Simulations Create Real-World Experiences

SAP's partnership with Enspire creates an out-of-this-world product.

The Company

SAP

The Supplier

Enspire Learning

SAP, a business software solutions provider, has more than 29,800 customers in more than 120 countries and 35,000 employees in more than 50 countries. With an ever-growing workforce spanning five continents, SAP needed to reinforce the principles and practices of managing remotely located, virtual teams.

SAP's project managers, who possess varying degrees of management expertise, needed to expand their skills to deal with diverse and remotely located teams. Because virtual project work was new to the organization, the transition posed challenges in its coordination and com-munication efforts. Project managers had to rethink their position: What aspects of virtual team management are similar to traditional management? What aspects have changed?

SAP's curriculum for virtual team management was an extension of SAP University's core project management curriculum. Project managers could opt into the courses, but were not required to take them. The curriculum would be divided into six courses covering planning, communication, virtual meetings, team building, team management, and cultural understanding. In addition, SAP wanted a highly interactive curriculum that also included evaluative metrics.

SAP chose Enspire Learning, a custom e-learning and training program provider, to handle the new curriculum development. The collaboration began with a two-day meeting at SAP headquarters in Walldorf, Germany. SAP wanted the courses to cover how to manage virtual teams and also to facilitate a shift in attitudes. Specifically, they needed to illustrate the benefits and potential effectiveness of distributed development, and to address cultural differences in a professional and unbiased manner.

Enspire's team began by examining how to uniquely and effectively communicate cultural differences while remaining sensitive to SAP's global array of cultures. Because it was important not to represent any stereotypes typically associated with SAP's diverse locations, Enspire's instructional designers created the fictional world of Orth.

As stated in the curriculum's opening monologue, Orth is just like Earth, "only different." Orth is Earth in a parallel universe, with "toothpicks, stock options, computer-based training, and ERP software," which comprises a Pangaea-like landmass of wildly varying climates and cultures. Orth allowed Enspire and SAP to explore cultures in the mode of fantasy and, in doing so, tackle real-world virtual team management issues like miscommunication and cultural misunderstandings in a safe space.

By developing Orth, Enspire and SAP made the learning content as imaginative as it was informative. Because the virtual team management curriculum is entirely voluntary, Orth also created an experience that project managers could find both entertaining and educational—a mix that Enspire prides itself on.

Enspire's custom e-learning solutions are often built on the foundation of storytelling, and this is evident throughout all six SAP courses. The story of virtual team management in Orth includes a mentor, Linda Arkan, and a peer character, Gus, who guide participants through the curriculum. In addition, participants also meet a full entourage of virtual team members and learn from their relationships, goals, and interactions.

Enspire achieved SAP's desired level of interactivity through two approaches. First, developers seeded the content with a number of short-term interactivities (matching and sort exercises, multiple-choice exercises, and small-scale toys) that reinforced learning in close proximity to didactic content segments. Second, they created a series of six simulations that served as capstones to the respective courses.

The six course-concluding simulations combine a "puzzle" interface with in-depth scenarios. They challenge participants to balance resources in a manner that is analogous to resource allocation for a project team. They also require participants to absorb and integrate the impact of the course's particular content on any such planning.

The simulations give participants:

● a timeline evocative of project planning software
● a set of work packages that can be assigned to distributed teams

- a series of scenario-driven issues that affect how work packages can be arranged on the timeline.

The simulations are integrated with the curriculum's main storyline: Arkan acts as a mentor to the participant who must interact with project leads across the virtual team. After the participant sets up the timeline, he runs the project and is presented with feedback for his choices. Participants also address real-time problems that pop up during the course of the project. Choices have an impact on quality, feature-set delivered, and team morale. Consequently, participants quickly discover that successful project management is a balance of the three metrics.

Enspire's instructional design was supplemented by straightforward and professional aesthetics. Enspire's multimedia team presented a clean animation style and a straightforward graphical user interface (GUI). Orth gave the multimedia team many distinct settings and scenarios to explore visually. In addition, Enspire implemented ambient audio to accompany narration, which communicated mood and setting along with content.

In terms of technical implementation, the modules integrated with and reported to SAP's custom learning portal. Enspire created courseware that presented a unified GUI experience while still cooperating with the learning management system as multiple shared content objects. SAP's own technical resources were invaluable in this integration.

"We were extremely lucky to have the opportunity to work with SAP University—they brought a clear vision of the learning goals, a proven and organized approach to working with vendors, a real knack and facility with collaboration, and an open mind to innovation," said Jason Craft, technology leader for the Enspire team.

The six-course curriculum was well received by the project team and other SAP University staff. In October, the curriculum was awarded the prestigious Gold Brandon Hall Excellence in Learning Award under the Custom Content, Full Course category. By the end of 2005, more than 900 SAP employees had signed up to take the virtual team management courseware.