

# Managing Interactive Media

## Industry Interviews



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# Bob Little

Bob Little has been writing and commentating on technology based training, including e-learning, since 1990. His work has been published across three continents - the USA, Europe and Australia as well as in UK-based publications including E-Learning Age and Training Technology & Human Resources (TTHR), making him unique as a commentator on the worldwide e-learning scene.

## **What is the top insight you have now about people working in interactive projects that you've got from your experience and would like to pass on to the next generation of Interactive Media Project Workers?**

Don't lose sight of instructional design models and theories (both at the 'macro' level - see the work of Charles Reigeluth among others - and at the 'micro' level, based on the work of Gagne and others) and use these in designing and developing learning materials but always bear in mind that these projects will stand or fall on the benefit (usually in terms of increased sales, efficiency and/or profitability) that they bring to the organisation that is using them. You are not working on interactive media-based learning solutions, you are working on interactive media-based business solutions - and that requires an altogether different approach and mindset.

## **What do you see as the wider context of interactive electronic media and the way things are heading for your sector's area - e,g rise of iTV, citizen journalism, podcast etc.?**

While everyone seems to be talking about wikis, blogs and podcasts, these will, ultimately, fail to satisfy the demand for knowledge because they tend to be made by amateurs - who forget that content is only part of the formula for even a successful piece of 'information', let alone piece of instruction. Style and strategy (planning) are often ignored and, without these, the blog, wiki, podcast and so on has little chance of being 'memorable'.

There are now too many of these sources for anyone to read/hear even a representative sample of them and (a) remain sane, (b) do their real work and (c) do anything else with their lives.

The real trends to watch are the growth of workflow (or 'rapid') learning and its near relation, electronic performance support systems (EPSSs) as well as the growth in mobile learning - through PDAs/Blackberrys, mobile phones and so on. In both these instances, demand for 'instant knowledge' - not beautifully crafted pieces of e-delivered instruction - is driving the development of the genre.

In many ways, this is taking responsibility for the learning projects from the training and HR departments and placing it in the area of Board level directors and, sometimes, line managers and subject matter experts.

Both of these trends - especially the growth of EPSSs - are bypassing the need for learning management (and related) systems (LMSs), since the test of the learning's effectiveness is not how

many people took the courses and what they did on the courses but on the business results that followed the learning (in terms of increased efficiency, sales and profits).

**Getting and retaining business can be time consuming and sometimes costly. Do you have a view on the pitch/tender process, preferred supplier lists, ongoing/return business and attracting business through the door.**

Top class performers - actors, singers, dancers - tend not to 'audition' for parts, principally because their capabilities are 'known'. It would be nice if this was the case in this industry: 'quality' producers were recognised and customers bought on quality and reputation rather than on price. Unfortunately, that's not the way of the world. We must all live with the pitch/tender process for the foreseeable future. However, it can be tempered slightly by 'preferred supplier lists'.

These are a good idea: the buyer gets to develop a longer-term relationship with developers and the developers get to develop a similar relationship with the buyer. That way, both should get to understand each other's processes, constraints, cultures, needs and so on. That can only mean more effective products/solutions.

Selling is not the only tool in the developer's armoury. Ultimately, a reputation based on sales alone will force a supplier into either cost or 'corner' cutting in order to keep prices 'competitive'. It is important to engage in customer relationship management (CRM) - through, for example, direct mail marketing, advertising and public relations campaigns within the relevant (especially trade) media, as well as some degree of 'corporate hospitality'. Both advertising and PR campaigns should stress the added value that a relationship with this particular producer can bring

**Getting projects off the ground is often problematic for a variety of reasons. Do you have any insights into defining and planning the stages of a project?**

The key is to identify the 'champion' within the buying organization who not only has the budget but also the organisational status and political skills to steer the project to success. This champion need not necessarily be the person who is specifying the project or even the person who is commissioning the work.

**Working out the cost of proposed new projects - any advice?**

Never be tempted to cut the price in order to get the work. Charge enough to make the project worthwhile and enough so that the client will value it once it's delivered.

## **Defining the quality level of projects - any advice?**

They should be 'fit for purpose'. There is no point in going out of your way to produce a piece of learning material that conforms to, say, SCORM if it is not going to be delivered via an LMS. The criteria for a 'successful' piece of learning is whether or not it helps an organisation to solve a business problem - not whether it meets a 'standard' in terms of pedagogical purity or technological delivery and learner monitoring.

## **What have been the top 2 difficulties that occurred in developing projects from your knowledge and what is the best way to address these?**

- ◆ The specifier/commissioner of the project changes during the design stage.
- ◆ The customer's (business) circumstances change - either putting the project on hold or radically altering the nature of the project

The best way to address these is with good grace and a smile, trying hard not to get 'stressed' and remaining calm at the thought of all the lost - or at best delayed - revenue.

## **How should companies take account of the users of interactive products and how should they influence design?**

Do you mean 'companies' to be the buyers of these interactive products (rather than the developers/suppliers of the products)? If so, they need only specify the results that they want to see after the products have been used. Let the designers design the most appropriate products for the products' users - that's what they 'do' for a living. But let the buyers specify - at the outset - the expected outcomes and the time period in which these outcomes are to be achieved. There is no 'definitive design' (that's the attraction of being a designer!), only definitive results - and designers should abide and have their work judged by these.

## **How much and what type of testing of the product should take place before release?**

It depends - on the timescale for the project, the immediacy of the learning/training need and so on. Intuitively, the answers should be 'lots' and 'all sorts'.

## **What are the most important legal aspects to cover for interactive media products?**

Ensure that you own the assets (including intellectual property rights) that you are using in the product.

Ensure that the client gives permission for you to use the product in your PR and marketing activities - to enhance your reputation. In 2005, one major financial services company gave and then withdrew permission for a supplier to speak about the

product that it had produced for that financial services company. This proved not only embarrassing but also immensely frustrating when the product then won a major industry award - and the supplier was prevented from telling anyone about it!

### **Any tips or advice about finding out about the users of interactive products/sites and how to go about collecting and analysing these?**

Exhibit at the industry's major trade show - Learning Technologies - and get the attendee list from the organisers after the Show.

Join the industry's major networking organisations - the eLearning Network and Learning Light - so that you can meet buyers and potential buyers in 'non-sales orientated' situations and so build up rapport with them before you begin to sell to them.

### **Interactive teams have special characteristics that make them a challenge to manage. What advice would you give from your knowledge and experience about teams and making their management smoother?**

People are people - and members of interactive teams are no exception (however much they may wish - or say - that they are). Building cohesive teams involves skills such as:

- ◆ As a manager, be seen to be 'one of your team' in terms of shouldering the workload and sharing (not hogging) the rewards and perks.
- ◆ Trust your team leaders but keep an eye on each individual.
- ◆ Choose 'workhorses' for the toughest assignments - so that you stand the best chance of succeeding in the project.
- ◆ And ensure that all successes (including individual successes) are celebrated together - as a team, to build cohesiveness and co-operation.