

The FA

A free and comprehensive learning platform for grassroots FA volunteers, the EE Playmaker online course is an invaluable asset for guiding this critical resource.

A history-steeped past

Almost 160 years ago at the Freemasons' Tavern, London, The Football Association – or The FA as it's more widely known today - was established with the remit to create 'a definite code of rules for the regulation of the game'. Today, this not-for-profit governing body's mission has broadened to accommodate an ethos of encouragement and inclusivity.

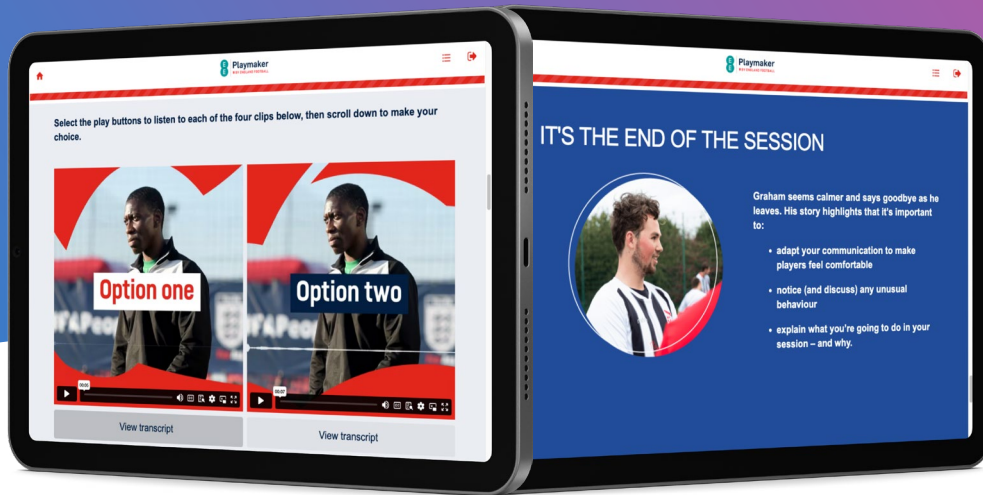
'Time For Change', the FA's strategy for the 2020-2024 cycle, draws upon the Association's unique ability to unite all parts of society, and

Critical to success

And yet none of that is possible without the backbone of the entire sport, the army of more than half a million volunteers who week in, week out devote their time to grassroots football, supplying advice, assistance and motivation to players of every age, gender and background across the country.

seeks not only to strengthen the structure and support through which major tournament wins can be secured but also to define football once and for all as "a game which embraces diversity and battles discrimination".





Facing the challenge head-on

Research revealed that one of the biggest challenges FA Education faced was upskilling new volunteers on key competencies. They also identified a lack of volunteer-specific training. Before the pandemic, no such programs were available through the FA. Instead, all volunteers had to complete The Association's basic coaching qualification, FA Level 1 in Coaching Football. Not only was this costly, it was only hosted at set venues, delivered face-to-face in large groups, and took a daunting 35 hours to complete.

Feedback from potential volunteers sent a clear message that the Level 1 was too expensive, too advanced, too lengthy, and difficult to access.

A mission to increase volunteers

With its sights set on a new training program, the FA sought to unleash the potential of willing volunteers to get involved in grassroots football. To succeed, it needed a course that would remove these barriers by:

- Reducing volunteer costs.
- Improving access to learning material whilst reducing learner seat time.

Additionally, to truly embrace diversity and battle discrimination, volunteers needed to reflect players from every race, gender and walk of life, meaning the organization needed to attract more females and those from ethnically diverse communities.

The FA's first digital qualification – Playmaker

The FA's inspired learning intervention was the introduction of EE Playmaker by England Football, a free online course that targeted grassroots volunteers and rolled out in the autumn 2020. With Covid still rife, the unveiling of an entirely online offering provided a timely and welcome means of keeping interest in football and coaching alive.

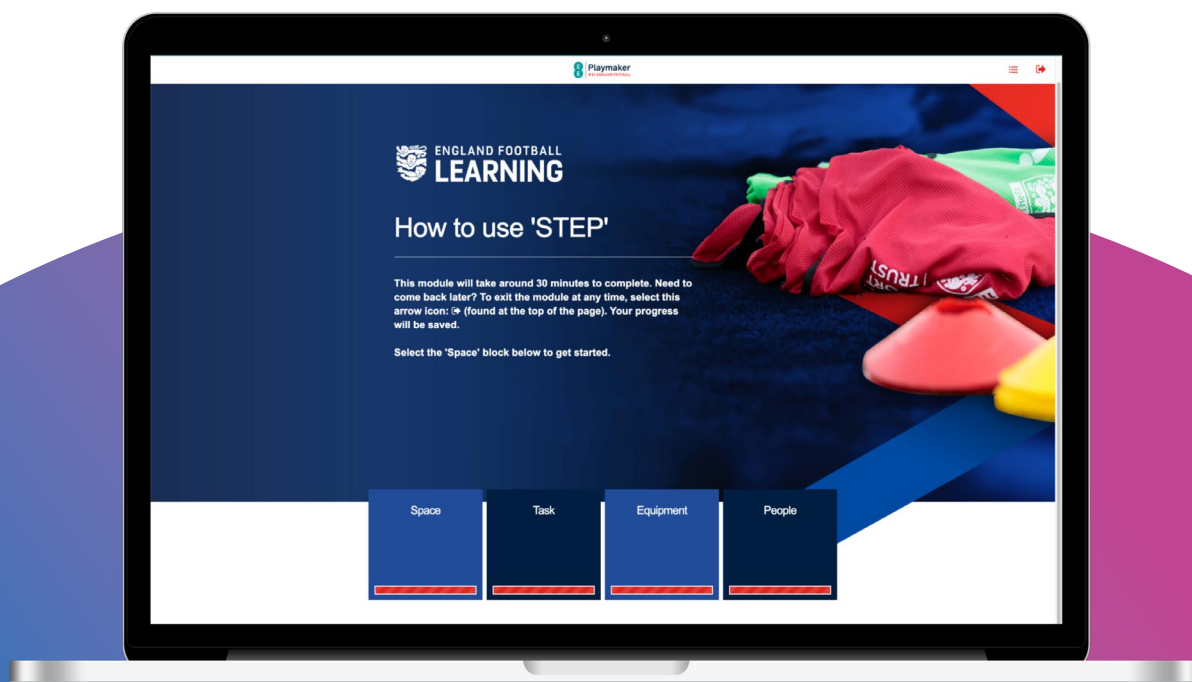
The first of its kind, this initiative wasn't without challenges. Faced with a short delivery time frame, a wealth of content to accumulate, and the need to ensure that learner interaction could be tracked, all while simultaneously dealing with competing projects – the small internal team knew it faced a battle.

But perhaps the biggest of all? The fact there was no mandate for anyone to undertake this learning as the audience consisted entirely of volunteers, the course had to be simple to access and engaging from the outset.

A considered solution

With the mission to remove barriers and open learning opportunities to potential volunteers in mind, The FA:

- Used existing technology to reduce costs, aid development time and pressures, comply with accessibility standards and track learner interaction.
- Harnessed the strengths of its L&D Team, crucially deploying a team to get under the skin of the original barriers, ensuring new learning programs were built to “help learning happen, rather than just provide content for content’s sake”, in the words of L&D Manager Nick Baker.
- Organized extensive stakeholder management by engaging with more than 20 internal and external parties with coordinated stakeholder management across a range of touch points at every level.
- Made completion easy through the FA’s open-access website, The Boot Room. With a clear overview of the course structure, and access to The FA’s LMS (learning management system) portal and its suite of reactive resources. Thanks to a thorough examination of the LMS analytics, the team was able to schedule regular email “nudges” to send at common drop-off points, prompting learners to continue progressing through the course. A feedback button and help center widget enabled them to flag up any problems, with the option of contacting the Association’s Mon-Fri customer service team.



Outcomes

Building excitement for our partners

The commercial impacts for EE as the sponsor of Playmaker have been considerable, given the FA's delight with the popularity of the course.

Bringing critical new volunteers to the game

Before the introduction of Playmaker, around 25,000 people signed up for the FA Level 1 course. In marked contrast, Playmaker's status as a free and open/optional course has resulted in 175,000 enrolments and a hefty 115,000 completions to date.



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Additionally, The FA has identified an improvement in diversity for new volunteers. In the last 18 months, they have seen female volunteers increase from 16% to 18% and non-white volunteers rise from 16% to 25%.

Delighting fresh talent

As well as this considerable improvement to volunteer enrolments, post-course survey analysis of 880 participants revealed an increase in confidence and significant, positive alterations in learner behavior.

Based on over 33k reviews, learners give their course experience an average score of 4.7/5. This is a testament to how important the course is in facilitating safe and inclusive sessions, the 'Deal with Medical Emergencies' module topped the most useful table scoring 78%, while the 'Create A Game For All' module was the most enjoyed element of the course at 73%. 86% believed the course was just the right length (10% too long and 4% too short!).

48% of those who have already taken the course have completed a second course (compared to 43% previously).

Furthermore, since completing the course, volunteer engagement has improved: (measured Sept-2023 vs. Jul/Aug-21):

- Locating their nearest AED (Automated External Defibrillator) – 43% vs. 40%.
- Challenging discriminatory or disrespectful behavior – 35% vs. 30%.
- Encouraging fun football sessions.
- Finding out why their team plays football.
- Reporting a safeguarding concern.
- An increased awareness of player welfare, for example, sitting a player out with a possible concussion.

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Most importantly, there has been an increase in volunteers in football (18% vs. 17% in 2021) as a result of EE Playmaker.



“Through digital learning, Playmaker is helping us to unlock and engage a wider, more diverse workforce – one with the skills to provide high-quality experiences for thousands of players. We can already see the impact of the qualification and know it will only continue to grow.”

David Reeve
FA Senior National Development Manager,
stakeholder: grassroots participation.



A future-proofed association

Nearly half of the volunteers went on to take full certification, and an incredible 94% of volunteers felt that Playmaker prepared them for their role.

“By creating a simple ‘first step’ into football, EE Playmaker is helping to diversify the grassroots workforce – and is particularly popular with female volunteers. The structure of the course provides a clear learner journey and allows individuals to study at a pace that suits them.”



Lucy Pearson
Director of FA Education,
stakeholder: project sponsor.

Today, with improved diversity, better upskilling, and greater numbers of volunteers than ever before, EE Playmaker has effectively plugged The FA’s volunteer gap – future-proofing the important role it plays in creating a game for everyone.

Testimony from volunteers

For volunteers, the experience has proved largely positive. Based on more than 33k reviews, Playmaker has attained an average score of 4.75 out of a possible 5. Comments include:

“As a volunteer, time is not always on my side. The format of this course allowed me to learn at my own pace around my work and family commitments. The live sessions were great and inclusive. No matter your background, all the team respected you and treated everyone equal.”

(Male, aged 35-44, White.)

“I found the course very useful and really well explained, making it easy to understand. I gained a lot of knowledge which definitely helped me improve and gain confidence to coach U14 girls.”

(Female, aged under 25, White.)

“I really like how interactive the online course was, therefore making it more memorable and engaging for students. I did think it was a tad too long, although this could be excitement to complete it as quickly as possible!”

(Female, aged Under 25, Non-White.)

“...I work as a volunteer here in Dubai. Thank you, England Football Learning management, for this opportunity to study free online courses like the EE Playmaker...”

(Male, aged under 25, Non-White.)

“I found the whole experience useful in helping me plan sessions, how to ensure the children’s safety and make sure everyone has fun.”

(Female, aged 35-44, Non-White.)

“The Playmaker course is the best starter coach course for me. I encourage all new starters to sign up.”

(Male, aged 25-34, Non-White.)



This case study was written in partnership with the team at Learnovate Research Centre, a not-for-profit research center focused on learning technologies. We used Learnovate's PEAS model to structure the consultancy with the customer.