for your learners and their future success.

1.

Digital transformation is becoming more of a need than a want

'Digital technologies are fundamentally changing society,' says Melanie, 'and increasingly there isn't really a choice for businesses about going digital – you either do it or you fail.'

Individual employees may have multiple careers, rather than just one, and it's important for employers to respond to that. 'You'll have people coming in straight from school or from twenty years in another job, and they all need to be able to work digitally,' adds Melanie. 'Your organisation needs to be prepared to give them those skills, as well as having a culture of using digital tools to work effectively.'

2.

Digital skills benefit everyone

'It doesn't matter how old your learners are, or how often they use technology – in the future, they will all need some digital skills to be able to work in any industry,' Melanie says. New technologies have disrupted how people learn, making traditional learning styles redundant and opening up new possibilities of multi-media, peer-to-peer and self-directed learning. Melanie notes, 'By equipping your employees with digital skills, you're preparing your business for future success; the requirement for these abilities is only going to increase, whether that's hosting video conferencing calls or managing automated manufacturing.'

3.

Digital delivery appeals to learners

'Particularly for apprentices,' explains Melanie, 'digital delivery of learning materials can be very appealing.' She identifies that apprentices have often gone into their preferred career path because they didn't enjoy elements of how they learnt at school, such as sitting in a classroom or not having control over their learning. 'Our apprenticeship programmes are delivered 80% online,' says Melanie, 'which is a refreshing change for apprentices; they're able to direct their learning more and not have to struggle to pay attention in a stuffy classroom.'

4.

Digital learning can help overcome learning challenges

Melanie highlights digital delivery as an important way to help learners overcome their personal learning difficulties. **'One of the key benefits of learning and being assessed online is learners feel less 'exposed' when it comes to asking questions, presenting reports or discussing ideas.'** Whether it's shyness, a specific behavioural issue or an aversion to public speaking, e-learning can boost a learner's confidence in soft skills as they can practice online before trying them out in 'real life'. **'Plus, the apprenticeship end point assessment is now an online, remote interview so digital delivery prepares them for that very well,'** says Melanie.

5.

Digital delivery complements face-to-face learning

'The assumption is that digital learning will isolate individuals,' says Melanie, **'and that it has to be an 'all or nothing' approach. The truth is online learning and face-to-face training work well together.'** In an apprenticeship with a high percentage of online delivery, apprentices can share expertise with others from different industries and still take part in peer-to-peer learning. Virtual College uses four key elements – context, construction, collaboration and conversation – to build its apprenticeship programmes. Melanie explains, **'Of these, collaboration and conversation are sometimes the most exciting for organisations, as it transforms apprentices from being the 'junior' ones in the workforce to genuine team members.'**

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Three new trends affecting learning and development teams

Inspiring learning for all

Keeping track of the latest research into learning styles can feel like an arduous task, especially in the current climate of rapidly developing technologies, demanding learners and complex national frameworks. And while classic learning styles have a useful place in creating online training, the changing face of learners and learning environments has rendered rigidly sticking to any specific model obsolete. To help, we've brought together three key ideas.

1.

Curiosity and on-demand learners

By now, you'll have read about your learner as a digital consumer – someone who is used to easily accessible information at the touch of a button. While some might argue this makes life harder for L&D professionals, it also means contemporary learners are more used to satisfying – and maintaining – their own curiosity. Tools like search engines and social media platforms facilitate learners in directing their own knowledge consumption and application, and this natural curiosity can also be satisfied through e-learning.

Some researchers believe a learner's self-motivation can be consistently encouraged, and therefore their interest in learning regularly renewed, by recognising their innate curiosity and providing 'thematic scaffolding'. These are areas of educational content that learners can explore freely in their own way; however, e-learning that forces learners down a particular path and doesn't allow choice (even within the smallest of constraints) can turn off users who are used to getting the information they want, exactly when and how they want it.

2.

The new trainer

In the last few years, the role of the trainer in workplace and online learning has changed significantly. Rather than being an expert 'broadcaster' of knowledge, trainers now have to inhabit many roles as coach, mentor, peer and even learner. Learners at work may be untethered from a particular location or working pattern, making the role of the trainer an important connecting force between them and the organisation. Similarly, as learners self-direct their education, they are beginning to create their own learning networks in which there is no longer one trainer, but many.

For some trainers, this shift can be difficult; despite their subject matter expertise, 'teaching' in this contemporary way may prove challenging. Trainers are required to be flexible and empathic, responding to the changing needs of learners, session to session. The most effective methods to ensure this in your organisation are to 'train the trainer' and provide them with pedagogically sound materials, which facilitate successful training, as well as successful learning.

3.

Learning together

While the impetus within an organisation may be to digitise programmes, it's important to recognise effective traditional and blended methods of learning – and give them a contemporary twist. Small, face-to-face study groups help students instigate learning and motivate each other; the modern-day equivalent includes specific groups on social media or online forums where larger cohorts of students can take part in peer-to-peer learning.

As an e-learning partner, we've seen that learners are relying more and more on their personal networks to direct their education, and they expect employer-based learning to facilitate this more social way of learning. This method of 'learning together' can be incredibly effective. Learners are not learning to be passive receptacles of knowledge that can be memorised and repeated, but rather they are learning to be knowledgeable people who can apply what they've learnt. Through conversation and shared experiences, learners are embedding knowledge very deeply – especially when this process is combined with scenario-based learning.

For more resources to help you
understand the e-learning landscape,
you can visit our website:
www.virtual-college.co.uk/resources

Sources
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5 New Teaching Methods Improving Education by E. Day:
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Learning Styles by M. Gorzycki:
https://ctfd.sfsu.edu/content/learning-styles
Virtual College's own research into delivering digital qualifications to contemporary learners.

Eight questions to find
the right solution for you

Any good e-learning partner will appreciate that digitising your qualification can be a complex and sometimes nerve-wracking process. To help prepare you for that important first meeting with your chosen partner, we've put together the eight essential questions we ask our new customers. Knowing what your e-learning partner might ask can help you to stay one step ahead, and feel confident you're giving them all the information they need to support your project.

1.

What do you want to achieve?

Before entering into a new partnership, we ask this crucial question: what do you want to achieve with this project? Whatever your aim, if we understand it from the very start, we can do more to help you achieve it.

2.

Why do you want to go digital?

Digitising a training programme might seem like the best – or only – option. However, 'going digital' isn't a silver bullet and can bring unique challenges for organisations, L&D professionals and learners. By understanding your reasons for digitisation, we can give you a clear and realistic picture of what the process will be like.
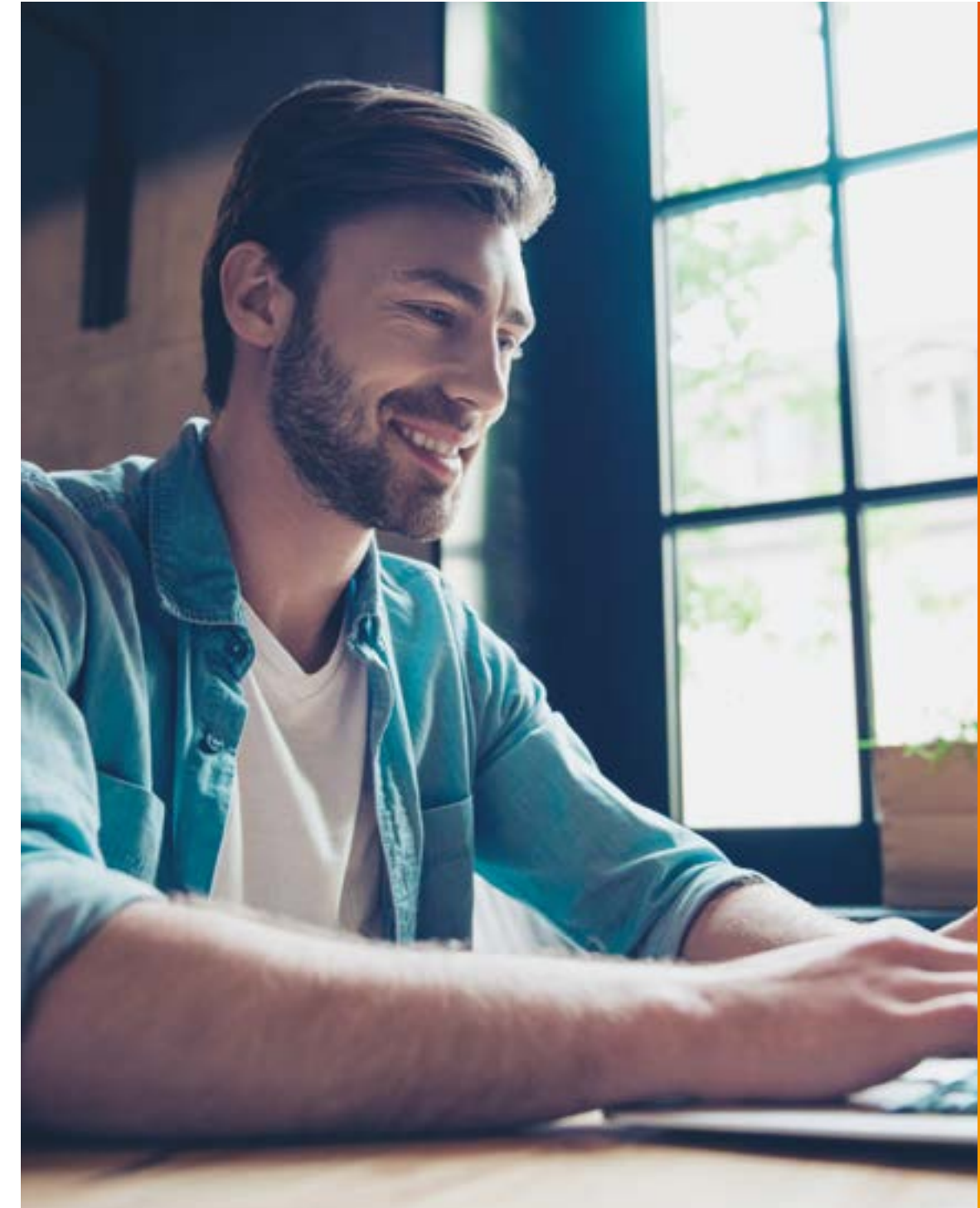
3.

What's your specific programme and does it need formal accreditation?

Every training programme, and accreditation criteria is unique, with different measures for success and different methods of delivery. Once we know what the content is that you're helping your learners progress through, we can use our extensive knowledge and experience to map what is now required on to what you already have.

4.

Who are your learners?

We believe your learners should be at the heart of any training programme, so we want to get to know them. What are they like? How do they learn? How does this training fit into their day? By asking you lots of questions about your learners, we can start to build a picture of the best learning solution for them as well as one that will work for you.

5.

What content do you already have?

We don't want to reinvent the wheel or spend your budget on replicating high quality content you may already have. Our team will ask you to share your existing content with us; this helps us see clearly which resources can be improved, which new pieces need to be made and what works effectively just as it is.

6.

How do you deliver this content?

Each organisation has a team of professionals delivering training to learners, but how they do this can vary greatly between businesses. By getting to know your delivery methods, we can suggest ways to improve the learner experience and provide your team with resources to support their employees, which adds up to a greater likelihood of learner success.

7.

What are your challenges?

We know you, your team and your learners will be struggling with specific challenges in delivering your chosen programme. It might be time, cost, location or something completely unique to your organisation. We'll ask you to explain why what you're doing now isn't working so we can help you overcome those hurdles and make it work.
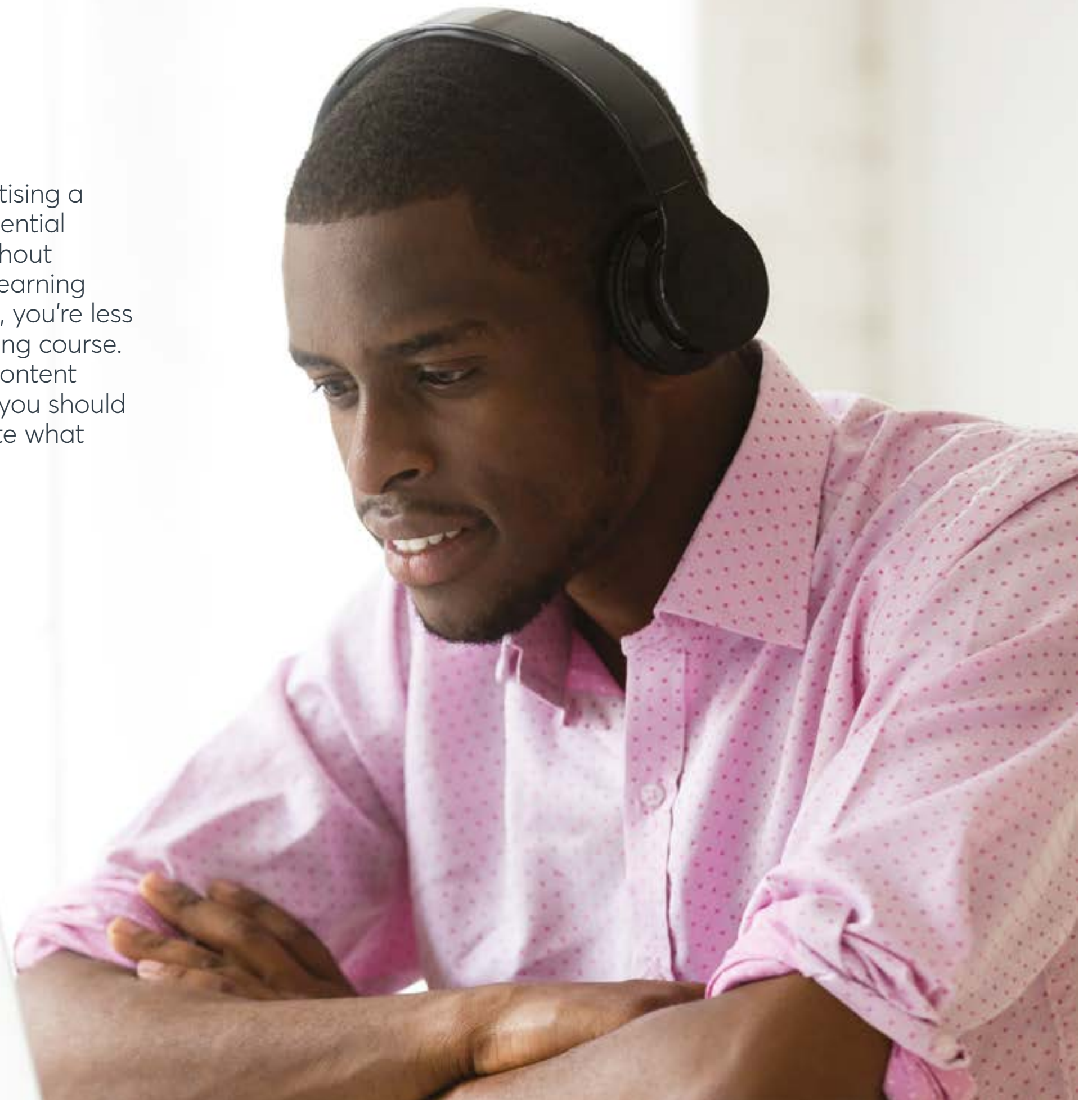
8.

How do you like to work?

Virtual College prides itself on its long-term partnerships with our customers; these are built on mutual respect and effective ways of working. If we understand exactly how you like to work from the start of the project, we can develop together and create the best possible outcome for your learners and your organisation.

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Four questions to ask when analysing your learners' needs

Before you start the process of digitising a formal learning programme, it's essential to know who your learners are. Without understanding their aims, ways of learning and relationship to the programme, you're less likely to create a successful e-learning course. We spoke to Jess Marshall in our Content team to find out the key questions you should be asking to analyse and appreciate what your learners need.

What are your learners trying to learn?

'The objective of your e-learning course directly affects how your learners learn,' says Jess.

'Your desired final outcome will change the way you need to share information with them to have the best chance of success. This seems obvious, but lots of organisations forget this and get disappointing results. For example, if the result of the training needs to be behavioural change, your learners will need and want opportunities to practise these new skills in a safe environment during the learning process.'

Jess also points out the difference between what you are telling your learners they need to know and what they want to get out of the learning. 'You and the organisation will have learning objectives – but so will individual learners, on a much more personal basis. Understanding these and designing e-learning to satisfy all these aims means it's much more likely to work.'

What do your learners expect?

Jess argues that, according to recent research, traditional learning styles are no longer very useful in categorising your learners. 'Instead, you can investigate what your learners expect from a learning experience. Are they used to finding information themselves? What about their tech-savviness? Do they expect to receive feedback immediately, and how do they feel about reflecting on their learning?'

Some learners in your organisation may not have had formal education since they left school, while others may be constantly 'learning' through their online activities. 'Although it doesn't seem like it,' says Jess, 'even a Google search for something your learner is intrigued by is a learning process which then sets up their expectations for gathering and absorbing information.' Knowing these expectations means you can create an e-learning component that doesn't disappoint learners, giving you a greater likelihood of engagement.

What's your learners' relationship to work and learning?

'You'll be able to articulate very clearly the culture of learning within your organisation,' explains Jess, 'so the next step is to consider how this affects your learners and their attitude towards learning. This attitude can make or break the success of an online learning project, so it must be taken into account.'

Jess points out the importance of looking at this on a personal level too: 'Find out whether your individual learners appreciate the value of education. If they had a difficult time at school or college, they might be resistant to learning – so your new project also needs to encourage them to see the personal benefit in workplace education.'

Your learners' jobs and workload also need to be considered. 'On a practical level,' says Jess, 'the way your learner works will also affect their relationship to learning: if they're always on the road, they'll need mobile-friendly access. If they're pushed for time, they'll need bite-sized information. And if they often work independently, they might need online community support to help them through the course.'

What can I provide – and what isn't in my remit?

'Understandably, every organisation wants to give their learners as much as possible to help them succeed,' notes Jess, 'but an important question to ask yourself is how much you can realistically give. Your role is to support learners, which means recognising where the 'formal' education ends and where signposting them to further resources begins.'

Jess identifies that all teams in your organisation are faced with multiple pressures, from long-term business objectives to day-to-day demands of learners. 'With this in mind, consider what you can provide that is most helpful to learners. You want to avoid a 'poor quality everything' and instead focus on something that is very high quality and effectively targeted. Think about what extra resources your learners can explore independently to supplement their learning, from real-life peer group discussions to downloadable PDFs.'

"Your role is to support learners, which means recognising where the 'formal' education ends and where signposting them to further resources begins."

Jessica Marshall, Senior Production Manager,
Virtual College

Mapping process to deliver
formal training programmes online

One of the biggest challenges you face as a L&D professional is understanding whether what you offer will help your learners achieve. Knowing you're providing the right information in the right way to your learners is essential for your business' continued success.

We work with our clients to map formal learning programmes, helping to break down complex learning requirements into comprehensible chunks and assessing where there are opportunities for better content to be created. Abi Holmes, our Senior Production Manager, explains how it works.

1.

Reviewing the programme

After meeting with you and setting up the work schedule, we review the programme of training your learners will complete. We look at the accreditation criteria, digging deep into what exactly is required for your learners to successfully provide evidence for each learning outcome. We've worked across a huge range of industries, programmes and qualifications, and we bring that experience to every review we carry out. For example, we know that the same qualification has slightly different criteria depending on your awarding body, which will change what evidence your learners need to provide – and how you need to help them generate that evidence.

2.

Reviewing your offer

Next, we look in detail at what you're offering your learners. This includes your content and delivery model, and we sift through every element to see if it will help your learners fulfil the criteria for success. We use our granular knowledge of e-learning, educational styles, qualification processes and industry insights to cross-check your content against the requirements of the awarding or professional bodies. The result is a comprehensive set of recommendations about ways to fill gaps in your content and opportunities to improve what you're providing – which in turn increases the likelihood of your learners achieving.

3.

Providing content support

Once we've identified any gaps or improvements, we'll work with you to curate or create digital content so your offer is better than ever. This might include looking through our existing database of content and finding learning material which can be used in your delivery, or breaking down your educational content into smaller units so learners can learn more effectively. Or, we might work with you to design brand new content that's tailored to your learners' requirements and the evidence they need to pass their qualification. We also work hard to make sure your unblended delivery trainers models, who are delivering the content, feel confident in what they're doing, by giving them the

Understanding exactly whether or not your training programme is delivering what your learners need, in order to achieve, is complicated – and many of our clients want to focus on the delivery, not the nitty-gritty of learning objectives. Working together, we can help map your offer against accreditation and professional development frameworks, and make sure your learners and team feel completely supported to get across the finish line.

Our process of mapping content to formal learning outcomes; analysis

Taking a formal learning programme online involves many stages, and one of the most crucial is the initial analysis phase. Through a rigorous set of processes, the analysis stage helps you and your digital learning partner understand exactly what's needed from your programme, laying the groundwork for future success.

Here, we've broken down our analysis stage of the mapping process to help you understand the sort of things your e-learning partner might ask you in their first few meetings, helping you get ahead and stay on track.

Throughout the process we'll work with you to meet your budget requirements and find the best solution.

1

Identify key performance indicators (KPIs)

A key question we ask at this stage is: 'What do you want to be different as a result of this programme?' This is an opportunity to share what you'd like to improve in your organisation, such as engagement rates, feedback scores, reduced delivery costs or increased quality. These KPIs directly inform the rest of the analysis and the programme itself.

2

Analyse programme

Here we identify the learning outcomes and standards for your curriculum or qualification. Depending on your awarding body and specific requirements, these will be different for each organisation. Then we map how each of the outcomes are currently delivered, which allows us to identify any gaps in your current offering.

3

Analyse learning

Next we analyse your learners, focusing particularly on the most effective ways for them to learn, for example, whether they engage better with real-life examples or a more theoretical approach. For each of the learning outcomes, we identify where knowledge transfer or behavioural change is required, and what types of delivery are most effective.

4

Map the solution

After gathering together this data, we establish the 'hero' and 'hub' areas in the programme. 'Hero' areas are where technology will make a significant difference to the learners' experience and potential success – like using scenarios or simulations. 'Hub' content is what supports the hero areas with a variety of delivery options, such as infographics, videos or e-learning.

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Inspiring learning for all

How to engage colleagues
in digital training projects

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When you're embarking on a project to develop digital training programmes or find a learning technology partner who will fully support your business' ambitions, you'll soon find there are plenty of challenges to overcome. Not least of these challenges is the difficulty of communicating across departments in your business and winning over your internal stakeholders.

Every team has its own targets and priorities – even when sharing in the overall aim of making your organisation a success – and it can be hard to work out how to work with colleagues whose criteria for 'a good training solution' might be different to your own. Understanding what they need to help them feel confident in these new projects can be the difference between a smooth, enjoyable process and one in which every stakeholder struggles to feel engaged.

We spoke to two of our team members to understand how to go about persuading internal stakeholders that the solution you have identified is the right one.

Wining hearts and minds

For Sarah Baker, our Content Development Manager, it's all about winning hearts and minds. 'Your colleagues need to hear how this new project or partner is going to help them overcome their current challenges,' says Sarah, 'your internal stakeholders are juggling lots of requirements – learners' needs, business objectives, national standards, changing educational systems – and so demonstrating that you understand, and can help solve their problems, will really help them feel confident in what you're proposing.'

The best way to do this, Sarah explains, is to tell them the story. 'This story starts with how things are right now – what challenges are they facing? What isn't working in your current offering? Next, it's showing them what your organisation could be like if these challenges were overcome – and how satisfied and skilled your learners could be. Finally, you can show them how to solve those challenges with your project, training proposal or suggested learning technology partner.'

Your colleagues will also want to know why they should trust, and ultimately work with, the technology provider you're suggesting. 'Your colleagues will have their own challenges and will want to understand the risks to them and the business,' Sarah adds. 'Case studies and customer testimonials from your technology partner can help do this quickly and simply.'

She also highlighted that internal stakeholders will want to understand whether a project or partner can successfully deliver the specific requirements of your organisation's learners. 'That might be a need for international languages, on-the-go access, understanding how your learners' education fits into their day job or effective pedagogies for your type of learners,' Sarah explains, 'but whatever it is, your stakeholders want to know your learners will be catered for and supported as much as possible. If you can highlight how your chosen provider or new project will be able to do that, they'll feel confident it'll be a great success.'

Making the business case

'First and foremost,' explains Jaison Cresswell, our Learning Technology Manager, 'your organisation will want to understand the positive impact of any digital project you undertake. Sharing this information will immediately help get your internal stakeholders on board.'

Jaison says one of the best ways to do this is to show them results from earlier projects or test modules your chosen partner has produced.
'That way, they can see exactly how likely it is that you will achieve these results. Your learning technology partner should be able to give you clear qualitative and quantitative results from similar projects they've successfully completed, so make sure to ask for them.'

Your business will also want to know what other organisations are doing, both in your industry and across learning and development in general; 'this helps them understand how undertaking this new project could make your organisation more attractive, supporting recruitment and retention of employees,' adds Jaison. He also mentions that explaining how your business can improve what they do for your learners can win over colleagues, who will want to know their organisation is doing everything they can to be successful. Successful learners translates to successful businesses.

Finally, Jaison says it's important to explain which parts of your current training programmes can be digitised, and how. 'Your organisation will want value for money, which means spending money in the most appropriate and effective way. Showing them exactly which elements of your current offering could be digitised, the impact this will have on the business and learners, and offering creative ideas on what could be done, will all help them feel confident in your proposed solution.'

Whichever team you or your colleagues are in, your overall objective is the same: to get the best possible learning for your learners, and the best possible results for your organisation. Each team needs different information to know they're making the right choice, but with a little understanding – and support from your chosen provider – getting everyone on board doesn't have to be difficult.

"Your colleagues will have their own challenges and will want to understand the risks to them and the business."

Sarah Baker, Content Development Manager,
Virtual College