Working with an unchanging budget,
Defense Acquisition University,
the corporate university for the
U.S. armed forces, managed
to leverage its resources
into a highly effective
strategic transformation.

Targeting the Learning Org

By Jennifer J. Salopek

The war waged in Iraq has brought renewed and refocused attention, U.S.-wide and worldwide, on the United States military. Newspapers and media reports feature daily updates on post-war events, while talking heads debate the relative merit of the engagement. Meanwhile, out of the spotlight, 130,000 Defense Acquisition Technology and Logistics personnel work efficiently to provide troops with the supplies and services they need—everything from paper clips to canned corn to Humvees and body armor. DAU spends US$80 to $100 billion per year to support the armed forces of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. DAU does this as part of a forward-looking learning organization that has set its sights firmly on the needs of its 21st-century workforce and has attacked those needs methodically, effecting a transformation that permits it to work with utmost speed and agility.

In April 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld announced a planned strategic transformation of the entire Department of Defense. Sounding more like a corporate warrior than a civil service employee, he said, "We must promote an entrepreneurial approach to developing military capabilities— one that encourages people to be proactive, not

reactive, and anticipates threats before they emerge." Defense Acquisition University, the corporate university that supports AT&L (Acquisition Technology & Logistics), could well be seen as leading the way.

DAU's transformation began in 1999, with the appointment of Frank J. Anderson Jr. as its new president. "We had a program in place, and a program we were proud of," Anderson says. However, his charge from DoD was to "take a hard look at our learning construct in the context of new technological opportunities"—with the goal of answering the question, Are you delivering the best product you believe possible?

The AT&L workforce that DAU supports has increased by 32 percent in the past year. Further, it's being buffeted by the same demographic trends that affect all employers: By 2005, almost half of the total workforce will be eligible to retire; by 2007, the number reaches 70 percent. As DAU strives to train a

that transformation is to create a motivated, agile workforce—and that's where DAU comes in.

"Leaders of learning organizations must understand the language of the senior leadership team. They must have the right information at the point of transaction," says Anderson.

The director of defense procurement and acquisition policy, Deidre Lee, is responsible for all acquisition and procurement policy matters in DoD. Her organization identifies and develops best acquisition policies and practices to promote flexibility and to take advantage of the global marketplace. Lee is also responsible for the training and career development of the AT&L workforce and directly oversees DAU.

Lee directly reports to the Under Secretary of Defense for AT&L, Michael Wynne, making DAU a joint service organization, meaning that it serves all branches of the armed forces. Being in that chain

anization

replacement generation of workers, its student population has increased by 82 percent since 1998. However, its $100 million annual budget has remained unchanged. Clearly, radical innovation was required to continue to meet the training and education needs of the AT&L community.

"We had to justify our use of resources in being the best we could be," Anderson explains. "We couldn't accept 'good' as good enough."

So, DAU designed and implemented a six-step strategic plan designed to replicate a corporate university model and move away from "training" to build a learning organization.

Step 1: Gain strategic alignment to understand leaders' intent.
In his April announcement, Rumsfeld stated, "The United States will transform America's national security institutions to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century…a priority element of the department's corporate transformation strategy is the reform of the acquisition process." One of the goals of

of command directly connects DAU with acquisition policy makers.

Anderson says, "We enjoy great support from Under Secretary Wynne. He views learning and people as a strategic asset. We recognize that the whole purpose of providing a learning environment is to create competitive advantage."

Wynne has said, "DAU is the one institution that touches nearly every member of the workforce throughout all stages of their professional careers. This is where we revitalize our workforce, while ensuring it has the training it needs to make smart business decisions and deliver for our war fighters."

Step 2: Understand your customers from their perspective.
DAU's mission is to "provide practitioner training and services to enable the AT&L community to make smart business decisions and deliver timely and affordable capabilities to the war fighter." To meet that mission, DAU leadership must know and understand that workforce and its needs. Anderson

built on his own experience to effect changes that promoted that understanding.

Prior to joining DAU, Anderson had pursued a 34-year career in the Air Force, rising to Brigadier General and serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Contracting and Competition Advocate General. "My background was a plus," he says. "It gave me a direct connection and linkage to the community I was asked to support." Further, joining DAU to direct a transformation permitted his fresh perspective: "I had no bias in terms of what DAU was already doing. I brought an openness to thinking about things differently."

Having lived on the receiving end as a customer, Anderson understood that perspective. He also feels that it facilitated his move into his new role at DAU: "I think it's easier to make the transition into learning by starting out with a knowledge of the business— knowing the mission side, then learning and shaping the training."

In order to get closer to its customers, DAU streamlined operations at its Fort Belvoir, Virginia headquarters into a leaner organization, and opened six regional training centers that are co-located with the largest contingents of the AT&L workforce. "That put us in the right place to support the workforce, by becoming a part of the community," says Joe Johnson, executive director of the Strategic Planning Action Group at DAU. That change has resulted in significant savings: Participant travel costs have been reduced from $33 million to $20 million per year. Faculty and staff have been reduced from 708 to 540, and the average cost per student has declined by 32 percent, or about $1000 per student.

"It's not just that we have campuses there," Anderson emphasizes. "We're now out in the workforce and are teaming with them to make our products more beneficial and useful."

While decentralizing training and development operations, DAU simultaneously centralized its curriculum development process, which had previously been overseen by faculty acting as "course managers." Those people were primarily rewarded for teaching, and the setup presented a challenge to keeping courses current.

"We are constantly looking at our curriculum from a strategic perspective," says Johnson. "This centralized product development means that as policy changes and develops, we can capture and claim it for the rapid deployment of courses. It has also resulted in increased economies."

Step 3: Build a roadmap.

DAU's ultimate goal is to be a learning organization— a premier corporate university that promotes career-long learning and is available to its clients whenever and wherever they need it. Those efforts are guided by a strategic planning process that is both elaborate and agile. DAU's strategic plan covers a six-year period, updated annually. The leadership team is responsible for defining mission, vision, and goals. An annual performance plan establishes tasks and performance measures for each year. Supervisors set individual objectives based on that plan, with leadership agreement on performance criteria and periodic feedback. Supervisors distill those objectives down to the faculty and staff contribution level. At the end of the year, after self- and supervisor evaluations, the annual performance report assesses actual against planned accomplishments. Rewards for faculty and staff are tied to their mission contribution. Then, an annual report is published to inform all stakeholders of the results.

All of that planning and reporting takes place within a framework that emphasizes
● setting strategic goals in alignment with senior leadership goals
● alignment of strategic goals, performance tasks, and individual contributions and performance awards
● clear linkage of budget costs, planning, programming, and priorities
● better management information for data-driven decision making and predictions
● financial, accounting, and cost-management systems connectivity
● monitoring goal achievement and measuring organizational performance.

DAU adopted its corporate university model in 2000. Soon thereafter, the guiding star of its mission was established: the Performance Learning Model, which was personally envisioned, designed, and implemented by Anderson, who says, "The PLM evolved from thinking less about training, and more about deploying learning assets that are responding to evolving practices."

The PLM includes these main thrusts:
● certification and assignment-specific training continuous learning

- performance support and rapid deployment training
- knowledge sharing.

Certification and assignment-specific training. Along with such generic business skills as research, proposal writing, and negotiation, AT&L workers must be trained in the policies and procedures unique to buying in the public-sector environment. These include regulations surrounding competition, funding constraints, and appropriation rules.

DAU offers more than 80 certification courses spanning 13 career fields. Employees pass through three levels of certification, culminating in executive-level training. Much of this training is now offered through e-learning; in fact, DAU offered more than 1 million hours of online instruction time in 2002, and touched 70 percent of all graduates with some type of e-course.

"As we thought about how we support our workforce, we knew that e-learning must be a significant testing, and some simulation," says Luis Ramirez, director of e-learning. He notes that all DAU offerings are Section 508-compliant for people with disabilities, which "adds a degree of complexity and determines how much interactivity we can have. We have a heavy emphasis on self-paced learning, but want more blending with synchronous, instructor-led material in our intermediate and advanced courses," he says.

Continuous learning. DAU's previous training model had included three levels of certification but "did not support the idea of lifelong learning," Anderson says. Although required to pursue 40 hours of continuing education each year, AT&L personnel were on their own to find and use those resources.

The Continuous Learning Center was launched in July 2001. Its formation was driven by the vision of learning assets that could be delivered anytime, anywhere and inspired by the fact that "we needed to address the constantly changing environment. It

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part," says Anderson. Much of the development of technology-based learning is financed through the savings realized through the reorganization of facilities.

DAU focused its early efforts on 100-level, basic knowledge courses, converting them first to online delivery, according to Johnson. With intermediate-level courses, portions were put online and augmented by short-term, intensive, case-based classroom study. Most executive-level curriculum is still classroom-based. "This model offers the full gamut [of options] based on what we believe is the best delivery method for the material," says Anderson.

Benchmarking against best practices in other organizations, DAU opted for mostly interactive, self-paced offerings, in which "the software itself engages the learner," according to Anderson. Most development of the courses is outsourced, and a consistent interface is the domain of a systems integrator.

"We are engaging through video streaming, knowledge checks with interactive feedback, online is designed to ensure that people who have completed the technical training aren't on their own to stay abreast," says Anderson.

The CLC offers 53 course modules that are developed in conjunction with functional leaders to tie back in with real needs. It serves to transform the learning culture as well: "We are providing training on the learning assets themselves, as we change the thought process about how you learn in the AT&L workforce," says Anderson. "We are moving away from the 20th-century concept of training, in which you pull people out of the workplace and send them off to a classroom. Our courses are designed to create a workforce that believes there is no *there* there."

It must be working. The CLC's number of registered users has skyrocketed—from 5830 in September 2002 to 132,837 in November 2003. (Use of the CLC is also open to people who are not part of the AT&L workforce but who interface with it, such as contractors and suppliers.)

Performance support and rapid deployment training. Through performance consulting processes facilitated by DAU's new co-location with the workforce, it is able to build targeted training modules that represent "training at the point of need," according to Anderson. These are typically smaller chunks of information that essentially serve as job aids and move forward the concept of embedded learning.

Process and policy changes drive rapid-deployment training, says Johnson. For example, after a change in guidance for running a major weapons system engendered a comprehensive rewrite of the requirements process, DAU was offering training on the new procedures within 48 hours. Johnson credits DAU's alignment within DoD for this success: "We are linked to the senior leaders who own that process. As they were making changes, we were tied in so that as soon as they changes were released, we could integrate the requirements process into our training."

Knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing is an integral part of the PLM and is facilitated by the AT&L Knowledge Sharing System and by communities of practice, an area that Anderson believes is ripe for continuing innovation. "I believe communities of practice will be a powerful learning asset as we get better at deploying and delivering those in a way that they grow in terms of utility to the workforce," he says.

Anderson says that DAU's communities of practice are moving into third-generation mode, in which owners are teaming with field organizations to get a better understanding of exact needs. To support knowledge sharing activities, Anderson is using his regional personnel to create "a relationship with the workforce so that they see the value of taking the time to post lessons learned and sharing experiences."

It's all part of Anderson's overall goal: "embedded learning," the seamless experience that is the hallmark of a true learning organization.

"I don't want to say that that's where we are today, and that we're really good at it, but we're trying to make embedded learning an integral part of what we do, and we're starting to build our courses to train people to use those embedded assets," he explains.

Step 4: Understand your value stream.
DAU is constantly trying to quantify its value—to combine capacity, legitimacy, and support to create a value-added contribution. Its value is derived from meeting these overarching goals:

- Provide customers what they need, when and where they need it.
- Operate a premier learning enterprise.
- Promote transformation through excellence in acquisition, technology, and logistics practices.
- Provide an environment valuing achievement, growth, and career-long learning.

Those goals are considered and evaluated in an atmosphere of cost-consciousness, as that $100 million annual budget remains stubbornly unchanged. DAU computes return-on-investment using enterprise-wide performance metrics and evaluates trends in these key areas: participant throughput, total budget, participant travel budget, and number of faculty and staff. Needs assessments for curriculum development and modernization are conducted 100 percent of the time, on a continuous basis. DAU's centralized curriculum development arm works with functional integrated product teams within AT&L to identify training and education needs, as well as performance outcomes for various career levels, which are incorporated into DAU courses.

DAU uses the four-level Kirkpatrick training assessment model to evaluate participant perceptions, learning outcomes, job performance, and organizational impact, and has developed another ROI model for evaluating performance support and applied research efforts. Using a quadrant scale, the model compares utility to the resources invested.

Step 5: Never stop innovating.
The changes wrought at DAU in the past four years are immense. In 2000, DAU leadership adopted the corporate university model and formulated the Performance Learning Model. It realigned its key leadership team, and established the Curricula Development and Support Center. In 2002, the regional training facilities were opened, the Continuous Learning Center established, and major program-area curricula were reengineered. In 2003, DAU became fully accredited, initiated the rapid deployment training practice, and created three prototype learning organizations.

A new Java-based learning management system will permit students to take courses online and incorporates more robust evaluation, increased Internet-independent learning, HTTP transport protocols, and Windows compatibility. Course materials may be downloaded and completed at learners' convenience

offline. When users reconnect, the LMS offers one-click synchronization that reports test scores and downloads the next set of lessons and examinations. DAU is also constantly evaluating new technologies for delivery as it explores mobile learning, and is experimenting with PDAs.

Step 6: Have a vision for the future.

DAU continues to learn about new and current employees, conducting knowledge assessments and identifying their individual learning styles. Intelligent tutors will make it possible to create tailored learning approaches tied to certification level and using blended delivery methods. Through customer surveys and other results mechanisms, the ultimate goal of personalized learning strategies will support employees in a true learning organization.

Results in employee and customer satisfaction have been demonstrable. Downsized from more than 300,000 in 1989 to its current 130,000, the AT&L workforce had suffered from low morale, poor or no training, and been perplexed by the demands of new technology and modern business tactics. Subsequent to the advent of DAU and improved recruitment and retention practices, 73 percent of the AT&L workforce declared itself "satisfied" or "very satisfied" at work in 2002—a 27 percent increase since 2000.

"This was a significant transformation of a very large learning organization," says Anderson. "We were willing to challenge the status quo."

As DAU collects accolades, including two United States Distance Learning awards, the Corporate University Best-in-Class award, a Brandon Hall Gold award, and a BEST award from ASTD, one can see that, despite Anderson's earlier statement, there is quite a lot of *there* there. **TD**

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