At the Center of Learning

Cutting-edge learning takes an informal turn at Sun Microsystems.

The scale in which training is conducted at Sun Microsystems is almost impossible to imagine. Consider that it delivered more than 6 million hours of formal training during its past fiscal year, a figure that will soar to an estimated whopping 12 million this year when new informal learning programs are combined.

And just what accounts for all of this informal learning? Let's just say the future of the corporate training function is now on display at Sun Microsystems. The company that began preaching the merits of Web 2.0 scenarios long before the term was invented is rolling out numerous innovations certain to receive plaudits, and surely some skepticism, from the training profession.

"Imagine a world where anyone, anywhere can develop content—at their computer, in a kiosk, or with a webcam, and publish that to a secure environment," teases Sun in its BEST Award application. With a few tags, that content is then published automatically to several delivery environments such as an iPhone or iPod Touch, a thin client, or a desktop.

"We call it 'YouTube meets iTunes,'" says Karie Willyerd, Sun's vice president and chief learning officer. Willyerd says it's a secure YouTube-like site where employees can upload content, package it into baskets of informal learning, and publish it for view by employees or the general public.

Branded as Sun Learning eXchange (SLX), the tool was piloted among a set of Sun employees and was fully launched in August. It is available at http://slx.sun.com with some content, including a mobile learning demo by Beckham, available for anyone to view.

It's part of Sun's new collaborative learning environment—wiki-driven capabilities that include gaming, learning, social networking, tag clouds, and other elements of the Web 2.0 era. In this learning universe, the LMS is no longer king. It's only a role player along with other tools that service a platform built around the discovery mechanism of Internet search.

To enable the broadest distribution of such content, Sun has designed a new Internet search solution currently at work within its own search engines. It integrates the Google search appliance with Sun's own infrastructure to aggregate formal and informal assets including file shares, intranet objects, databases, applications, hosted services, and LMS-administered content. (In the process, the clicks to learning launch have been reduced by 30 percent.)

These and other learning technologies will be shared with the public via an open source community that Sun has created, says Charles Beckham, chief technology officer of Sun Learning Services.

Sun's emphasis on informal learning has several motivators. They include an unquenchable thirst for training services by its various audiences, the virtual nature of the company in which more than half of the employee learning audience works from home, and Sun's longstanding commitment to open source software.

So the logical solution was to seize ownership of the space in every possible way, says Willyerd. She asked a team headed by Beckham to devise ways to promote informal learning. "They told us what was technologically possible, and we worked backwards to wrap a process around it—the opposite way most companies would do it."

From Beckham's perspective, to emphasize informal learning, is merely to acknowledge the inevitable. "In real life, the bulk of learning happens

informally among individuals. This initiative uses the Internet to leverage that so people can share with each other in a learning fashion," he says.

Even before the capability was rolled out systemwide, Sun's learning departments were running at full steam. Nearly 30 percent of the daily visitors to the Sun website click through to the training site, which enjoys valuable real estate on the home page.

Not only is training an important and growing profit center (Sun doesn't disclose specifics), it trains tens of thousands of global employees and millions more from its three other constituencies—customers, partners, and communities. It does so through a single training organization headed by Willyerd, a formula that works well, she says.

"People in the traditional customer training business don't tend to be as actively involved in the training community as those in workforce training," explains Willyerd. "They typically view themselves more as business professionals, while those from the internal training world don't tend to be as metric and business savvy."

By involving learning executives in these areas within a single business unit, Sun can devote more attention to curriculum, performance support, and other learning areas, Willyerd says, while leveraging the skills of both groups. (Budgets are kept separate.)

The combined entity, created in 2007, was part of a consolidation of Sun's formerly decentralized learning functions, which combined more than a dozen legacy organizations into the unit. In its first year, it found more than nine LMSs, three competency management systems, and e-learning delivery systems that were both SCORM and non-SCORM compliant.

One decision made during the restructuring was to share the title of CLO. With Willyerd as the principal executive, Sun appointed 19 other individuals as regional and local area CLOs throughout the world, each with a dotted line relationship to the local vice president.

Beckham's 75-person tech support unit was also created, along with a shared design and development group.

Two other new programs demonstrate the eagerness of Sun learning services to work with internal clients. It created the Sales University with guidance by the executive vice president of sales to manage sales-related learning and development, and the Leadership Academy under human resource to identify key programs for each management level of the organization.

As part of the leadership program's focus on sustaining the organization, every director and vice president will engage in a program where they have the opportunity to run a simulation of the company during the next year. The goal is to allow leaders to drive results within the safety of a management simulator, so they can make more informed decisions in their daily roles to drive alignment around sustainable organizational results.

As you might expect, a learning organization this committed to innovation does not ignore metrics. Among the more unusual measurements Sun employs is the "infrastructure complexity factor," a seldom-used metric in training and development, to measure the complexity of individual applications. Since it runs a full profit and loss center as well, Sun employs all the traditional metrics across the business.

So that's life on the cutting edge for Sun Microsystems. The reason for doing so is basic: "We're making a significant investment to make learning a prominent portion of the company's business strategy," says Beckham. One reason is Sun's ability to develop web-based communities to reach high school and college students who could become clients or employees. Says Beckham, "We're leveraging this across all audiences." **T+D**

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> **–Karie Willyerd**
> Vice President and CLO,
> Sun Microsystems

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