Enterprise E-Learning

Interoperability? Infrastructure? What are those?

Here's how Braxton (formerly Deloitte Consulting) went from pilot to permanent in a sweeping e-learning effort that put all of the pieces together.

By Martha Gold

This article is part 1 of a five-part series of case studies on how some big organizations are using and measuring enterprise-wide e-learning.

The challenge: Train and certify 15,000 consultants, scattered among nearly three dozen countries, in e-business concepts and strategies. Wrap it up within nine months. Save money in the process.

That tall order, conceived in 1999 before *e-learning* had acquired that appellation, set Deloitte Consulting (recently renamed Braxton) on a path towards an aggressive embrace of digital learning. CEO Doug Mc-Cracken saw that Braxton's consulting staff needed to hone its business technology acumen so the firm could better avail itself of opportunities in the burgeoning field of e-business. More companies wanted guidance bringing their practices into the 21st century, and a growing number of competitors claiming expertise in e-business were whittling away at Braxton's potential growth.

At the time, 95 percent of training at Braxton was classroom-based. Getting 15,000 employees certified in an internally developed e-business curriculum under that approach would've cost about US$150 million and taken more than two years. Mc-Cracken's view was that technology, and the consulting opportunities it was creating, was advancing far too quickly to spend even a year getting the consultants up to speed. The program had to be up and running in six months. The solution was to create a training program based largely on e-learning content, sweetened with incentives for successful completion.

Nine months later, Braxton had achieved its goal. More important, the initiative, a first taste of e-learning for many of the firm's consultants and a crash course in enterprise e-learning for the company, catalyzed a number of shifts in the global consulting firm's training function. Chief among them were a move from numerous, semi-autonomous regional training departments into a cohesive, centralized training department and a shift from predominately classroom-based training to various combinations of e-learning and classroom training. Dozens of duplicate, underused classes were culled from the roster, and predominantly classroom-based courses were transformed into blended solutions of Web-delivered courses and traditional training approaches.

Those changes didn't come about quickly or easily. Getting executive buy-in and involving the IT department from the very beginning helped smooth the transition. Still, it took a lot of trial-and-error for Braxton to achieve mastery of enterprise e-learning, according to Kathy Scholz, leader of Learning Technologies and Infrastructures. Following

are the milestones in the creation of what's now considered a sophisticated and far-reaching enterprise e-learning implementation.

Lobbying at C-level

Seeking to build on its initial experiment with e-learning to augment its e-business training initiative, Braxton's chief learning officer Nick van Dam, who helped devise that initiative, sought funding for e-learning infrastructure to extend and institutionalize Braxton's use of digital learning. That meant lobbying C-level executives for the needed funding. Van Dam, together with other e-learning strategists, approached the executives to pitch their idea of a responsive, centralized training function closely tied to organizational objectives.

"We talked to them about what we were doing with education and training and how to make it meet Braxton's business challenges," says van Dam. "That helped get their buy-in." So did his promise of another outcome favored by Braxton's CEO: a more centralized training function.

Among the business challenges the training task group discussed were expanding the company's consulting capabilities into promising growth areas such as financial services. Just as with the e-business certification program, Braxton wanted to be able to train employees quickly and efficiently, without having to remove them from assignments for the training.

After winning executive approval, a new centralized training and development department wasn't far behind. First dubbed LearningEdge (now called Braxton Learning), it made training more efficient and incorporated a growing volume of computer-based learning. Van Dam's group set about developing e-learning courses in numerous areas such as SAP systems implementation, business ethics, and even instruction for employees on how to fill out a new timesheet. With less need for classroom instructors, the company let go half of its training staff and hired instructional designers, systems administrators, and other e-learning experts in their place. Today, virtually all training and education programs that aren't provided externally are developed by a group of 40 employees in the company's three global learning groups: Markets and Services, Design, and Learning Technologies and Infrastructures. The workflow in those groups is analogous to an agency model, in which Markets and Services employees works as "account managers" for internal industry and service area groups to create goals for particular courses.

Says van Dam, "The Design group creates a course and chooses the appropriate delivery methods before passing it along to the group responsible for deployment. Business leaders own the content priorities, and Braxton Learning owns the vision, the vehicles, and the logistics to address those needs."

Executives weren't the only people the training department needed for support in executing its new initiatives. IT also proved valuable for developing and maintaining software and other technology. "Partnering early with our IT organization was a key success factor," says Scholz, whose team serves as a liaison between the training function and the IT department. "When we created the consolidation database, for example, IT helped build and maintain it." The database, a tool that members of Braxton Learning and IT developed to track and manage the e-business certification course, served as an early LMS (learning management system) for the firm. Later, when the LMS proved insufficient for Braxton Learning's growing needs, IT and a couple of consultants from Braxton's Learning Practice were able to help develop and choose new LMS technology and other tools to help support Braxton's enterprise e-learning.

Significant cost-savings

Where is Braxton now?

"When anyone needs information on a topic, he or she should be able to download it," says van Dam. "We have several blended solutions and online courses. There are also guidance and advice through online collaboration, synchronous learning, seminars, chats,

Custom Tweaking

Three years ago, Kathy Scholz, leader of Learning Technologies and Infrastructures at Braxton, was helping deploy the company's new e-business certification program. Like many of Braxton's training programs, this one called for tracking and documenting employees' progress on certifying their completion of the program.

It was Scholz's first taste of the integration challenges in Braxton's shift towards online learning. "The way the program was set up, we had numerous tracking requirements," she recalls. But the information was on different systems, making it complicated to pull together in one format to meet the tracking and reporting requirements. "After struggling with that for a couple of months," she says, "we built what we called the 'consolidation database' with direct feeds from our various systems, and it met our needs." That is, until Braxton pulled out the stops in its use of e-learning in 2000 and rapidly outgrew the capabilities of the internal-

ly built application. Still, the homegrown effort proved fruitful. "The process of building the [consolidation] database helped us define our requirements for an LMS," recounts Scholz. Braxton ultimately settled on Saba's LMS version 3.3.1 for its learning management needs.

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges Braxton and other large firms implementing enterprise e-learning face is integrating data from various enterprise management systems with their e-learning platforms and making digital content from different sources work smoothly on those platforms. Despite 1) the ability of an LMS to incorporate tracking data from different sources; 2) the emergence of interoperability standards such as SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model); and 3) much talk of "seamless integration" in e-learning product pitches, integration is often a matter of custom tweaking. Most recently, Scholz and staff sought to share data between Braxton's ERP (enterprise re-

source planning) system and its enterprise LMS.

"There are no direct feeds back from the LMS to SAP," says Scholz, something she hopes to accomplish with custom coding. "We're looking into linking electronically with HR–not just from a reporting perspective, but also to improve the performance management process. But from a systems perspective, we're not quite there yet.

Integration of e-learning data—including usage, completion, and any testing or assessment information gathered by external content providers that Braxton partners with—has posed a challenge. A key goal of the data-integration effort is gathering the information needed to begin determining a return-on-investment for Braxton's various e-learning programs.

"We started out by tracking completions," says Scholz. "But when we looked at our strategy, we realized that so much data we weren't utilizing was applicable to ROI. For example, consultants on a project site need updated information on a particular technology. We want them to be able to go to our learning catalogue, find the learning object they need, complete it in 15 minutes, and go back with the information to the client. With one of our goals being to provide just enough information just-in-time, how do we track that?"

Braxton Learning went to its content vendors and asked them to track usage of everything from self-paced content to virtual classes to downloadable content. Then Scholz and her team analyzed the data and picked out the relevant information. For example, they discovered that instances of multiple, consecutive downloads of programs and learning objects were often due to consultants having to reconnect several times from hotels with dial-up Internet connections.

"We now have the capability to break it all down," says Scholz. "We've come up with our own definitions about what we need to track and the frequency with which we track something."

Braxton will use that information to calculate ROI on its e-learning programs. The learning and IT departments expect to continue working closely with vendors to improve interoperability and integration, hoping that their efforts will result in more sophisticated technology and better capabilities in the near future.

and bulletin boards together with online learning management—things that help guide people in determining the skills and learning they need."

Braxton found significant cost-savings in its migration to e-learning. In the past three years, the company cut its training costs by more than half, says van Dam. In 1999, the firm spent US$7500 per employee for training; in 2002, that figure had dropped to $3000 per employee. Says van Dam, most of the savings were in travel costs, which were a substantial part of the training budget in the era of classroom training for Braxton's far-flung employees. Now, a greater proportion of funding is devoted to creating and delivering learning than in the past.

Much of the training provided by Braxton's remodeled learning division consists of blended solutions that combine live classroom training and e-learning. For example, the company's SAP implementation training program starts with a pre-class online program that tests participants' abilities in Java and other required skills. Employees in need of remediation for necessary skills are brought up to speed before enrolling in the SAP implementation program.

"We're hiring analysts that have a broad range of abilities, some with technical backgrounds and others with more emphasis in the liberal arts," says van Dam. "By the time we get to the classroom, we've done the leveling. It's a more homogeneous group, and we spend less time playing catch-up." After the classroom sessions, e-learning courses test participants to ensure that they're ready to work in the field and help keep them current on software changes and updates.

Power of the portal

Signing up for SAP implementation training, together with all of the other training and e-learning courses, takes place at a companywide intranet portal, where consultants access the Learning Channel, powered by an enterprise LMS from Saba. Employees register for all classes and gain access to most of the electronically delivered courses through the portal. The curriculum consists of thou-

sands of online courses from SkillSoft, internally developed courses, and courses other content providers that work with Braxton.

The LMS behind the Learning Channel centralizes administrative functions, such as registration, accounting, and tracking of individuals' learning. It also gives CLO van Dam an "at a glance" look at where the company is in its various learning initiatives. The LMS is accessible via the Learning Channel. From there, employees have ready access to their records, classes, and information about upcoming training requirements—all in one spot. Scholz says that Braxton set up the portal with a focus on user interface and efficiency.

"We wanted to avoid duplication of effort," says Scholz. "We have direct feeds into our learning catalogue from our external vendors. That was one of the key elements. In the Learning Channel, there are four quick links that connect a person smoothly to different areas of interest in Saba. We have a single sign-on so that once a consultant logs on, he or she doesn't have to log on again to access e-learning."

The portal has direct links to Centra's virtual classroom platform, which is proving to be a popular way to conduct training via live, synchronous sessions. It also includes simulation games, online self-study guides, video, PowerPoint presentations, email, and white papers. Those are available for employees to search and download quickly for on-the-job information or for preparation for a new project. Employees will soon be able to communicate with each other in the Learning Channel portal via chats and bulletin boards.

Standards reality check

The variety, depth, and breadth of learning and other information resources offered through Braxton Learning are comprehensive. The bulk of its content is provided by SkillSoft through a US$10 million, five-year contract that allows Braxton employees virtually unlimited access to SkillSoft's online course library, whose topics span IT, business skills, and executive education. Numerous smaller providers—such as the New York Institute of Finance, MicroMash, PeopleSoft, Siebel, Intellexis, Intuition Publishing, and SAP—also provide content to Braxton Learning.

To build a comprehensive course library, IT and Learning Technologies and Infrastructures worked with many content providers to make their products compatible with Saba and other systems at Braxton. In doing that, they discovered what has become a common surprise to e-learning implementers: E-learning "standards" don't guarantee plug-and-play compatibility.

"We told [vendors their] courses had to be AICC-compliant," says Scholz, referring to one set of industry interoperability standards in wide use. "They said their courses were set up that way, but later in the process we'd find out that they didn't really understand our requirements."

Braxton needed the content and suppliers needed the business, so Braxton's IT department learned more about interoperability standards to help vendors understand the company's AICC and SCORM needs. "We needed to do a lot of education with vendors on standards to teach them how to become truly AICC- or SCORM-compliant," says Scholz.

Initially, suppliers were reluctant to pay for the changes necessary to make their products compatible with Braxton's systems and technologies. "We pointed out that we'd be helping them make a product that they could market to other companies," says Scholz. Many ultimately agreed to shoulder the costs for changes.

Integration challenges ahead

Among the challenges Braxton is exploring now—as are many other implementers of enterprise e-learning–is increasing the integration of e-learning and other enterprise business systems. Specifically, Scholz seeks to improve the exchange

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of information between internal departments using existing systems. She says, "As the company looks to further enhance system capabilities in such areas as performance management, we will look to share data directly between those systems and our LMS."

As with Braxton's earlier struggles in the area of content interoperability standards, achieving direct integration among different enterprise systems is unchartered territory. "We often feel like we're pushing the envelope with our vendors," says Scholz.

Braxton is also looking to increase integration of its synchronous and asynchronous content by getting more integration between Centra, its primary synchronous content provider, and its Saba LMS. "We're doing more live e-learning sessions all of the time as this type of delivery mechanism is really taking off," notes Scholz.

To make the connections between the different systems smoother and quicker, Learning Technologies and Infrastructures, along with IT, is developing a user interface that will reduce the number of steps for someone to register or enter a class. Scholz expects the solution to go live by this spring.

"We're putting in a flash interface to cut out the number of clicks for the user within Saba and Centra," says Scholz. "We pulled together SkillSoft, Centra, and Saba; presented them with scenarios; and asked them to come up with solutions for a better user interface. They came back with several proposals to better integrate their processes. Working with them, we've come up with what we think is a good integrated solution. Tying those various systems together will be where a lot of effort is focused in the coming year." **TD**

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