

Online learning centers may be  
the new construct for training  
and development.

# How to Build an Online Learning Center

By Kenneth M. Boxer and Bernardine Johnson

For technological breakthroughs to change our daily lives, they must not only bring something new, but also must enable us to make better use of what we already have. The automotive age, for example, didn't begin with the internal combustion engine. It began when Henry Ford (and others) integrated new technology with traditional crafts—leather workers, woodworkers, metallurgists—in a system of mass production.

Online learning centers may prove to be a comparably significant organizing construct for training and development. Much like Ford's innovations, a learning center effectively blends powerful new technology—the Internet, intranets, and e-delivered courses—with traditional learning media such as audio- and videotapes, instructor-

led courses, books, and articles. The result is a powerful, accessible learning information source for an entire organization.

W.R. Grace, a global specialty chemicals company, launched its online learning center in 2001. The result is a global focal point for learning within Grace as well as a powerful new employee communications channel. The Grace Global Learning Center supports employee development world-wide cost-effectively, while linking learning to performance and talent management, strategic communication, and individual development planning.

### The blueprint

W.R. Grace's HR leadership wanted to provide managers throughout the company fast and easy access to a wide selection of skill-building tools. Recognizing that

**GRACE** GLOBAL LEARNING CENTER

SEARCH  GO

**Welcome To the Grace Learning Center!**

GRACE REGIONAL SITES

Click on image below to go directly to one of our three regional web sites, which contain specific Grace Learning Center Information for those areas.

AMERICAS EUROPE ASIA/PACIFIC

**Dear colleague,**

W.R. Grace is more than a place for you to earn a living. It is a place for you to grow.

In fact, your professional growth is among my top priorities.

Why? People in pursuit of growth have a rare energy. They awake excited about the day ahead. Small obstacles remain just that... small. Large obstacles become stimulating challenges. Each accomplishment fuels the drive to accomplish more.

That is the spirit of a premier company.

**Paul Norris**  
Chairman, President & CEO

The people of Grace are already among the most skilled in the world. What might we achieve... as individuals, in teams, and as a corporation... if we not only increase our skills, but also tap more of the vitality that flows from personal growth? Finding out should prove one of life's rewarding experiences.

**Grace Values**

**Core Competencies**

**Competency Models**

**What's New**

**Contact Us**

**Guide to the Learning Center**

Look here for information about how to use the Global Learning Center

- [Visual Tour](#)
- [How to For Managers](#)
- [How to For Employees](#)

not all learning solutions require training, the company wanted managers to have access to on-the-job learning strategies they could reference easily to address all kinds of employee development needs. Surveys indicated a widespread desire for enhanced professional and personal development support that employees could readily use on their own.

Grace recognized that the learning center concept developed and proposed by Strategic Partners would provide the answer. Specifically, it would

- keep Grace's learning strategy fully aligned with its rapidly evolving business strategy
- provide a focal point for worldwide learning and development
- ensure fast and easy access to a comprehensive range of valuable learning content, deliverable via a variety of media
- link learning content to core competencies (competencies identified as essential to fulfilling Grace's business objectives)
- actively promote and enable open, ongoing communication about learning, employee development, and key business processes
- ensure easy, ongoing addition of evolving learning content and technologies.

The result is Grace's Global Learning Center. The center was piloted with Grace employees in the Americas in March 2001. Within six months, its success led to the official launch of the center, now available 24/7 to Grace's 6000 employees in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Global Learning Center is a place for them to explore and pursue fresh development opportunities, order audio and video instruction, enroll in courses, and keep abreast of what's new in learning at Grace.

### It's empowering

Grace employee Luhong Bo provides a case in point.

## Sample Learning Center Offerings

Internal classroom training

External courses

CD-ROM courses

Self-paced learning tools

Streaming video

Internet learning conferences

E-learning courses

Coaching tips for managers and mentors

Audio- and videotapes

Books and articles

Corporate mission, values, and strategy

Strategy guides suggesting specific development actions, on-the-job and in the community

Corporate and industry news

She moved from China to the United States 11 years ago and now works as a technician associate. Her personal and professional development priority is improving her command of English.

"I want to speak correct English to my boss and co-workers to be sure I say things clearly and they understand," she explains. Bo adds that it's equally important for her to understand instructions in English to avoid rework from miscommunication.

Bo taps the Global Learning Center's tape

rental library for audio programs that help her develop her grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills.

"I started to rent tapes when the center was first launched, and I listen to them whenever I have time during the day, also on the way to and from work. I find it's a very efficient way for me to learn things," she says.

Grace's director of HRD, Ron Pepe, also sees the value of the center in practical terms. "Now, managers are working with people who are more intent on developing their skills and talents. They see job skills and experience as the currency of the future, part of the reward of being in an organization," he says.

Pepe also thinks complexity is driving a different approach to managing. "Managers can't have all of the answers anymore; it's too much for one person." To help, Grace's leadership development programs give managers at all levels tools on the Global Learning Center site to support them with development ideas and resources, as well as the latest forms and guidance for performance review and development processes.

### Anatomy of a learning center

As Grace has found, an online learning center is a treasure trove of learning resources, a career development mentor, and a powerful channel for corporate communications together in one place, which

employees can access easily via the Internet or corporate intranet.

A learning center's offerings might be organized any number of ways based on corporate values, primary business objectives, or components of the organization's mission—or a combination.

Grace chose to organize its center around a set of core competencies which, together, define the knowledge, skills, and abilities all employees are expected to attain. The center's visitors

can use the search option to explore and access resources relevant to a particular topic or to instantly access a range of relevant tools and action options.

**Training sessions** is a list of Grace-approved internal and external programs, including e-learning options, for developing each core competency.

**Recommended readings** is a list of the best books on each topic (ordered by email), as well as downloadable articles.

**Rental library** is a place for ordering audiocassettes, videotapes, and CDs for self-paced learning. Employees throughout North America can have such learning tools delivered to their desks within a few days.

**Strategy guide** lets visitors browse a list of quick ideas, learning assignments, and other direct actions to develop a competency.

Among the most popular features in the center are links to the guidelines and forms for completing an annual performance development review. Grace intends to make it possible for managers and their staff to complete and submit all review documentation electronically.

To come are links to external resources such as *Harvard Business Review* and a section dedicated to Grace's Six Sigma initiative. Because Grace's business and functional units are diverse in the markets they serve and types of worker knowledge required, employees will soon be able to access information about key learning and organizational initiatives within their

## Why a Learning Center?

**Access.** A learning center provides easy access to a wide range of learning content, delivered via diverse media appropriate to different learning styles.

**Empowerment.** A learning center helps people throughout the organization take responsibility for their professional and personal development.

**Focus.** A learning center visibly and tangibly links learning and development to business priorities.

**Management.** A learning center gives managers direct access to an array of practical tools to improve employees' performance and proactively guide career development.

own units. Under consideration is the addition of foreign language pages for employees who don't speak English as their primary language in the workplace.

Decisions about additions to the center and its direction are among the important functions of the center's Global Steering Committee—made up of representatives from all of the business units and drawn equally from Grace's Americas, Europe (including Africa), and Asia Pacific business

regions. Through regular meetings, the committee's role is to keep the center attuned to the real development needs of employees, including managers; to promote the use of the center in each of the regions; and to provide HR leadership with feedback on how the center is doing meeting identified needs.

Last but far from least, the learning center is a powerful channel for communicating management messages and sharing learning success stories. Every six weeks, the center sends an electronic newsletter, *Career Advantage*, to every employee's desktop.

*Career Advantage's* mission is threefold:

1. Keep all of Grace up to date on what the learning center offers.
2. Report on the wide variety of ways Grace employees are using the center effectively.
3. Encourage Grace employees worldwide to make the most of the center as a learning and development resource.

Links embedded in the e-newsletter take readers directly to whatever part of the center is being described. Just as with all e-initiatives, internal marketing, promotion, and communication are important to success. *Career Advantage* helps provide continuing visibility to all employees.

### How to ensure success

Based on our experience, here are the keys to

successful implementation:

**Line up strong senior management support.** That's always a smart thing to do, of course, but it's especially compelling when implementing a learning center. At Grace, senior executives quickly grasped the advantages of a learning center, and they're still solidly

behind it. VP of HR Mike Piergrossi frequently refers to the center as "the easiest sell to our executive team I've ever made."

**Build gradually.** Resist the temptation to quickly construct a grand technology temple. It's far better to get a modest learning center up and running first, gather feedback from users, make any needed adjustments, and then build on that.

**Invite involvement.** People tend to support what they help create. Grace established the steering committee to give its HR staff, business leaders, and other employees around the globe ongoing opportunities to help shape the center.

**Provide a variety of learning tools.** Address diverse learning priorities and styles with a broad mix of in-house

and external learning resources. Make the learning center valuable to each part of your organization.

**Make the learning center a focal point.** Many organizations have corporate intranets and have implemented e-learning and a learning management system. The learning center should be the focal point for use of all learning tools to increase the value of learning to the organization.

**Make it part of the whole organizational system.** Although the center is the learning focal point, it must be integrated with core processes and systems such as performance and talent management, communication, and rewards and recognition. At Grace, employees, including managers, find performance review forms at the center and will soon be able to link to current job postings and employee referral systems. An employee considering applying for a new position will be able to quickly assess his or her skill lev-

## Who's Ripe for Learning Centers?

Here are some characteristics of organizations we think are especially ready to implement a learning center:

- geographically dispersed learners
- technology-friendly employee population
- drive to maximize learning ROI
- strong senior management commitment to learning, and attracting and retaining top talent
- t&d staff overextended in trying to meet needs and fulfill commitments.

els regarding relevant competencies and, if a quick brush-up is required, identify the best resources.

**Keep it visible.** The frequent appearance of *Career Advantage* helps keep the center visible to employees right at their desktops. Other promotional strategies for maintaining visibility include a comprehensive global

launch campaign with articles in other employee media, posters displayed in cafeterias and other gathering spots, and rewards for successfully completing an online scavenger hunt.

**Ensure that the content is fresh.** Not surprisingly, employees expect to find something new and different each time they visit an online resource. The learning center's regional administrators keep the center up-to-date with the latest course information and learning resources. The center's easy-to-use, secure administration system lets designated employees in each plant or location add course information to the site. Once it's reviewed and approved by the authorized administrator, it's posted instantly.

Will online learning centers revolutionize training and development in this century, much as Henry Ford's production line revolutionized transportation in the last? Grace's experience with its center suggests that potential. Paul Norris, chairman, president, and CEO of W.R. Grace, sums it up: "Targeted, practical learning—the kind of learning fostered through our Global Learning Center—is how people achieve professional growth. And professional growth will take us all where we want to go."

Online learning centers is a concept for our times. Expect to see many more of them, soon. TD

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