

## Change Management/Outsourcing

# Return on learning, Part 6: "Phenomenal Learning": A key to enterprise learning transformation

By Kurt Olson and John Ceisel

**Kurt Olson** is director of capability solutions for Accenture. He is based in Chicago.  
kurt.j.olson@accenture.com

**John Ceisel** is a senior manager with Accenture's capability development organization. He is based in Chicago.  
john.a.ceisel@accenture.com

For any organization embarking on an enterprise learning transformation program, the primary drivers are likely to be business-oriented. Today's training budgets face increasing scrutiny, and learning executives must transform their organizations from cost centers to operationally savvy functions driven by a sound business case—and able to demonstrate a solid return on investment.

But efficiency must come without sacrificing training quality and performance improvement. If the classroom and online courses themselves are not engaging and professional, and if they do not support networking among employees and an enterprise-wide enculturation process, they will not deliver the changes in workforce performance necessary to drive high performance. In short, if the learning experiences themselves are not phenomenal, a training organization is probably headed down the wrong path.

### The rise of phenomenal learning

"Phenomenal learning" became one of the key phrases driving the enterprise learning transformation at Accenture. As part of a complex and multi-year change program, Accenture's internal training organization was reshaping the way the entire organization thought about training: why it was important, what value it delivered, and how it should be planned and managed.<sup>1</sup>

The transformation initiative took place in the wake of the global economic downturn following the bursting of the Internet bubble and the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Thus, our pressures were predominantly budget driven: become more efficient; deliver more for less; run learning like a business. But after one of our early planning meetings, our global HR lead presented us with a new challenge: "Whatever else we do, the learning programs we create have to be *phenomenal*."

The "phenomenal" label as the summary vision for learning design and delivery at Accenture caught on for many reasons. In addition to meaning "absolutely off-the-charts great," the word "phenomenal" also tapped into a major business trend in how to differentiate a company and keep its products from becoming commoditized: the move to a mindset of delivering *experiences* to customers, not just *services*. For Accenture, the new learning programs were not merely about the content—the information to be covered and mastered—but also the "phenomena" surrounding the experience of learning and the delivery of a course.

The Accenture team came up with a short definition to serve as a beacon during course design and development: Phenomenal learning means "creating a surprising and delighting level of excellence in every aspect of the training experience." This shifted the focus in

<sup>1</sup> The full story of Accenture's learning transformation is told in *Return on Learning: Training for High Performance at Accenture* (Agate, 2006).

an important way. The question for the learning transformation leadership team became: What else can we do to create a learning experience here that has the potential to change someone's career—even change someone's life? For those employees already satisfied with their work, what can we do to make them feel even better about working for Accenture? And for those whose commitment to the company is wavering, how might a positive training experience make them want to stay?

## The four experiences of phenomenal learning

Delivering phenomenal learning involves a focus on four interrelated dimensions: learning, networking, enculturation and the guest experience.

### Learning

The learning experience is the most important thing—though not the only thing—to get right. It begins with shifting from the traditional concentration on the content of the learning program and moving it toward the performance outcomes the learning is intended to produce. An effective learning experience considers the make-up of the learning population or audience for the course, and it uses specific techniques and strategies that work well for that audience. Phenomenal learning also engages students by drawing them into a difficult problem or issue, especially one that counters or challenges their existing mental models.

### Networking

At Accenture, some of the more foundational learning events take place at a central training facility just west of Chicago. When employees are brought together for these classes, they do more than just learn content; they also have the opportunity to build relationships with peers from around the globe—and these relationships can then be leveraged to innovate and deliver better service to clients.

Part of the networking experience relates to the distinctive character of the learning experience. That is, a pedagogy where small groups or teams work together to meet a goal or solve a challenging problem is, by its very nature, a relationship-building exercise. It also simulates the actual work environment of an Accenture professional and asks students to engage in the give-and-take of working with peers on a shared goal. The relationships forged among new hires during their common learning experiences often create bonds that last throughout their careers.

### Enculturation

As an experience, and not just a means to pour content into the heads of people, learning is an opportunity to participate in the culture of the entire company and to understand what it means to be a part of the whole. At Accenture, the classroom environment becomes part of the cultural fabric of the company. Students learn more than just the subject matter at hand; the classroom faculty are Accenture's senior leaders, who are able to share their stories, experiences and teachable points of view with their younger colleagues. In every class, occasions arise where the core values of the company can be reinforced and highlighted, where the company's heritage can be discussed, and where the company's global culture and diversity can be embraced. Many client projects at Accenture will involve a mix of people from around the world, so the classroom presents opportunities for people of different nations and cultures to interact with each other.

### Guest experience

This experience refers to the goal of surprising and delighting learners by the quality, engagement and even festive nature of the time in the classroom. Making that happen involves, in part, applying some of the best practices from the field of customer service to the learning environment—to learners and faculty alike. This means that all communications with employees are professional and upbeat; the check-in process is fast and easy; the classrooms are well designed for effective learning. Opportunities for fun and relaxation are built into the learning experience, too, and periodic breaks with healthy food options are provided so guests can recharge, refresh and reconnect with their lives back home.

## The relationship between phenomenal learning and employee engagement

The most obvious impact of highly effective corporate training is on the performance of the workforce: high-quality work delivered on time and on budget; exceeding the expectations of customers and clients; innovative approaches and breakthrough ideas. However, phenomenal learning also can improve employee retention, especially retention of the top performers.

An organization's training experiences can be a crucial part of ensuring that employees stay actively engaged—that is, that they are committed to improving business results through their work and that their perfor-

mance actually does create value. A company's commitment to training—in economic times both good and bad—is a large part of its overall commitment to its people.

The issue of engagement increasingly is on the minds of executives today, as many industries begin to see a shortage of talent on the horizon. Just as important is the fact that a disengaged workforce operates at low levels of productivity. On the positive side, research has found that higher levels of engagement not only improve retention but also drive up customer satisfaction, productivity and total shareholder return. In other words, high-performance businesses have an actively engaged workforce, and enterprise learning is a key part of making that engagement happen.

Successful execution of learning programs based on the experiences they create for people is not something that necessarily can be achieved by following a checklist. Delivering phenomenal learning is a mindset—and a vital one. Phenomenal learning is how all the planning and design comes to life in the experiences of an organization's people.

Outlook Point of View  
March 2007, No. 1  
Copyright © 2007 Accenture  
All rights reserved.

The *Outlook Point of View* series offers insights about leading trends and innovations across all industries.

David Cudaback, Editor-in-Chief  
Craig Mindrum, Managing Editor  
Jacqueline H. Kessler, Senior Editor

For more information on *Point of View* and other *Outlook* publications, please visit our website: <http://www.accenture.com/Outlook>

Accenture, its logo, and High Performance Delivered are trademarks of Accenture.

The views and opinions in this article should not be viewed as professional advice with respect to your business.