

PASSPORT

E - Learning @ Belgacom

Here's how one European firm makes e-learning work.

By Patrick Collin, Denis Dorbolo, and Laurence Vandresse

If technology wasn't an issue, what type of learning environment would you create? Belgacom SA, the leading supplier of global telecommunications solutions on the Belgian market—offering local, intercity, and international voice and data services; cellular telephone services; satellite services; carrier services; and all Internet-related services—is in that lucky position. Belgacom's learning philosophy is that training and continuing education are responsibilities shared

by a company, its employees, and their supervisors. To that end, it created the Learning and Development Academy. LDA, as part of human resources, identifies, analyzes, develops, and implements training solutions.

In previous years, LDA applied traditional learning methods: internal and external instructors using whiteboards, flipcharts, overhead projectors, and the like. LDA further enhanced its training capabilities by establishing 13 training

centers across Belgium to cut travel costs for the organization and lessen inconvenience to employees. To keep up its reputation as a cutting-edge learning center, LDA has been preparing its e-learning system for the past five years.

The company decided to invest in e-learning for a number of reasons. One, Belgacom, by its nature as a telecom company, has an advantage over other organizations starting e-learning programs: It has at its disposal the appropriate technology—network infrastructure, high bandwidth, IT equipment, and so forth. But organizational leaders also expect e-learning to provide these benefits:

- course cost reduction
- travel expense and time reduction
- shorter course development and distribution time
- anytime, anywhere learning
- message standardization
- ability to personalize courses for target groups.

LDA doesn't intend for e-learning to replace all traditional coursework. The plan is to reduce the number of "presented" courses gradually and replace them with blended solutions—courses that combine classroom, computer, and distance learning.

Any solution used to design and implement e-learning at Belgacom is part of its Information and Communication Technologies. Here's how LDA uses ICT to create and implement courses.

Assess requirements. To conduct competency testing for a target group, trainers ask participants to complete online tests located on the learning management system. After scoring the tests, the assessment calculates the average skill level of the group and then identifies courses to increase that skill level.

Conceptualize and develop courses. Using various multimedia development tools (HTML, DHTML, JavaScript, animation, 3D, image adjustment, and

video editing), trainers design and develop e-learning courses.

Implement. Course enrollment takes place over the intranet. LDA uses ICT to distribute courses over the intranet and Internet, but it also uses CD-ROMs. The LMS not only enables course tracking and reporting, but also incorporates other learning tools such as a messaging service, a discussion forum, and an online test module.

Not knowing how well received e-learning would be with employees, LDA trainers thought of the pilot as a train voyage: Anyone who wanted to e-learn could hop on the train. The first were

Trainers thought of the pilot as a train **voyage**: Anyone who wanted to e-learn could hop on the train. The first were **volunteers**.

volunteers. Then volunteer word of mouth raised interest in e-learning among other employees. Those employees, in turn, became e-learning spokespeople to their colleagues, who began to board the train gradually.

Integrating e-learning

Even with the increased interest in this new learning method, Belgacom trainers think it's best to combine traditional instruction with e-learning. Here's an example of how its blended solution works.

After attending a half-day information session, participants are given three months to complete the coursework at work, at home, or in one of the Open Learning Centers. During the first month of study, a coach telephones participants to discuss their progress. During the next two months, learners can call their coaches for advice.

Participants appreciate the flexibility of this plan for coordinating course and

work schedules. The coaches' support is a comfort to learners because it prevents them from feeling isolated, a complaint sometimes cited with distance learning.

LDA has planned other ways to present content, depending on whether the course is synchronous or asynchronous:

- videoconferencing. LDA broadcasts courses live to learners who gather at Belgacom's videoconference centers.
- desktop video coaching. After taking an interactive course, participants have direct visual contact with an instructor via a Webcam.
- virtual lectures. Like videoconferencing, but participants sit in front of their

computers instead of gathering in a room with a screen.

- Web-based training. LDA makes interactive multimedia courses available on the intranet and Internet.
- computer-based training. Courses are stored on a CD-ROM and don't include coaching.
- Web-based testing and assessment. Belgacom is increasing its use of online tests to assess training needs and improve the assessment phase.

Implementation difficulties

Still, difficulties abound. Belgacom might not have the e-learning infrastructure issues of other organizations when starting an e-learning program, but it does have to continuously make technology adjustments—installing plug-ins and securing bandwidth, for example. Which means that trainers must establish a good relationship with the IT department.

Part of that never-ending system adjustment is in response to the inclusion of new courses. Before a course can be added to the program, trainers must identify, analyze, test, and assess its content. Even after deciding to incorporate a new distance learning course, trainers find that it's more successful when they include a coach. That creates two problems: 1) A good instructor isn't necessarily a good coach, and 2) it takes time and energy to integrate coaching into distance learning.

The lessons of experience

Belgacom has now passed the pilot phase of its e-learning program and can offer these tips:

- When launching your first e-learning program, start with a small-scale implementation.
- Content should be stable. For that reason, don't use an e-learning pilot to train your staff on new products. That content often changes between the time the course is written and it's distributed.
- Be aware of resistance. Management may be skeptical of the "unorthodox" concept of anytime, anywhere learning; traditional instructors may worry that their profession has become obsolete; course developers may not be accustomed to the new working methods; and some employees may be reluctant to learn on computers.
- Demystify e-learning by clearly explaining coursework to learners. That will soften some of the initial resistance.
- Keep continuous, close contact with service suppliers to enhance the quality of the courses.

Patrick Collin, Denis Dorbolo, and Laurence Vandresse are training consultants with the Learning and Development Academy; www.belgacom.be.