

Share and Share Alike

BY PAMELA LEIGH

People have formed consortiums for every purpose from purchasing products to swapping information. So, why not a consortium for sharing multimedia training?

RICK CORRY REMEMBERS the day that his idea went public:

"In the spring of 1995, I and about 200 other managers and executives from several companies were listening to a vendor tell us how great multimedia is. And I'm thinking, 'Here we go again. This guy's going to try to sell a training program to each of us and maintain control of the finished products.' When the vendor asked if there were any questions, I jumped out of my chair. I told the group that I was amazed that, considering our common training needs, we weren't sharing what we had and funding what we need."

The idea was not greeted with applause. In fact, silence reigned, and the vendor was not pleased with Corry's contribution. Em-

barrassed, Corry sat down, wondering what had possessed him to be so bold. After the meeting, though, he was surrounded by about 40 people, all handing him their business cards and requesting that he call them if he were to launch a venture for sharing training.

Back at Owens-Corning in Toledo, Corry shared with his then-boss, John Vermeulen, vice president, building materials, sales and distribution, what had transpired at the meeting. Vermeulen liked the idea of sharing training with other companies. A few months earlier, he had named Corry head of Owens-Corning's performance university, and then challenged him to find a way to stretch the limited training budget for its sales and marketing field employees.

Faced with that challenge, Corry began to research solutions, and he came to a few conclusions that led to his share-sourcing concept. First, he was aware that there are many non-competing business consortiums—purchasing consortiums, engineering share groups, hospital buying groups, and so forth—but he could not find any educational consortiums.

He talked to suppliers about multimedia and was astonished at how expensive developing a training module can be. Corry says the typical supplier pitch was, “If you provide the content and travel expenses, we can develop something for you in six months, which will cost about \$130,000. And the really good news is that after two years, you can lease

it back from us.” Corry’s reply was, “You mean after all that, we still won’t own the program?” That did not seem like a good deal to him.

Next, Corry talked to other companies about what they were doing with training. From his phone survey, he learned that about 75 percent of all training—regardless of the industry—is almost identical. He started to ponder the supplier-driven monopoly—the control of contracts, copyrights, and licensing, and the amount of money usually charged for a training module. It was at this point that LearnShare, a consortium concept, was born.

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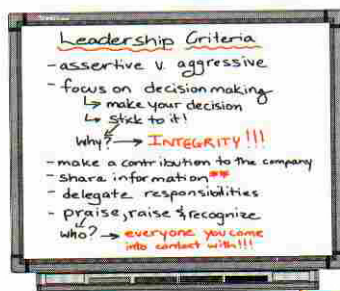
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Dave's Notes

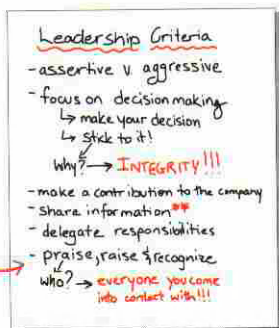


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The members

In August 1996, General Motors Service Parts Operation hosted the first formal LearnShare meeting in Detroit, which was attended by 27 corporate representatives. The group laid the ground rules and discussed the opportunities for the consortium. By the next month, LearnShare had its first nine company members: 3M, Deere & Company, General Motors SPO, Pilkington/Libbey-Owens-Ford, Motorola University, Owens-Corning, Owens-Illinois, Reynolds Metals, and TRINOVA.

LearnShare also formed partnerships with three universities that are leaders in distance learning—Ohio

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State, Arizona State, and Farleigh Dickenson. This alliance ensures that LearnShare is up-to-date on learning technology and business education trends. Tom Keller, associate professor in the College of Business, Department of Management, Arizona State, helped Corry set up the consortium's business structure.

LearnShare hopes to have 15 members by the end of 1997. Many interested multinational companies are now calling Corry, and, in turn, there are specific companies he's seeking out.

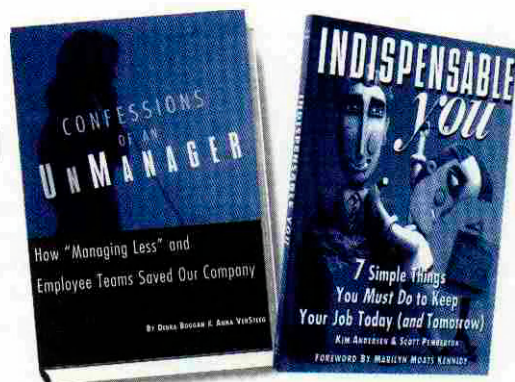
The desire to join LearnShare is not enough to obtain membership. First, member companies must—for both legal and trust reasons—be noncompeting. For example, because General Motors SPO is a member, Ford cannot be. Second, LearnShare is seeking companies that can add value to the consortium, not just replicate expertise. Third, each member must ante up \$100,000 per year for two years. (After this initial seed-

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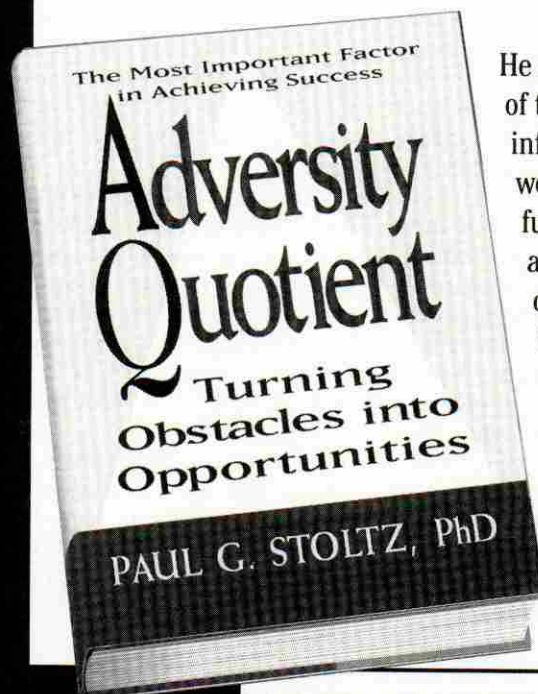
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ing period, it's the goal of LearnShare to be self-sustaining.) And fourth, each company must commit to sharing its already developed, noncopyrighted training material with the other members.

That open-handed sharing can make some companies think twice about joining. As Corry says, "Trust is a major factor in this consortium. Many people have a high pride of authorship, and it's easier for them to write a check for \$100,000 than it is for them to give up their training programs." Corry has found the level of trust that exists among the nine participating companies to be high. "The members have been quite open with each other, eager to talk about and share what they have."

For many of the company representatives that attended the first exploratory meetings, convincing their respective CEOs of the benefits of joining LearnShare was not that difficult. Denny Brandon, sales development manager, 3M, says, "Once the concept was grasped, there wasn't too much hesitation. After all, it's a consortium of noncompeting members, and the only materials that we're interested in are noncompeting, nonprocess-oriented materials. 3M won't be sharing any information on how to make adhesive tape, but the other members aren't interested in that anyway. What's of interest to all of us are generic programs such as sales techniques, worker safety, federal regulatory information, and so forth."

There are companies that have turned down LearnShare, though. For some, it's because they're already selling their training on the open market and LearnShare's set-up just didn't work for them. Others have their own corporate learning institutes and consider what they produce proprietary. And some couldn't get past the trust factor. One company that is still contemplating participating is the Harley Davidson Motor Company. According to Bob McIntyre, computer training manager with Harley Davidson, "Membership is still an open issue. The reason Harley did not join initially was because we were in the throes of a company-wide training strategy,

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and for us, a relatively small company compared to some others in the consortium, we thought it was important to develop our own internal training first."

For those companies willing to participate, the potential rewards are great. Right away they have a library of expanded training resources to choose from. Each member company has from 20 to 30 training modules that they're willing to share, which creates quite a pool of available resources. Needs are cross-matched among companies. For example, if Motorola needs diversity and first-time leader training and 3M has training programs on those topics, there's an immediate fulfillment. Corry points out that a side benefit has surfaced with this sharing. "Industries tend to look differently at the same topics, so that sharing training programs lets them view similar challenges in new ways and increase their expertise."

Pooling resources also means that each company will realize a savings. The consortium is still too new to quantify how much money will be saved, and it will vary from company to company. Corry estimates that Owens-Corning will save between 30 and 50 percent on the purchase of new materials.

LearnShare maintains a Web site where the members can see what training programs are available; receive updated messages from Corry telling them what's new at LearnShare; view a LearnShare Yellow Pages, where high-quality suppliers are listed; and participate in a forum in which they can chat with each other.

When a member wants a program listed online, he or she can click on

its name. This generates an order to the LearnShare office where a copy is made and shipped. Eventually, a copy of the reworked version will go back to Toledo where it can be shared.

LearnShare members do not want to recreate any training program that already exists in their pooled resources, but they do want to fill gaps. A major benefit of their collective purchasing power is their ability to approach suppliers. As the group identifies a gap in its program topics—say, in negotiating skills—it can hire a supplier to create a core-skill-set training program to which each member company can later add the information specific to its industry or division.

The supplier perspective

Most suppliers do not see LearnShare as competition. Bill Maclear, manager, business management and sales training, General Motors SPO, says, "When vendors hear the names of the companies that are LearnShare members, they recognize the size of the training budgets they each represent—let alone en masse." He continues, "LearnShare collectively represents the largest academic institution in the world."

However, there is some concern among training suppliers about the implementation of copyright issues. A LearnShare member cannot share with the other members, or anyone else, any training program that was developed for the company by an outside supplier that holds the copyright to the program. That effectively eliminates sharing many training programs, except those that a company itself develops.

Stephen Cohen, president and CEO of The Learning Design Group in Minneapolis, offers two solutions to the copyright challenge. If a company hires a supplier that does strict work-for-hire development, there are no copyright problems. In this arrangement, the supplier is paid to develop a program from concept to finished product, but the client owns the product, along with the copyright. There may or may not be royalties paid to the supplier.

Another solution is to work with a

supplier that will allow the company to share its product in exchange for a fee every time it's used. However, Cohen says that defeats the purpose of a consortium like LearnShare, which is trying to eliminate the need to pay over and over again. But he also points out that the consortium's purchasing power could give it the ability to strike a favorable deal with a vendor.

The future

Obviously LearnShare is very much in the fledgling stage. But the board has big ideas.

LearnShare intends to go online eventually with the training materials and deliver them back to the members. LearnShare would like to capture as much content as possible and then digitize it so that it is adaptable to emerging technologies. For example, the Internet and CD-ROM are hot now, but as Corry says, "I don't want to be remembered as the one that created the eight-track tape of the '90s training industry, and I certainly don't know enough about technology to know what's going to be the next big thing." For LearnShare, the way around that potential obstacle is to keep the common training content flexible so that it can be adapted to whatever format is needed.

LearnShare members also want to be able to take the products to their respective customer bases as a competitive advantage. Explains Corry, "Owens-Corning believes that if we can create 30 to 40 courses that are common to our industry and are also common to our customers, then they would view this as a competitive advantage of doing business with us."

The three universities that are partners with LearnShare are interested in writing degreed and accredited curriculum for delivery in a virtual environment. Daniel F. Twomey, professor and director of the Center for Human Resource Management Studies at Fairleigh Dickenson, says, "LearnShare may be the most important development in business education this decade. It represents a major change in how business education is going to be developed, shared, and delivered."

■ *If LearnShare fulfills its potential, it will provide the curriculum basis for a global 21st century classroom* ■

LearnShare is also talking with certain government agencies about how the consortium might be able to form a partnership with them on training modules for diversity, sexual harassment, and so forth. The federal government is interested in the process that LearnShare is implementing because it represents a significant opportunity for the government to cut costs and train a lot more people. Explains Corry, "If we show that we can take the material that resides within these corporations, put it into cutting-edge technology, and distribute it, then we will have created opportunities for people to become better employees and helped create a better workforce." If the government is satisfied with what LearnShare accomplishes, then it sees ways for this concept to work with education and the military.

LearnShare's success also means that the government would help fund the technologies. The government wants to see how its funding is going to be returned. Corry says, "This share sourcing has a nice, circular motion to it that comes back in performance."

Maclear speaks for all of the members when he says, "Right now, LearnShare is a big academic playground for us." But if LearnShare fulfills its potential, it will provide the curriculum basis for a global, virtual classroom in the 21st century. ■

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