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E-Learning Around The World

E-learning, tricky to implement in the best of circumstances, gets even more difficult when you go global

By **Dawn Gareiss**

Litton PRC, an IT consulting and systems integration subsidiary of Litton Industries Inc., has a global E-learning program that trains 5,400 employees in 80 offices worldwide. What started six years ago with 150 technology courses on CD-ROMs is now 1,500 online courses on everything from interpersonal skills to Java. There's even 24-hour access to online mentors.

"We have people with varying degrees of access to the corporate infrastructure, but all have access to the Web," says Kent Schneider, president of Litton PRC's defense-systems division in McLean, Va. "We have people across 16 time zones, and they need access to learning at various times. This gives us that flexibility."

E-learning's greatest selling point--flexible, round-the-clock online access to any number of courses--makes it especially attractive to multinational companies. But to reap the benefits, companies must overcome several challenges.

The most obvious challenges for any global E-learning implementation center on language and localization issues. Many companies offer courses only in English or in English and one other language, usually Spanish. An English-only focus works for them, because they conduct their business all over the world in English. But others need courses in more than one language.

Companies that want to offer courses in several languages usually turn to translators. Financial-services provider GE Capital relies on translation companies to offer Web-based courses in English, French, German, and Japanese. But it's not enough just to convert a course from one language to another, says Mike Markovits, manager of the Center for Learning and Organizational Excellence for the Stamford, Conn., General Electric Co. subsidiary, which earned $5.19 billion last year. "Globalness requires localization or ways to ensure the learning makes sense in local context," Markovits says. "The translation company may not be up to speed on GE language, so we have GE employees in each local language review the translation to make sure it's GE-correct."

For example, as part of an E-business course that GE Capital offered last year, students had to visit specific Web sites. But the assigned sites were from the United States, appropriate for English-speaking students. To make the course more relevant for other students, localization experts identified Web sites in various languages that were just as useful.

Bryan Chapman, an analyst with E-learning research firm Brandon-hall.com, cites Cisco

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- *TechWeb News:* Education Czar Bennett Heads Web-Based Effort (1/8/01)

LOCALIZATION:
Going global with E-learning requires ways to make the material appropriate for different locations, says GE Capital's Markovits.

Big IT problems

Systems as an example of a company that's done a good job implementing global E-learning. "About five years ago, the company was doing 80% of its training in instructor-led classes and 20% in a technology-based format. Now that's flipped, and 80% of the company's training is via the Internet and 20% is in the classroom."

Cisco "sets the standard for the rest of the industry," Chapman says. It has a centralized pool of courses customized for specific regions of the world and individual students. The Cisco Networking Academy Program trains hundreds of thousands of high school and college students around the world, offering courses in 11 languages via software from Lionbridge Technologies Inc. The LionAccess module lets Cisco upload and download files for translation; LionPath routes new and changed files; LionLinguist lets Cisco leverage previous translations; and LionView is a portal that Cisco managers can use to track globalization projects Cisco has been an industry leader with its work on learning objects--small modules of online content that can be reused and personalized for specific students. Cisco's big push is providing metadata tagging--bits of XML code that identify types of content--that can be matched with employee profiles. Only the most relevant tagged content will be delivered to employees' learning home pages. Cisco says it plans to roll out customized home pages by year's end.

Aside from the language and localization issues, companies need to decide whether to post the E-learning content internally or use a hosting service. GE Capital selected the external hosting option, whereby employees connect to courses via a URL. "That simplifies the process for me and for our tech organization in terms of dealing with bandwidth issues and our own network," Markovits says. E-learning provider DigitalThink Inc. hosts GE Capital's E-learning application.

In addition to Webcasts and workshop simulcasts augmented with local facilitators, Arthur Andersen relies on global E-learning to train 77,000 employees in 83 countries. The professional-services firm has installed a common user interface on employees' notebook computers and uses English for most E-learning content, says Kathy Dressel, director of E-learning, assurance, for Arthur Andersen's Performance and Learning unit in St. Charles, Ill.

FLEXIBILITY COUNTS: Employees in Litton PRC's defense-systems division need access to E-learning applications in 16 time zones, says Schneider (center), with Pat Sherod (left) and Mike Balderman.

"Like all global companies, we have problems in developing countries," she says. "The infrastructure may not be what it should be, and there are bandwidth issues."

That's because employees in some parts of the world have slower connection rates, as low as 9,600 baud. Browsers can also be a problem. In the United States, most browsers are equivalent to Internet Explorer 5, but for much of the rest of the world the norm is IE or Netscape 3.0 on a 486 computer.

Georgia-Pacific Corp. opted to offer its E-learning courses on the Web, in part because the programming languages used by its E-learning provider, SmartForce plc, conflicted with the security features Georgia-Pacific uses on its intranet. "We can't compromise security for learning," says Wendy Wheeler, manager of training and development at the Atlanta paper and building materials manufacturer and distributor. Georgia-Pacific has also struggled with the issue of employee identifiers, Wheeler says. U.S. employees use Social Security numbers to access E-learning programs. But employees in other countries don't have those numbers, so the company may implement an in-house employee-identification system.

Pricing varies widely for implementing E-learning globally. Learning-management systems--platforms that manage Web-based and classroom training--start at $200,000; costs associated with third-party content programs vary widely, Chapman says. All told, global E-learning initiatives can reach the million-dollar mark. Sun Microsystems' Sun University expects to spend about $1.1 million this year on its E-learning efforts. Georgia-Pacific signed a $1 million, four-year contract with SmartForce that provides IT-related content to 1,000 users and user-skills content to 10,000.

"In the short run, it's very costly," GE Capital's Markovits says. "But the size of your audience determines how you get the return on your investment." ■

Photo of Markovits by Ed Santalone
Photo of Schneider and company by D.A. Peterson

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