

NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT COALITION

Resource Sharing Project



Choosing and Working with a Vendor to Develop Online Learning Modules or Platforms

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There are so many different aspects to consider, and costs involved, when building online learning tools that some people choose to work with a vendor or contractor to create the foundation for their online learning programs. Vendors advertise services for everything from building brand new learning management platforms for coalitions, customizing existing open source (free) platforms, and turning training outlines into online course content to offering ongoing support and technical assistance after courses have been launched. Each vendor offers different options and has different levels of experience or expertise. Knowing what questions to ask can help coalitions clarify what they're really looking for and whether the vendor is able to meet that need, saving both time and money for everyone involved. Clarifying questions can help manage expectations so coalitions understand how much time and effort they will need to contribute to the project and the quality of finished products they are likely to receive.* Establishing good communication and an understanding of what the whole development process will entail at the beginning of the project can help coalitions experience the benefits of an external team's support.

* a sample list of questions is included at the end of this publication

Working with a vendor or contractor offers numerous benefits and comes with many drawbacks for sexual assault coalitions. The benefits may include familiarity with the different learning platforms and tools available. Choosing a learning platform that is right for the coalition's needs depends on what functionality people want, ability to pay, and coalition staff members' technical abilities. In addition to knowing what learning platforms exist, vendors may have experience customizing or building new learning platforms and/or curricula. This can be important because few, if any, learning platforms are built with sexual assault coalition needs in mind and most need some level of customization. Vendors can also design aesthetically pleasing and engaging materials. And contractors may be able to offer maintenance support on an on-going basis.

Though the benefits are many, so too are the challenges. One challenge coalitions often face in working with a vendor or contractor is a lack of familiarity with each other's work and fields. Coalitions may be unfamiliar with what it takes to develop online trainings and vendors may be unfamiliar with sexual assault work broadly, and coalition work specifically. This challenge can show up in particular when creating brand new materials during training development such as when imagining scripts or scenarios for instructional videos, choosing background images, and creating other interactive elements. It is the responsibility of both groups to make sure the work being created is both ethical and responsible. It has happened that coalitions ended up with training modules or materials that do not fit with their values or work for their intended audiences at the end of their contracts with vendors.

In addition to the mutual education sometimes involved with working with a consultant, their services may also be expensive. Online learning projects can cost upwards of \$10,000 for a single training or platform. Working with someone outside of the agency to build an online learning platform can also create problems months or years later. Unless otherwise clarified, vendors may own the rights to the platform or training materials created, making it difficult or impossible for coalitions to make any changes without hiring the vendor again. It is important to be specific about who will own any materials created (including any graphic designs, videos, and images used). For example, if a coalition hired a

vendor to create a Sexual Assault 101 training and now also wants to offer an online training about sexual assault prevention that looks visually similar, they may have to hire the vendor again because they only have PDF versions of learning materials, not Adobe Illustrator files, Microsoft Word documents, or high-resolution JPEG images. Other times, the issue may be that coalitions can create their own sexual assault prevention online training but not be able to upload the training to the place it is hosted on the internet because that part of the platform is owned by the vendor.

It is also important to remember that working with a vendor may save time, but it will still require work on the part of coalition staff. Working with a vendor is not like delegating a project to someone else on staff. Vendors do not know the coalition's organizational culture, messaging, or content to the same degree. To ensure the learning project reflects the coalition's language, values, and style, coalition staff will need to devote time to thoroughly reviewing any materials contractors develop and crafting helpful feedback. As much as possible, be clear and specific about what you do and do not want. For example, if you need there to be photos of people of different races or ethnicities throughout the training, or you only want to use [sans serif fonts](#), share that at the beginning. These are things coalitions may care about that designers may not think of. It is the coalition's responsibility to consider access and inclusion needs, not the vendors. Coalition staff will also need to recruit people to complete demonstrations of the training products and give their feedback. Thorough and timely reviews at each stage of online learning platform development will help timelines stay on track and can prevent adding extra edits, and cost, to the project. This could look like recruiting seasoned advocates to review content, offering a free trial of modules for allied professionals in exchange for detailed evaluation feedback, and engaging technical assistance staff to ensure information about their areas of expertise, such as prevention and sexual assault law, is accurate. In addition to these tasks, coalition staff may also need to revise and submit training materials in different formats, both to vendors and for funder approval. Attending training sessions hosted by the contractor to learn how to use and manage the learning platform or online training will also likely be part of the development process. All of these

stages of development may require participation from people with different roles throughout the coalition.

Being prepared for the challenges and planning ahead by establishing both solid communication and realistic expectations supports a positive experience when working with a vendor. Asking questions before signing a contract, understanding the benefits and drawbacks of working with a vendor, and looking at past samples of the vendor's work can give coalitions ideas about what is possible and provides tangible examples of the vendor's capacity. Entering into partnership with a vendor can ultimately help coalitions clarify their own expectations and lead to the development of a more thoughtful online learning experience. Depending on the scale of a project, a vendor may not be necessary, but particularly when coalitions are developing online learning products for the first time, working with a vendor can help make the process more manageable.

Sample List of Questions to Ask Vendors Before Signing a Contract

Depending on what you are looking for in a relationship with a contractor or vendor, some of these questions may or may not be relevant for you. There may also be other questions you wish to ask. This list is intended to help coalitions think through the process of working with a vendor. As much as possible, be clear and specific about what you do and do not want.

- Have you worked with sexual assault programs or coalitions before?
- Do you have references we can talk to?
- Can we see examples of your past relevant work?
- What training or background do you have in adult learning theory and/or youth learning theory? What training or background do you have in online curriculum development?
- From your perspective, what are the internal things a coalition needs to do, have, or be in order to be successful in this venture together?
- What are the accessibility features of your product? Do these features change the cost of the project?

- What minimum internet speeds are required of end users (both download and upload)? How will users with slow Internet speeds or low data caps access the materials?
- Will people be able to complete the training, using all accessibility features, on a mobile device? Will these features change the cost of the project?
- What data security and privacy features are included in your product?
- What reporting functions are available for viewing online and printing?
 - Are these customizable?
 - Can local program administrators, working from other IP addresses, create and read enrollment and completion reports for training participants from their programs only, without having the ability to delete reports and data?
- How are new users added and tracked?
 - Can local program administrators add new users without also having the power to delete any users? Can they reset the user passwords of people from their own programs?
- What are your (the vendor's) expectations around
 - Timeline?
 - Content review
 - For written materials?
 - For visual or video materials?
 - For platform functionality?
 - Staff time?
- How many rounds of revision are included in the contract?
- At what stages of the process will we get to see and give feedback on the project?
- Who owns the final product? What does that include?
- Who manages the final product after launch?
- Is the final product (training module or learning platform) expandable?
 - Does the coalition need to contract with you again to make changes or expand it? Or will the coalition have the ability to do that themselves?

- Who does the design and engineering work for you? Can we talk directly with them?
- Is any training for coalition staff included the contract? What specifically does that entail?
- If we (the coalition) need to make any changes to the contract during the process, how do we do that?
- If you need to make any changes to the contract during the process, how would you do that?

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Sample Online Learning Module Development Workplan

Stage	What is this?	Who does this?	Considerations
Sales & Marketing	The initial meeting(s) where coalitions learn what a vendor has to offer and what the coalition is looking for	Coalition or vendor may approach first	This meeting is usually led by a salesperson who is not the same person, or people, responsible for executing the project.
Background & Research	The vendor is becoming familiar with coalition written and visual materials and may be presenting options for learning platforms and training designs	Coalition often shares their existing training materials, shares or develops training syllabus, and selects a platform for their online learning product. Vendor often uses this information to inform their research and present different options for learning platforms and training design.	This is the stage to help vendors understand the online training target audience and any training philosophies that are important to the coalition. During this stage, it can also be helpful for coalitions to share examples of other people's products (images, activities, online trainings, etc.) that they both do and do not like. This helps the vendor have more insight into what the coalition's final vision is.
Curriculum Design	Deciding what and how people will learn.	This stage could be led by coalition staff or vendors,	This is where adult or youth learning principles are combined

		depending on contract. It often involves a lot of negotiation and communication.	with online learning principles to adapt or build new training content. This stage can also include researching and submitting supplemental links to online materials or previously developed coalition publications.
Programming or Engineering	Building the actual training, including any specific functions for the training module or learning platform, such as activity tracking, interactive quizzes, how to upload new learning modules, etc.	Vendor	This may happen concurrently with graphic design or other steps of the process. It's important to pay attention to language and ability accessibility of features and functions during this stage.
Graphic/Visual Design	Deciding what the training will look like, including choosing and assembling logos, images, fonts, colors, shapes, layouts, and transitions used throughout the online learning product	Vendor, with input from coalition	During this phase, coalitions will want to ensure visuals are accessible and representative of coalition values.

Online Content Element Creation	Creating any custom training elements such as instructional videos, audio transcriptions, illustrations, animations, etc.	Vendor, with input from coalition	<p>This may happen concurrently with other stages.</p> <p>If vendor is creating any video elements, it is important for coalition and vendor to communicate ideas, expectations, tone of video, and anything to avoid.</p>
Testing & Revision	Seeing how everything works together	Coalition and vendor	<p>Hopefully the coalition has been providing feedback all along the way.</p> <p>This stage is for potential learners and other staff to try out a functioning product to test accessibility, cohesion, and effectiveness of the entire product.</p>
Staff Training	Teaching staff how to use and maintain online training and/or learning platform	Coalition and vendor	It's a good idea to have several staff trained in how to use and maintain the online training and/or learning platform.

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