

BEST in E-learning

By Jennifer J. Salopek

Three 2008 ASTD BEST award winners—Toshiba America Business Solutions, La Quinta, and BB&T—exemplify the best in workplace e-learning.

In his article for the June 2008 issue of *T+D*, “Technology Euphoria,” Marc Rosenberg commented that many organizations had greeted the advent of e-learning with “irrational exuberance.” Truly effective e-learning, Rosenberg writes, is

- a tool rather than a strategy
- integrated into a corporate culture that values learning
- more than the sum of its courses
- the right solution to the right problem, with defined measures of success.

Three 2008 ASTD BEST award winners—Toshiba America Business Solutions, LaQuinta Management, and BB&T—exemplify the best in workplace e-learning. Their e-learning offerings are crafted as one part of an overall learning and performance strategy; designed to solve address specific performance gaps; leveraged within a learning culture; and crafted with an intense focus on the audience. This is e-learning that is much more than a course or a tool, but less than a worldview. Rosenberg’s assertions served as a framework for our conversations about their approaches.

Toshiba America Business Solutions

Toshiba America Business Solutions was an early adopter of e-learning, according to Tony Codianni, director of education and development for the Irvine, California-based company. “We view ourselves as pioneers in the field, and believe our approach is very sophisticated now,” he says.

E-learning at TABS is directed at two primary audiences—dealers and corporate employees—and is leveraged primarily to impart knowledge that is a prerequisite for the company’s many classroom-based courses, for which applicants must pass a competency test. The teaching of “skills,” as opposed to “knowledge,” is the exclusive purview of the classroom at TABS. The organization worked with Harvard Business School to customize and adapt 42 HBS courses to the four main TABS learning tracks: managing self, managing projects, leading teams, and leading businesses. These are supplemented by live e-learning classes, offered both synchronously and asynchronously.

TABS keeps the needs of its audience at the fore. “Our delivery methods have been driven by the rise of several distinct generations in the workplace,” says Terry Kristiansen, national education manager. Aware that those workers possess a variety of learning styles, the education staff is devoted to giving them multiple options. The company’s CEM—classroom, electronic, mobile—delivery strategy allows its multigenerational workforce to complete educational requirements any time, anywhere.

For example, for employees participating in TABS’ new leadership development program, content is distributed via a monthly LEADcast. The LEADcast can be downloaded online 24/7 in one of three formats:

- articles, which can be viewed on-screen, printed out, or downloaded to a mobile video player
- webcasts, live or on-demand online sessions that combine audio and video, and are delivered by subject matter experts
- “Beats,” audio sessions that can be downloaded to an iPod, MP3 player, or any other portable audio device.

Therefore, whether a learner prefers to read, watch, or listen, TABS has a way to deliver content. That makes sense to Codianni, who says, "For us, e-learning is both a strategy and a tool. Our strategy is to provide alternative approaches and delivery methods. E-learning is one tool we use."

E-learning is less human-resource intensive, the company reports, lowering costs by requiring minimal trainer time. Those savings are put into expanding the number of subjects covered and courses offered. Codianni reports that 70 percent of company learning content is now delivered via technology. The five members of the e-learning staff are content and process experts who work with subject matter experts to design custom courses for TABS; the company unveiled 25 new courses in October and is currently working on e-learning to support a new Six Sigma LEAN program. The group is also planning to explore e-learning on an open platform. "We never rest on our laurels," Codianni says. "Innovation is the key word at Toshiba. We are always trying to push the envelope."

La Quinta

At La Quinta, a hotel chain that employs more than 10,000 people nationwide, experimenting with e-learning began about five years ago. As the technology and content has evolved, so has the company's strategy, which is now devoted to targeting and remediating performance gaps in short, 10- to 15-minute bursts.

"We have done a lot of experimenting," says Christina Cernuch, vice president of operations and training. "Previously, we tried to cover too much, which resulted in archaic, static modules with a very linear flow." In addition, the introduction of a new property management system in June 2007 rendered all many e-learning courses obsolete.

"Now, we approach everything from the perspective of the guest experience at La Quinta," adds April Carey, director of operations training. "We went directly to managers and front-desk sales representatives (FDSRs), and asked them, 'What do new hires struggle with?'" To address those gaps, the company created eight new learning modules of 15 minutes each that support its guest relations approach, known to FDSRs as Buddy's View.

Buddy is an animated character who leads new staff through La Quinta's guest-relations philosophy, which emphasizes selling the Best Available Room Rate, doing "Whatever It Takes" to satisfy guests, and using creative problem solving. Employees' success at implementing this philosophy is constantly measured by automated reports, a guest survey tool, and property test calls.

Carey cites LQ's revamped new employee orientation program as one of the best examples of the company's e-learning transformation. Previously, the program was a page-turner that yielded low completion rates. Working with local vendor MLink, LQ transformed NEO into an engaging experience featuring video clips and interactivity; chunked into four 10-minute sections, it can be completed at the employee's convenience.

"E-learning is one of many tools we use to deploy our learning strategy," says Cernuch. Her training department has changed the way it reports on e-learning usage, adopting the way operations measures performance—with a keen focus on the bottom line. A considered use of resources also shapes the strategy: "Our focus has been on developing systems that we have in place," says Scott Burton, senior manager of learning technologies. "We are aware of new technologies but only act if we see a clear advantage. At La Quinta, our learning technologies include fax blasts and desktop wallpaper. What we are truly seeking is an improvement in operational performance."

Branch Banking and Trust Company

For many e-learning advocates, blended learning is the Holy Grail of any truly integrated training organization. The operational performance gap targeted by BB&T University for its first truly blended learning solution was that among branch tellers. Across the commercial banking industry, annual turnover among tellers hovers around 45 to 50 percent. Although BB&T's rate was somewhat lower—around 30 to 35 percent—the bank wanted to drive it down even more.

This sort of constant turnover presented a challenge for teller training, which had traditionally relied on observation and on-the-job instruction by senior tellers. BB&T University wanted to develop a training program that could still be delivered in the branch, but on a just-in-time basis and with a more consistent approach.

As a result, BB&T University staff developed “Teller Fundamentals,” a two-week course structured as a virtual classroom environment. Participants are assigned to a University instructor who provides direction and mentoring. Working on a laptop or desktop computer in the branch, tellers participate in an interactive program of tutorials, exercises, and assessments. If necessary, the instructor will contact the teller or branch manager to offer individualized instruction or coaching. During the first week, participants also observe experienced tellers and attend virtual classes, which reinforce concepts covered in the multimedia program. The classes are live and synchronous, and permit the instructor to call on trainees for discussion and demonstration.

During the second week, additional online exercises supplement on-the-job training with a teller mentor on transaction processing. These mentors have been certified by the University and are given a structured curriculum to follow. A final assessment tests trainees' proficiency; a two-day classroom session is held after 60 days to reinforce operational standards and customer service.

Will Sutton, manager of BB&T University, describes corporate learning as combining decentralized decision making with centralized support. “We want to leverage the decentralized approach of a community bank with the resources of a large corporate bank,” he says. “Ultimately, we want to create a place where employees can learn and grow.”

BB&T began web-based delivery of courses in 2007. David VanSchooten, e-learning manager, says, “Our e-learning strategy is to partner with strategic initiatives, help them to meet goals and move the business forward. E-learning is a tool, a way of providing information.” Debi Wayne, curriculum design and development manager, reports that BB&T's corporate culture is very supportive of learning, and that information exchange and knowledge sharing are core values at the bank.

The team is working on defining online course effectiveness and tying it to performance improvement. Currently, evaluation for classroom-based courses measures knowledge retention through Kirkpatrick Level 3. BB&T is committed to e-learning as a tool within its workplace learning arsenal; VanSchooten's team is developing 35 new courses this year, while keeping an eye on next-generation learning. BB&T is working with Alison Rossett to figure out ways to put power in the hands of learners, and to uncover how elements of social networking might be leveraged. “There are many preconceived notions of what training is and what it should do,” says VanSchooten. “We are trying to avoid a cookie-cutter approach.”

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