

Change Management | Outsourcing

Return on learning, Part 7: Running learning like a business

By Andrew White and Kurt Olson

Andrew White is the director of global training operations for Accenture. He is based in Chicago.
andrew.r.white@accenture.com

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

Today's enterprise learning organization is being challenged as never before. Accenture's research into high-performance learning organizations has found that the challenge is twofold: (1) increase the business value generated from enterprise learning, and (2) do it for less. It's a tall order.

Achieving that balance—between delivering rich, "phenomenal"¹ learning experiences and being as cost efficient as possible—was critical to the success of the enterprise learning transformation recently executed by Accenture.² In the face of a global economic downturn following the demise of the first Internet economy, as well as the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Accenture had to look carefully at all spending. That meant the internal training budget—which previously had grown each year to match the company's growth—had fallen under scrutiny.

Accenture's learning transformation program was visionary in terms of its potential impact on people and the performance of the business. Yet that business impact would only be achieved by improving the training function's operations—its ability to run learning like a business.

Successfully retooling the learning operations at Accenture involved several parallel initiatives: improving the program management capabilities of the internal training group; making the right learning delivery decisions to leverage new technologies where appropriate; and using more effective sourcing strategies for learning design and delivery.

Changing the mindset of the learning organization

Transforming enterprise learning today requires changing the way that the training function views its role. Many legacy training groups struggle to overcome a "service delivery" mindset, where training is seen merely as a function that supports the business with services. Our goal was to break out of that mindset and to focus on the business impact and upside value creation of enterprise learning.

Running learning like a business means, first, having business-oriented goals. A training department needs to set value objectives that have financial measures associated with them, and then keep those metrics and business objectives in mind throughout the development process. In our case, we used an innovative development technique, the Accenture V-Model of Learning,³ to ensure that training projects were linked with specific business objectives.

From a more operational perspective, our training organization needed the ability both to deliver great training experiences and to execute within a budget—to make tough decisions about what could and could not be afforded, and to deliver training timed to meet business needs.

An especially important role in the context of running learning like a business was that of our solution plan-

¹ See "Return on learning, Part 6: Phenomenal learning—A key to enterprise learning transformation," *Outlook Point of View*, March 2007, No. 1.
² The full story of Accenture's learning transformation is told in a recent book, *Return on Learning: Training for High Performance at Accenture* (Agate, 2006).
³ See "Return on learning, Part 4: Maximizing the business impact of enterprise learning," *Outlook Point of View*, February 2007, No. 1.

ners: people who were in charge of what Accenture calls "business interlock," the governance structures that keep learning offerings locked onto the most important business needs of the company. The solution planner/business interlock roles brought to life the vision for learning at Accenture: planning the curricula, managing the sponsorship of the curricula and ensuring the curricula were achievable within the cost constraints.

Making the right learning delivery decisions

An essential part of Accenture's learning transformation was reinvigorating the core curriculum strategy and the use of a central training facility that had distinguished Accenture in the 1980s and 1990s. The core approach had weakened in recent years, interfering with the company's ability to provide a consistent foundation of skills and to assimilate people into a common culture. We aimed to reassert the importance of core, common skills to our people and culture.

But there was a right way and a wrong way to reaffirm the importance of classroom-based training. Borrowing from the language of manufacturing, the Accenture team concluded that the company needed an education approach that was not a system of mass production, where some training was being delivered to large groups of people "just in case" it was needed. Instead, Accenture would move to a system of custom, "just-in-time" production that could respond more quickly to the changing needs of its people and the marketplace. With a more nimble implementation approach, we could prioritize our learning investments to address the skill gaps with the largest business impact.

Making the best and most appropriate use of technology to deliver training was also vital. Accenture already had in place a leading-edge learning management system and technology infrastructure for virtual learning, called "myLearning." But the training leadership team needed a more effective way to determine when a set of learning objectives called for classroom interaction, versus occasions when electronic delivery was not only less expensive but also resulted in a more effective learning experience.

To achieve and maintain the maximum benefits of both classroom and virtual/electronic learning, the Accenture team was guided by a decision-making model that assigned the specific method of learning delivery according to two factors: the extent to which participants needed to interact with content to master it, and the level of interactivity they needed with fellow participants to absorb and apply the knowledge content. When there is a need for high interaction with both content and people, a classroom experience would likely be the most appropriate delivery mode. If, on the other hand, high interaction with content is needed, but interaction with people is not, then an electronic experience (such as multimedia performance simulation) is likely to be the most effective and most cost-efficient delivery vehicle.

A more effective strategic sourcing strategy for learning design and delivery

Until the time of this learning transformation program, Accenture, like most organizations, had used its own dedicated team of employees to create proprietary learning content, support the execution of its classroom training program and maintain the learning infrastructure for the company. Now, to maximize cost efficiency, Accenture intended to develop and then follow a more sophisticated approach to strategic sourcing of learning design and delivery.

There are many strategic dimensions to learning that an organization such as Accenture generally intends to keep in house. However, for more transactional and delivery functions, companies do well to automate where possible, and then to pursue shared services and outsourcing models—not just for cost and efficiency reasons but also to leverage the expertise of a provider whose core competency lies within the business function being outsourced.

By outsourcing key administration, design and delivery capabilities to Accenture Learning (Accenture's learning outsourcing business unit), the company's central training could benefit from the kind of efficiency that often results only from a supplier-to-customer relationship. The Accenture team retained its key planning functions in house, while also benefiting from the consultation

of Accenture Learning. This way, the internal team could continue to determine the learning strategy and objectives, define the curricula, and shape specific courses and solutions. It could then turn to its outsourcing partner to design, build and deliver those learning programs in a manner that balanced quality with cost effectiveness.

Managing to business outcomes

Senior management in every industry increasingly measures the performance of learning executives in terms of how well they manage the business side of learning, and how well they meet defined business outcomes. By infusing a learning team with sound business skills and program management techniques, and by leveraging the right use of key technologies and sourcing strategies, enterprise learning can increase a company's ability to achieve high performance.

Outlook Point of View
April 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.