

Workforce Performance & Learning

Return on learning, Part 8: Using technology to create a high-performance learning organization

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New technologies are a vital component of delivering enterprise learning in a way that is cost-effective and that results in measurable improvements in workforce and business performance. There is no shortage of compelling technology-based learning approaches today, from e-learning to web-based seminars to podcasting to simulations. The challenge most organizations face, however, is in incorporating those specific technologies within an integrated and holistic infrastructure, in a way that makes sense both economically and from the standpoint of learning effectiveness. That's not an easy job.

A comprehensive enterprise learning transformation recently executed by Accenture¹ also included a transformation of the company's technology infrastructure for learning. Its existing technology base was in a shape similar to many companies today: it was fragmented, with information distributed over hundreds of databases worldwide. That situation raised distressing data integrity issues, and it also made it difficult to run centralized compliance reports or assess the value delivered from internal training. Managing any of the information centrally was time consuming and needed a great deal of manual support, so the learning infrastructure had also become very expensive.

Accenture faced the risk that its existing learning infrastructure would not hold up well under the strain that the learning transformation team was about to put on it. Accenture's learning strategy, for example, called for more e-learning

to support development of Accenture professionals. The company was looking for more nimble technology support—the ability to deliver faster, more timely learning to meet urgent business needs in a rapidly changing marketplace.

The path taken by the transformation team is instructive for any organization seeking to revitalize its enterprise learning capabilities through the intelligent application of technology. The answer, the team knew, was to create a single learning infrastructure; however, this would be a significant technical challenge. It meant creating one learning management system, one virtual instructor-led system and one learning data warehouse for all of Accenture, across dozens of countries and hundreds of business units. Yet this was part of the vision driving the entire transformation team: Use technology in the most effective way possible to provide exceptional learning experiences, track learning delivery and results, and provide the information needed to support effective decision making about how to steer the learning function in the long term.

Creating an effective team

Accenture's Chief Learning Officer, Don Vanthournout, began by assembling a group that became known as the "Infrastructure Planning and Coordination team," comprised of business architects charged with ensuring that all investments were properly targeted to the right business needs and goals. This team, when assembled, had two key strengths: First, a balance of both business savvy and technical know-how;

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

second, the desire to use technology not for technology's sake but toward the goal of developing a learning infrastructure that had a measurable, positive effect on how Accenture's people learned and worked.

The governance role played by this team was important to achieving the goals of the overall learning transformation program. A critical factor in the team's success was identifying an advocate for each of the key stakeholders: business sponsors and management, as well as employees. The team included someone responsible for the personalization of the learning infrastructure and another individual responsible for reporting. In addition, a particularly innovative step was to assign another team member responsibility for the experience of the learners themselves. With this team make-up, Accenture had more assurance that technology would be applied to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

A comprehensive learning infrastructure

Accenture made good use of a learning outsourcing strategy to develop its new global learning infrastructure. By working with Accenture Learning—Accenture's business unit devoted to outsourcing of enterprise learning—the development team improved its efficiency and found it easier to meet challenging delivery timeframes. While the internal Accenture planning group could focus on business requirements and strategy, Accenture Learning had the resources and skills to focus on and overcome the many technical challenges to deliver a system that met these requirements. By partnering with the outsourcing unit, Accenture's learning development team could focus on scoping the functional requirements to the associated business impact, without the distraction of the underlying technology implementation.

What this all meant for the Accenture team was that while many companies were (and are) struggling to implement one companywide learning management system, Accenture was able to perform that difficult task the first time out. The result was "myLearning," Accenture's single and unified global learning management system. This companywide infrastructure coordinates the work of the decentralized business units to provide:

- Intuitive access to comprehensive information resources that enable

Accenture professionals to be effective consumers of education, based on both the company's and the individual's needs.

- Common, standardized delivery platforms for distributed education to reach Accenture employees closer to the job site, to minimize delivery costs and to allow the operating groups and business units to focus on education content instead of technical delivery.
- Common, consistent feedback from all learning assets to proactively manage the quality of the content delivered to Accenture employees.
- Comprehensive reporting to improve management decision making and better align the overall education investment with business need.

Because of myLearning, all of Accenture's employees today—more than 150,000 people in 49 countries—can go to a single intranet site for their learning and development needs. The new system created a single shared infrastructure for all virtual learning, one survey system to measure learning effectiveness, and one central data warehouse and decision support system for tracking and reporting.

Reaping the benefits

The myLearning system and a streamlined central operations team have delivered significant benefits to Accenture:

- **Cost savings.** Retiring all the local training management systems allowed the company to redeploy the associated local administrative personnel, representing more than \$23 million in cost avoidance in the first three years and contributing to strong executive support for the business case. In terms of ongoing costs, the myLearning capabilities enable Accenture to effectively track actual course usage to optimize vendor contracts—that is, to determine costs on actual course completion, not just on course availability.
- **Balancing control and flexibility.** The technology infrastructure for learning has given Accenture both centralized control and local flexibility. The overall technology infrastructure at a company can be thought of as the "pipes" that deliver learning; but there also need to be the "valves" that give decision makers control over how much of what goes where. The myLearning system is the set of valves that gives Accenture greater

control today over what training gets pushed out in what amounts. The company can, for example, have more assurance that its people have completed training required by regulations such as Sarbanes-Oxley.

- **Support for continuous learning.** Accenture can now support both large learning programs offered at given points in time, and also continuous learning. Virtual seminars and workshops conducted via myLearning allow Accenture to provide an effective and highly interactive way to support continuous learning.
- **Better decision support.** The "myLearning Decision Support" function integrates information from a variety of sources and provides a customized, comprehensive and timely snapshot of learning metrics. This reporting function is essential for the learning professionals as well as for the company's business executives.

The proper application of technology to Accenture's learning design and delivery capabilities has resulted in more timely and relevant support for the company's different workforces across industries. The global training team can more effectively plan courses that meet business needs, in ways that also create compelling learning experiences for the company's employees. Training delivered via e-learning or online seminars can be integrated into the holistic picture of career development and learning for the company. And executives can use reporting from the global learning management system to make more informed decisions about helping employees work together toward the common goal of achieving high performance.

Outlook Point of View
May 2007, No. 2
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