

The seven rules of eLearning localization

How to create meaningful experiences for every learner



Introduction

Why effective localization matters

Globalization has created opportunities that, for many businesses, simply wouldn't have been imaginable a few decades ago. Opportunities to enter distant markets, reimagine supply chains, off-shore operations and more.

But with those new opportunities come fresh challenges, especially for corporate learning and development teams.

They find themselves tasked with training a global audience of learners, comprising employees, franchises, resellers and dealers – individuals with a huge diversity in cultural background, frames of reference and preferred language.

And this raises a host of questions.

How do we effectively and consistently engage learners from very different cultures? How do we ensure they have a great experience that reinforces our brand values? How do we do it all, with limited time and budgets?

One solution is to create and deliver eLearning content that's been expertly localized to meet the specific needs of your audiences.



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What we mean by localization

While translation aims to convey meaning in another language, **localization goes further**, striving to make it culturally and regionally relevant and relatable to its audience. For this reason, while translation typically restricts itself to words, localization expands to symbols, images, graphics, currencies, user interfaces and more, and places all this into a cultural context. It also takes account of the differences in the way that learners behave, how they consume content and how they prefer to learn.

The benefits of localizing eLearning content

When global organizations create localized eLearning content, individual learners benefit – **but so does the business as a whole**.

Better learner outcomes. Learners feel like content has been designed for them. They find it easy to understand and navigate, they perceive greater clarity in the content, develop a better understanding and engage with it more deeply. And they enjoy better outcomes.

Better business outcomes. When eLearning works for every learner, everywhere, organizations can build a better trained and more knowledgeable workforce. At the same time, they can build their reputation as a future-ready global enterprise – helping them attract and retain top talent – and support their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) endeavours with more accessible training and development.

The dangers of a one-size-fits-all approach

When corporate training teams don't localize their content – the “one-size-fits-all” approach – the negative effects can be just as profound.

Diminished ROI. When eLearning content fails to communicate effectively and is open to being misunderstood, or if it fails to resonate with a percentage of its audience, then it won't fully deliver on the time and money invested in its creation and delivery. Worse, it can create additional costs as organizations are forced to invest further in retraining.

Increased disengagement and turnover. Trying to engage with eLearning content intended for learners with a different first language and cultural background is a frustrating experience. There can be a knock-on effect on productivity, employee morale and talent retention, as staff feel they haven't been properly equipped to succeed in their roles.

Compliance and safety risks. Corporate eLearning content often helps employees understand how to perform their roles in a safe and compliant way. Without adequate localization, content can fail to reflect local laws and industry standards, leaving individuals in unsafe working situations and employers at risk of legal action.

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The many benefits of eLearning localization – and the real dangers of assuming that one size will fit all – have seen it fast become an essential practice for companies with globally dispersed or multi-lingual learners.

But some organizations' localization efforts are much more successful, and much more cost-efficient, than others. Following these seven rules will help ensure your own localized eLearning content delivers the best possible outcome for your learners and your business.





Know your learners and their needs

Effective localization always begins with a good understanding of your learners.

So compile and review your employee data, conduct an internal training needs analysis – do whatever it takes to define the different groups that comprise your eLearning content's global audience and assess their differing needs as regards language, culture and regional fit.



Consider localization as early as you can

Unfortunately, localization is often still an afterthought. Businesses find themselves struggling to adapt eLearning content that was created without an international or multi-lingual audience in mind.

There's a better way. Identify any eLearning content that needs to be localized as early as possible in the content creation process. Then build that content in a way that's localization-friendly, from the language and visuals you use, to your choice of authoring and delivery platforms.

You may even find the most effective and efficient approach is to create localized content in multiple languages, for multiple audiences, simultaneously. This 'concurrent authoring' approach allows for a high level of linguistic and cultural adaptation, driving better understanding as well as higher engagement and completion rates.



Build flexibility into your content

How do you create localization-friendly eLearning content?

Make it as flexible as possible.

That means avoiding idioms (often difficult to translate into another language) and culturally specific scenarios that don't have clear equivalents for learners with a different nationality or cultural background.

It also means thinking carefully before embedding text, images and graphics. Embedded elements can make localizing a course for a different learner group more time-consuming and costly, by complicating translation and design phases.

Instead, you should opt for customizable multimedia content, with editable components that allow your experts to localize (and simply update) your courses without completing extra steps or redoing entire layouts.

You should also build flexibility into the layouts themselves. As your course is translated and localized, everything from text expansion and contraction to adapted graphics and visual aids may drastically alter its length. Copy in German, for instance, may need over a third more space than the same copy in English. So, test your fonts in all your target languages, leave plenty of negative space in your initial layout and make sure all layout elements can be modified with ease.



Consult an expert on cultural differences

Different cultures have their own unique communication needs and styles, religions, customs and ways of defining social relationships. For one group of learners a subject might be a suitable subject for a joke, for another, it might be taboo.

The visual elements of your eLearning content may also land very differently with learners of differing cultural backgrounds. For example, some cultures associate certain colors with positive and negative emotions, and the associations conjured by common imagery (e.g. a picture of a dog) are culturally specific too.

You should be mindful of the gestures and body language shown in your visuals. For example, the thumbs-up gesture – which is a positive sign in most Western countries – is offensive in certain parts of Asia and the Middle East.

Simply put? You should always consult experts who understand your learners' backgrounds during the localization process, to make sure your lessons will be meaningful and relatable, and won't cause any offence.



Demonstrate inclusivity

Whatever their nationality and cultural background, your learners should see their lives reflected in your localized eLearning content. If they don't, they may quickly disengage, feeling your courses aren't intended for them at all.

Demonstrating inclusivity depends on being able to depict individuals of any ethnicity, without reproducing reductive stereotypes by, for example, giving a character a stereotypical occupation or traditional clothing that they don't wear in their daily lives.

To get this right, you may need to train yourself and your content creators – and you should always listen to feedback from your learners.



Aim for universal accessibility

At its best, localized eLearning content isn't just inclusive of every learner. It's accessible to every learner too.

Not everyone in the world has the privilege of a steady internet connection, and while some of your learners will live in big cities, others may live in remote rural areas. You need to support them all, whether that means implementing more global servers for better connections, or allowing learners to download your courses and learn offline.

Similarly, not everyone has access to a laptop or computer. It may pay dividends to design mobile and tablet-friendly materials that allow everyone with a smartphone or tablet to access your content. And remember to thoroughly test your eLearning experience on every kind of device your learners might use.



Remember you don't have to go it alone

The simplest way to make sure your eLearning content works for every learner, everywhere, is to work with **an expert translation and localization partner.**

You'll want to seek out a partner with:

Experience and industry expertise. You'll need a partner that can support all your content formats, **target languages and cultural contexts**, and, ideally, one that understands your industry. Ask for proof of this – whether that's customer references, success stories or demos. Ask them how they handle user data security and compliance. And remember, localization needs tend to evolve over time. An ideal partner will have the breadth of expertise and the operational capacity to support you even if your business grows and you need to deliver training to new audiences.

Global reach and local expertise. Look for a partner with specialists all over the globe – they'll be able to tell you, firsthand, **what's going to resonate best with your target audiences.** They'll also have teams in your time zone, ready to respond to your needs.

An end-to-end service, tailored to you. You may need your partner to help with multiple aspects of localization, from choosing the right eLearning methodologies and technologies, to testing and optimizing localized content. Your partner should be able to do it all, while integrating with your technologies, and providing the right service for every localization need.

Four signs that you should seek a localization partner

If you're experiencing any of the following issues, it's definitely time to speak to an expert partner about how they can support your eLearning localization projects.

Low engagement rates

If your lowest levels of eLearning engagement and satisfaction are coming from your overseas learners – or those whose first language is different to the language used in the course – then that's a strong sign your localization efforts aren't sufficient and your content isn't resonating as it should.

Poor learning outcomes

Does it look like your learners are successfully completing your courses, but aren't putting what they've learned into practice? This could signal a disconnect between your course content and the reality of their working lives.

An inconsistent brand image

It's easy for localized content to become inconsistent and potentially confuse learners with its mixed messages and design styles. An expert localization partner will ensure your eLearning content accurately reflects your brand's visual aesthetic, messaging and values, without undermining its effectiveness across different audiences.

Overstretched teams and budgets

Many businesses initially attempt to manage eLearning localization in-house, only to find their staff and budgets increasingly stretched. If you notice that your learning and development team is getting overwhelmed, then bringing in a localization expert could allow your staff to focus on eLearning creation and curation, and ultimately reduce your costs.

Great localization is essential for global brands

It's hard to overstate the importance of localization when you're addressing a global audience of learners. Great localization lets you create engaging experiences for every learner, wherever they are – and in turn, build a more successful global business.

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