

# Keys to Developing a Successful Global Learning Program

## Introduction

Bersin & Associates found that in high-impact learning organizations, the L&D organization drives effectiveness by meeting “the unique needs of its audience, despite variance in geography, culture, age, and other sources of diversity.”<sup>1</sup> As those variances increase, meeting the audience’s needs becomes more difficult: a challenge global organizations grapple with every day.

Like any L&D department, staff responsible for learning at global enterprises must identify and prioritize training and development needs and goals. Though global organizations must address these concerns on a larger scale, this step in the process remains consistent regardless of program size and scope.

Former Booz Allen Hamilton CLO Ed Cohen writes, “Although many of the components are the same for a global corporate university, there are unique characteristics to keep in mind. Cultures, languages, learning styles, modes of delivery, and global footprint are some of the main areas to consider. The key to a successful global corporate university is the ability to identify universal competencies, as well as to meet the unique needs of a mobile society of global citizens who need to adapt nimbly and intuitively to an abundance of differing business situations.”<sup>2</sup>

Once the L&D staff have collaborated with key stakeholders to determine learning needs across the enterprise, the differences between a global organizations and smaller operations become more apparent. In planning how to deliver learning, the L&D professional tasked with reaching constituents in multiple countries must consider commonalities and disparities across locations and cultures. Three crucial components in developing an effective global learning program include:

- Determining the most effective and efficient ways to deliver learning
- Identifying and addressing disparities in access to learning across locations
- Accommodating regional, cultural, and other differences while providing consistent content and messaging to everyone participating in the same learning program.

<sup>1</sup>*The High Impact Learning Organization: Research Program 2012. The High Impact Learning Organization Primer. By Janet Clarey, David Mallon and Josh Bersin. Bersin & Associates, March 2012.*

<sup>2</sup>*The Next Generation of Corporate Universities: Innovative Approaches for Developing People and Expanding Organizational Capabilities. “Chapter 8 - Global Considerations for Corporate Universities”. Ed. Mark Allen. Pfeiffer. © 2007.*



### Selecting modes of learning delivery

While many people and organizations strongly prefer classroom training, global L&D organizations simply cannot rely solely on ILT.



“Within a global corporate university, time differences, geographical differences, escalating travel costs, opportunity cost of time, and other barriers exist. Instructor-led learning cannot be justified as the primary means for learning,” Cohen states.<sup>3</sup> “Beyond actual real-time, on-the-job learning, use of virtual learning combined with alternatives, including degree and certification programs, executive coaching, performance consultancy, global learning circles, experiential learning, and self-study, needs to be a primary mechanism for learning deployment.”

*Scotiabank even identified enhancing efficiency through e-learning as one of the company’s keys to success in the 2011 Scotiabank Annual Report:*

*“We provide learning and development opportunities for all employees worldwide, equipping them with skills and knowledge that will enable them to serve customers better, and meet their personal career development goals. This year, we provided employees with access to thousands of SkillSoft e-learning courses—valuable learning which is also cost-effective...The courses have been especially popular in Mexico, where employees have enthusiastically embraced SkillSoft e-learning and are the Bank’s biggest per capita users. Globally, the new program has led to significant savings and greater consistency with respect to learning content.”*

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Candy Haynes currently serves as one of six Learning and Relationship Directors at PwC, which has 771 locations in 158 countries. She also spent 20+ years in the global learning group at Deloitte. Haynes emphasizes the importance of getting global input in designing learning programs. “Make sure your development team is as globally diverse as your audience—you have to have that diversity as well as subject matter expertise,” she says.

Flexible and scalable, e-learning has become increasingly important in helping global enterprises provide consistent training. SkillSoft Learning Strategist Elizabeth Yarnell explains, “Many years ago, if you were working with a US based company that had a global presence, chances are the people at the corporate office were typically the fortunate ones who received training, mostly due to bandwidth limitations and travel costs. Virtual learning has leveled the playing field and offered learning opportunities to all employees regardless of their location. People in the Philippines are now being given the same learning opportunities as those who live in Cincinnati, Ohio; India or Australia and they are eating it up. Everyone across the company has the same learning opportunity.”

Susan Covington and Susan Hughes, who have both held various L&D roles at Convergys, develop learning programs for a relationship management company with more than 75,000 employees worldwide. Hughes says the fast-paced nature of Convergys’s business makes e-learning a strong fit. “Working in a contact center is like a NASCAR event. E-learning provides an opportunity to have resources available to employees on demand. Long gone are the days when we can cycle all our employees through instructor-led training,” she says.

Hughes says e-learning is often a complement to other modalities. “For example, our onsite HR managers wear many hats, but they are definitely on the front lines of employee development. E-learning resources offer access to a huge common toolbox that can serve our large employee population. Our HR managers pick and choose the best fit, confident it will be the latest and greatest.”

As another means to build community and consistency across locations, Covington says Convergys got a good response to an interview program that allowed learners to call in with questions. “We’d provide a topic of interest to people all over the globe and interview a subject matter expert,” she says. “We might select a subject related to our performance management topic for that quarter, then invite relevant audiences.”

“We try to find someone from a business unit with a stellar reputation to address the issue,” Hughes says. While the program started as a radio-show type call in format, it has evolved to use web conferencing tools.

### Addressing disparities in access and technology

L&D professionals often face a lack of consistent technology infrastructure when developing programs for global audiences. In situations where not everyone has the same



technology or access available, it's crucial to consider versatility when choosing delivery modalities. "Don't assume locations all have the same capabilities," Haynes cautions. While designing a recent global learning program, a team wanted to incorporate a social learning component. "You have to ask how much reliance on this you want to have if not all territories have access," she says.



Employing one LMS worldwide, consolidating content and streamlining processes has clear benefits. As data analysis becomes more important to HR, the ability to track how learning supports talent management and drives business results will become a higher priority. L&D professionals must be able to show the ROI of learning; reducing costs through a unified platform and carefully curated content can be one path to improving ROI.

Using one global LMS allows all employees access to the same training whenever it is needed, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Whether people are working at home, at a company office, or another location, as long as they have network access or internet connectivity, they're able to access all the company's learning resources.

Leveraging other technologies in place across the enterprise can help cut down on concerns about compatibility and access. David Mallon, Senior Analyst at Bersin & Associates, points out that Microsoft SharePoint is often widely deployed across an organization; some global L&D departments have built on this existing infrastructure as a platform for social learning and knowledge-sharing.<sup>4</sup>

While a unified platform for learning content can streamline delivery, it doesn't guarantee universal access. Haynes says L&D professionals must consider the data privacy laws that govern the countries in which their learners work. "France and Germany have much different requirements than many other countries," she says. Particularly when developing learning solutions requiring input of learner information/interests, or encouraging sharing of learner profiles and experiences, additional due diligence may become critical.

### Accommodating differences while maintaining consistency

L&D professionals with successful global learning programs understand how to respect cultural preferences while still operating within established frameworks. Understanding your target audience and adapting content to them can have a powerful impact; but failing to do so can have an even greater effect.

One of the biggest misconceptions many stakeholders make, Haynes says, is "Assuming you can take a classroom program that works in the U.S., make it virtual, and achieve the same results globally. That assumption can be pretty costly—it can actually have a

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negative impact.” Haynes says when adapting classroom training for virtual learning, it’s important to reengineer the program to fit the technology. When done poorly, Haynes says, this can turn learners off to both the content and the delivery mode.

Fergus O’Sullivan, SkillSoft’s General Manager of Outsourcing, says fully adapting content for a target audience requires adjustments not only from a language perspective, but from a cultural perspective as well. When localizing course content, SkillSoft seeks partners with a deep understanding of the target market. “We look for partners who bring certain attributes to the table—we think a key to the success of localized products is choosing partners with both linguistic and business expertise,” O’Sullivan says.

In addition to translating language, O’Sullivan says localization requires a careful scrutiny of imagery to ensure it accurately represents the local learners. “We look at attire, facial expressions, terminology, currency, and character mix,” he says. Scenarios may need to be adapted to reflect culture as well. Examples could include differences in interviewing techniques or discussions about leisure activities, O’Sullivan says.

While some countries are receptive to U.S. imagery, others are not. O’Sullivan says learners in countries like Japan or Germany may look at course content that doesn’t reflect their culture and decide the courses don’t support what they are trying to accomplish. Using localized content can help learners master the core competencies an organization has identified as essential for success.

Haynes says localization can make a difference in receptivity to self study and off the shelf content. In her experience, learners in Latin America in particular have embraced localized e-learning courses. “Our SkillSoft courses are very popular in Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela—learners like the bilingual capability. Courses have a lot of uptake and use there.”

### Conclusion

Ultimately, L&D professionals in global organizations have an obligation to engage learners around the world—they must captivate diverse audiences and reinforce that despite their differences, each learner is part of one organizational culture, with common values and goals across the enterprise.



## Recommended Reading

*Strategic Knowledge Management in Multinational Organizations* by Kevin Sullivan. ICI Global, © 2008.\*

*Strategic Learning and Leading Change: How Global Organizations are Reinventing HR* by John Steven. Taylor and Francis, © 2009.\*

*The Next Generation of Corporate Universities: Innovative Approaches for Developing People and Expanding Organizational Capabilities*. Edited by Mark Allen Pfeiffer, © 2007.\*

\*Available through Books24x7.

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