

Know Your Audience

When you're using the LMS from SumTotal, one critical thing to sort out before launching is audiences. You can't just flip a switch and hope that the learning just starts happening: understanding audiences is key.

But what, exactly, is an audience? Simple: only the learners in the audience of a learning activity can see it. Audiences let you control who can see an activity in Learner mode, and whether or not they can register for the activity. Audiences can be created based on a number of different criteria, including things like whether or not a user is in a certain organization, job, domain, is a manager and so on. Users often belong to many different audiences, although they could, conceivably, not belong to any audience at all, which would also be a very effective way to exclude someone from a learning activity, come to think of it ...

Audiences can also be used to assignment a learning activity. Any user who is a member of the audience is assigned the learning activity. The assignment stays as long as the user is a member of that audience.

When an audience is used to make a learning activity viewable to users, that's called a "registration audience." When an audience is used for assignment, that's called an "assignment audience." Typically, an audience is created as a registration audience or an assignment audience, but could – theoretically – be used as both. An audience created for neither assignment nor registration is called "deletable."

Anyway: audiences. Now that you know what they are, here are answers to some of the common questions people have when starting to set up audiences.

Are audiences used to keep learners out?

Absolutely. Although audiences are often thought of in terms of who should see a learning activity. However, a better way of determining if you need an audience is to see if you need to keep users out. If you think a while about the audiences you need based on who should see what, eventually your head may spin with the number of ways you could segregate users depending on the activity. But all that work may be in vain. The idea of creating audiences is really to exclude learners when you need to. For example, a course on payroll processing should have its own audience specific to only users who need to know. However, a course in becoming a lead in a certain type of job may only apply to certain users but there is no need to keep others out so such a course could have a more global audience.

Should I make an audience for each organization?

Not necessarily. While it is fairly common to make an audience for each organization in the database, you should only do so if you need to restrict learning activities to a specific organization. For example, some people make many of their activities visible to everyone and restrict viewability for only a few, select activities. And yes, I know that viewability is not technically a word--yet--but I'm going to use it anyway, and since it's my article ... well, you know.

Should some users be in all--or almost all-audiences?

Yes. Some users will need to be in many, if not all audiences. Some common examples of this are administrators who register others in Learner mode, or learning activity creators who need to test their creations in Learner mode. However, be careful when adding these users to all audiences: if you ever assign courses using audiences, you may inadvertently assign unwanted and unnecessary activities to those administrators or learning activity creators, leading to headaches later on.

Can I assign training to an audience?

In the LMS, a learning activity can be assigned to audiences which includes a dynamic list of learners that meet the audience criteria. Let's say you have an audience that includes everyone in a certain job – say, the Cupcake Taster job - and Sally is lucky enough to be a Cupcake Taster, then she is in the Cupcake Taster audience. But then she gets changes jobs to become a Brussel Sprouts Taster (considered a demotion by some), so she will no longer be in the Cupcake Taster audience. Audiences can be manually refreshed, but typically they are refreshed automatically each night.

Can I specify more than one audience for a learning activity?

Yes. While learning activities typically only have one audience, they can certainly have two or more. Be warned, though: if a learning activity has multiple audiences, users have to belong to ALL audiences in order to see the learning activity. Suppose, for instance, that a learning activity is created that is visible to both the "California" audience and the "Manager" audience. Rather than being visible to both groups, it will be visible only to those who are managers in California: users who are managers in Virginia won't be able to see it, nor will users who are non-managers in California. So while assigning an activity to multiple audiences is a great way to help narrow down who can see that activity, it requires careful thought and planning. Note, however, that you can take advantage of this to keep the number of audiences from getting out of control, since you can often make a learning activity visible to the right mix of people simply by skillfully combining audiences.



What happens if a user is no longer part of a registration audience?

That's an easy one: when users are no longer part of a registration audience, they can no longer see the learning activities viewable to that audience. Unless they had already registered for, started, or complete said activities, in which case, the user will continue to be able to view the learning activity in their training schedule or transcript, as appropriate. For online learning, the user will also still be able to launch or relaunch the activity (if relaunching courses is allowed). If, however, the user had not yet registered for the activity, it will disappear entirely and they will no longer be able to register for it once they are removed from the registration audience.

Irene Campbell has been talking about audiences--and sometimes to audiences--and other matters related to SumTotal products for over 20 years. During that time, she has worked with audiences of all sizes, from clients with small, phased-approach rollouts to clients with huge projects involving international LMS rollouts in multiple languages to thousands (and sometimes millions) of learners. She thinks that if this article were a learning activity, she'd set it to be viewable to a global audience.

If you have any comments, questions, or suggestions on this article, please feel free to email your thoughts to articles@terrabia.com, where they will find an audience that is happy to read them.