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Global e-learning
The 5 cornerstones to effective e-learning localisation

Overview

This paper outlines some of the key consideration points when localising e-learning for various geographic markets. The focus will not just be on the "authoring" of e-learning, but on the whole production process, ensuring that organisations using this paper as a guide to localising, understand all of the relevant requirements.

Introduction

Globalisation has long been seen as a force promoting "sameness" amongst various geographic markets, producing a homogeneous force that is best exemplified by the availability of Pepsi around the world or the fact that you can buy a Big Mac in just about every country on earth.

Many global enterprises, including PepsiCo and McDonalds, also realise the need to identify with the local markets in which they do business to deliver the best results in that market. So both of these companies offer products that are delivered in a culturally accepted, localised fashion. This trend is supported by figures from LISA (Localization Industry Standards Association), which claims that the worldwide spending on localisation services ranges from $5 to $15 billion USD.

Although the business world understands the value of localising products and services, surprisingly these concepts aren't always applied to e-learning so this paper has been created to explore the obvious and not so obvious factors to consider.

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Localising E-Learning

In many cases e-learning is used to educate a company's employees on products, services, or processes. When this is being done on a global scale, it is important to remember that delivering localised e-learning involves addressing obvious changes such as translation as well as other aspects of localisation to ensure the learner is able to absorb the information more readily.

Localising e-learning can be more challenging when compared to the localisation of other documentation because:

- There is no standard document file formats where different tools can interoperate so even a basic activity like translation might be very difficult.

- Content creators typically are not used to considering localisation as part of the design process, resulting in project management problems.

- Vendors do not appreciate the full scope of localisation and unintentionally over promise.

- There can be various cultural and language interpretations of the same message, so roadblocks can occur in the content creation process.

- Unanticipated legal and social issues can result in significant project delays.

Considering all that can go wrong with localising e-learning, the next section in this document attempts to outline five key areas of consideration when launching an e-learning program that requires the content to be localised.

5 cornerstones to localised e-learning

This section will address the five most important aspects to consider when localising e-learning.

1.Technology

This is a critical decision that will dictate the ease with which you can localise any content created, quickly and effortlessly. As the creation of e-learning invariably involves either the purchasing of software (such as e-learning authoring tools or Flash development kits) or sourcing bespoke content creation consultants to create the e-learning content, it is vital to ensure that a number of features have been reviewed prior to making any purchases.

Unlike most other software tools, e-learning does not provide a common format for the creation of content. Furthermore, many e-learning tools, including Flash development kits, do not separate data (text) from the graphical layer. This becomes a problem regardless of whether a consultant or in-house producer is creating the content.

So when selecting the technological base for an e-learning project that must be localised, ask the following questions:

- **Is it possible to separate the text from the graphics?** It is important that it's feasible to replace the text in an e-learning course without having to redevelop it.

- **Can the text be exported from the course to facilitate translation and then imported again once the translation is completed?** In some e-learning tools the core content can be exported to either a standard document format, or in some cases, even export into a format that plugs into translation tools. The industry standard for translation is called XLIFF, which is an XML document format. If a tool uses this format properly, not only can it facilitate the translation, but also assist in the uploading and incorporation of the translation into the new e-learning courses.

- **If a content creation consultant is being used, are they willing to use an e-learning tool that enables easy localisation of content?** If the consultant hasn't given full consideration to this point it can add months to the project, which then reduces the effectiveness of the course. Ultimately this could require an update of the content in all of the localised versions, adding further delays and leading to a project management nightmare.

> The most important issue to consider when selecting the underlying technology for an e-learning project is:
>
> Ensure that the vendor is able to adequately explain how they do localisation, not just say it's possible. Inquiring about their processes and functionality on this front will save significant trouble down the road.

Updatability

It is also important to look forward, towards the completion of the localisation of an e-learning project, as not only does there tend to be a sense of relief and accomplishment but in many cases it will have been quite an investment in time, resources and budget.

So it is critical to ensure upfront that the technology chosen allows any content created to be easily updated.

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Being able to quickly reuse and update a module will enable you to rapidly implement product modifications or easily react to environmental changes such as revisions to local laws that could deliver you an advantage over your competitors, and save significant time and money in the future.

To ensure that the e-learning technology can be easily updated, important essentials to review include:

- **Owning the content:** Often overlooked, an important point to negotiate with your supplier is who will own the content, as some external content creators will try to retain ownership, forcing the customer to come to them whenever a small (or large) change is required.

- **The course is updatable:** Sometimes a course is hard-coded in such a way that it makes it almost impossible to update. In other words, if the language in a course is updated, it won't force a complete redevelopment.

- **User friendly format:** Many companies use Subject Matter Experts to create content. If a course needs to be updated, but not necessarily changed in terms of design or function, it is highly efficient to have subject matter experts make the changes. If the course is in an easily updatable user friendly format, it greatly streamlines the process.

In summary, it is important to choose your technology very carefully so that localisation is not only technically possible, but can be done very quickly, easily and inexpensively.

2. Language

The second most obvious aspect of localisation is translation. In many eyes it is so critical to localisation many people assume that to localise something it simply needs to be translated.

This is not as simple as it sounds, as translation involves interpreting the meaning of a text in one language and then producing the equivalent text in another language, while still communicating the same message.

The most common misconception about translation is that there exists a simple "word-for-word" relationship between any two languages, and that translation is therefore a straightforward and mechanical process. However differences between languages often command differences of expression and therefore source and target texts may differ significantly. This complexity is compounded when applying it to the e-learning environment as it is interactive in nature and is measured on the learner's comprehension of the message.

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Since this is a critical aspect of localisation, here are several translation-related elements to consider in order make the process smooth and effective.

When writing the content consider the following:

- **Ensure the proper vernacular:** Each industry has its own specific terminology to refer to concepts and tools within that industry, ensuring the correct terms are used in creating e-learning.

- **Writing style:** Using concise language without flowery descriptions typically delivers better results as the learner will comprehend the content better.

- **Clear language:** Avoid slang and expressions as these tend not to translate well and usually result in a course that is vague and confusing.

Once the writing is completed and the course is ready to send for translation, ensure that a good translator is chosen. A good translator is a professional whose job it is to accurately translate work into another language.

Two written language tips to consider:

- Some languages have right-to-left language sets, such as Hebrew and Arabic.

- Other languages, such as German, produce text that is up to 50% longer than English.

Consider the following tips for selecting a translator:

- The project is within their ability. This refers to not only their language abilities, but also their technical or industry knowledge.

- They are eager and willing to ask questions to ensure they understand the job requirements and accept the deadlines set.

- They have solid references, especially within relevant industries.

Curious about bad translations?

A good example of a poor translation is the Internet meme "All your base are belongs to us". This is part of a video game dialogue that is trying to say, in essence, "We have captured all of your bases", but due to the poor translation it has become an Internet phenomenon. This is a case where the translation error is more popular than the original product. To see just how much this has been made fun of, simply search for "All your base are belongs to us" and see.

In addition to ensuring that the text has been translated properly, consider the form of the language used. For instance, are you using an informal tone when a more formal tone is appropriate?

What about dialects and other adaptations of a language? English is a great example, and to prove the point, consider the word "localisation". In the UK this is spelled with an s, whereas in the USA, it's spelled "localization".

These are subtle differences, but tend to help make a course more agreeable to a learner, making them believe the content was created for them, not simply translated for their use.

3. Content

When considering the localisation of e-learning, it is vitally important to ensure that the core content in the e-learning contains appropriate terminology and covers local processes and adaptations required for that market. To ensure this is accurately captured the involvement of locals in the content creation process is key. They will ensure that the course recipients are able to understand the local adaptation, not be overshadowed by the original corporate version.

Consider the following types of e-learning courses that could require a localised content element:

- **Product training:** Products are often localised to meet different market requirements and these changes need to be communicated. So it is important to update content and localise it to ensure staff and the local sales channel appreciate the nuances of the changes that have taken place.

- **Induction training:** In the case of a subsidiary using an induction course created by the corporate headquarters, there would need to be some adaptation, even if it was just including information about the subsidiary and local personal contact details.

- **Process training:** The most common training that requires content localisation is process training. As country subsidiaries tend to differ from corporate headquarters in regards to legal, cultural, and physical differences in each region.

Whitepaper

4. Graphics, photography and other media

Since e-learning is very much about multimedia elements that intermix with plain text to deliver a message in a more engaging fashion, it is vitally important to consider the media used when localising and deploying e-learning around the world.

Imagery in particular is extremely powerful. A picture says a thousand words, but when the wrong picture is used, it dilutes the original message and muddies the learner's understanding of the topic.

The power of imagery

HSBC believed in the power of imagery to the extent that it ran a multi-year, multi-million dollar advertising campaign about how they can help business understand local customs. They conveyed this message almost purely through imagery where they showed how one image can mean two very distinct things in different cultures.

When localising e-learning, the following points must be considered to ensure the effectiveness of the module:

Pictures: Sometimes a picture is universal and conveys the same message, other times one picture can mean a number of different things. So ensure your image choice resonates with your market and is not offensive, confusing or considered foreign.

Audio and video is localised: If an e-learning module contains voice-overs or even built-in video, it is advisable to replace the media with a localised version, exclude it altogether, or provide subtitles (video only) to ensure the learner is able to correctly grasp the subject.

Design: Well designed e-learning modules are intended to look good as well as effectively convey a message. As part of this, it is important to ensure that all design elements are considered, for example:

• Are the menus and other screen elements translated and available in the local language?

• Is the colour scheme appropriate? In many cultures colour can play a very important role in how something is perceived.

• Do the icons make sense? If icons are used to convey messages, do they make sense in the local markets?

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5. Test market and review

While not obviously part of the localisation process, the whole concept of reviewing and test-marketing e-learning in the locale in which it has been localised for will help ensure that it is effective and appropriate for the market.

Consider the following approaches to ensure your e-learning has been localised effectively:

- **Peer review:** Some, but not all translation services will provide a peer review service, where a second translator is used to review the original and the translation to ensure it is accurate and that there isn't a more accurate and concise way of expressing a concept.

- If a translation service does not provide this, it could be a wise investment to pay a second translator to do a review.

- **Local legal and marketing review:** As discussed previously, local brands, language and approaches have subtleties that might be missed as part of the localisation process. Conducting a legal and marketing review in the local market will help ensure the course is both legal and on the mark when it comes to the brand and local messaging.

- **Target market testing:** Before deploying an e-learning module out to a whole subsidiary, it is often wise to conduct a reference group market test. In other words, have a small sample of the intended audience take the module and then provide feedback on its effectiveness.

Important points to remember when reviewing content:

Encourage your review team to feedback comments that clearly identify which piece of content they relate to and the change needed. As a guide, comments should reference the page number where the error occurred and describe the change required. The danger with unspecific feedback is that is it is very difficult to implement changes from, as the comment could be misinterpreted and result in additional rounds of changes and further costly delays.

Conclusion

While the world is becoming smaller and tools like the Internet open us up to an intermingling of cultures, there are still significant differences between various geographic regions.

In a global organisation it is important to remember that even though the company has international standards (such as English as the corporate language), being able to localise your training - especially e-learning - ensures that the recipients are able to fully understand the information transmitted and they are able to learn and be more effective. After all, e-learning courses are designed to educate and inform staff on policies, products and other important company information. If that message is ineffective there is no point in deploying the course.

Contact

About Mohive

Mohive develops the Mohive e-Learning Publishing System (eLPS), a system that enables an organization to collaboratively plan, author, review, and publish e-learning. It is a web-based software system that publishes e-learning content directly into an LMS. In other words, Mohive, combined with an LMS, provides the critical infrastructure needed to unlock the potential of e-learning within an organisation. A partial list of Mohive customers include: BBC, Charles Schwab, Hornbach, UPC/LibertyGlobal, PepsiCo, Promina, and If Insurance.

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