A Virtual Business Training Center: An Online Platform for Students and Businesses

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Before we explore our virtual training online platform, we need to examine where it fits in both education and business. To effectively discuss our position on online training environment, we need to review some specific trends and gaps in existing training and learning environments. The uniqueness of the Virtual Business Training Center focuses on the effectiveness of an online training environment in developing application skills and increased performance for business employees and students, a feature corporate universities and traditional universities lack.

Corporate Universities

Individual business training centers are quickly being driven from reactive skill–based training responses into more proactive and strategic learning environments. The structures that are housing this movement are corporate universities. Corporate universities are most often umbrella programs that include all of an organization's custom training needs, including outsourcing, product based in–house training, and online opportunities. Jeanne Meister, a recognized and leading expert on corporate universities, indicates that the customizing of an organization's corporate university focuses on the increase of overall performance, whereas traditional training programs focus on increasing job skills (Gerbman 2000). If the performance goal of corporate universities includes the understanding of corporate values and culture, then the skill–training component becomes a much smaller piece of the company's overall learning objectives. The growth of these new custom–learning centers is startling. A 1999 *CIO* report indicates that 400 companies

with corporate universities in 1988 have now grown to 1,600 companies and include nearly half of the Fortune 500 companies. Ninety percent of those companies have at least some online or virtual training deliveries, including web–based training, CD–ROM, and video conferencing (Stuart 1999). This realization only escalates the latest efforts by training departments to find effective ways to measure training return on investments. The higher levels of assessment are directed toward performance improvement impact vs. satisfaction with training delivery method and basic knowledge gains. Another review of corporate universities has summarized important benefits, including improved recruitment, increased revenues, reduced turnover, better employee advancement, and a wider talent pool (Fenn 1999).

Not coincidently, formal education has been trying to redefine how it delivers its main product—knowledge. Education is experiencing explosive growth in distance education and online course offerings. Most of the incentives and efforts in education have been targeted toward market development strategies rather than increasing performance of student learning. The predominant technology platforms used (or components used) have low–level interaction (interaction within the Web site with site data base, discussion boards, etc.) and appear to be more like online correspondence courses. These universities also are struggling with delivery effectiveness and the growing array of technology choices available to deliver various knowledge bases. This struggle represents the difficultly in matching technology choice with delivery and content objectives.

Gaps In Corporate University And Online University Efforts

Meister states that the key to a successful corporate university is flexibility. Flexibility should be expressed with flexible teaching methods, scheduling, and modes of learning. Without such flexibility, learners have little chance to apply learning to their jobs (Gerbman 2000). My own experiences as a trainer have focused my understanding of flexibility as being based on establishing a structure of training that can be as dynamic as learners' needs. Learners' needs are driven by workplace and market place requirements. It is on this flexibility issue that most

corporate universities and formal education fall down. The absence of an appropriate delivery featuring project–based techniques combined with maximizing the use of new web–based technology platforms prohibit effective responses required in establishing this flexible environment. The project–based approach is a technique of pedagogy and delivery of business information to university classrooms. It represents an integral piece of improving the effective training of future business leaders. Project work in general provides an environment in which students exhibit a direct hands–on application of business skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Students in this learning environment have the opportunity to develop key business skills that are difficult to deliver in the traditional classroom format.

The project–based approach functions as a "pull" system, much like successful and innovative production control systems that require parts to be delivered only as they are needed using a Just–in–Time (JIT) system. The successful integration of business skills and software expertise can emulate the shop floor control model. The issue is Push vs. Pull. Pulling the business content requirement and technical skills into the project–classroom at exactly the time business students need those enablers optimizes the benefits of experiential learning project work. It also increases the range of applications of various business skills. As an example, the pull method of integrating software into a business class is driven by the actual business project. The question of what type of enabler (skill intervention) is needed is matched with what best enables the successful completion of the project component. The project also is the significant criterion for what should be introduced (knowledge intervention) as preparation. Using the software example, we note that the project will determine whether the student team will get exposure and training in software for spread sheets, project management, statistical analysis, statistical process control, flow charting, desk top publishing, activity based costing, or simulation software. The timing of the required training intervention is determined by the immediate needs of the student project team in resolving project problems. The introduction, demonstration, and hands–on project application are presented only when the team is ready to apply the software application for project activities.

A comprehensive project–based program will require the

understanding and usage of relevant knowledge and expertise. The real time nature of projects should eliminate the expended time lag between the receipt of theoretical information and its implementation in solving problems. A project–based approach can focus on skills, knowledge, and attitudes. This approach requires dynamic responses from students exhibiting some skills and gaining exposure to others (Hoyt 2000).

An innovative use of online technologies is not just an alternative to be used in project–based business training: it is a better platform. Project managers, trainers, and faculty can use a Web–based platform to maximize their facilitation of the project. An online platform in a learning setting will:

1. Increase participation of learners
2. Provide more opportunities for critical thinking
3. Enhance communication between team members
4. Enhance communication between business sponsor, facilitator, and team
5. Increase probability of achieving required deliverables
6. Quicken responses and facilitator interventions
7. Complete project closer to planned timeline schedule
8. Increase communication between team members
9. Provide clearer exhibition to business skills and knowledge
10. Establish more cohesive group work
11. Complete project completion closer to planned specifications
12. Facilitate earlier interaction with facilitator
13. Facilitate earlier interaction with business sponsor
14. Provide opportunities for increased number of outside experts involved with project

The use of an online platform also has additional benefits in a workplace setting by providing an organization with several optimal efficiency outcomes, including:

1. Optimizing employee's time on project
2. Reducing costs
3. Maximizing outcome performance
4. Providing stronger support to keep project on timeline

5. Making more effective project status reporting
6. Encouraging effective interaction with internal or external sponsors
7. Tracking of project progress for more efficiency
8. Maximizing team member expertise
9. Allowing team members from different locations to have full participation
10. Improving the efficiency of other work activities and project work (Hoyt and Stockman 1999)

Our Concept—The Virtual Business Training Center

The Virtual Business Training Center (VBTC) is an integrated business resource center that provides business users with access to online training, market research, project management, and project–based resources. The center also functions as a business lab and virtual internship for Ohio University students. Our online and interactive format provides users with services including project management, business plan work, market research, and continuous improvement problem solving conducted and posted online. The technology platform integrates an interactive Website, desktop video conferencing, and compressed video technologies. The VBTC is designed to help build skills needed to function and succeed in a project driven workplace. It is an interactive learning environment that facilitates participation with necessary interventions in project management, an essential factor in bringing business projects to successful completion. Using an actual business project requires close and frequent interaction between team participants, data, and facilitator.

The dynamics of an actual business project require skill and knowledge interventions delivered Just–in–Time for students and business partners to complete key components of their project. This multitiered online platform leverages the power of a full range of synchronous and asynchronous opportunities. All participants can access data, reference materials, and market analysis information placed on Web databases. Threaded discussion boards or video files posted on web site facilitate software support. Both the synchronous and asynchronous features of our online approach maximize interaction. IRC chat functions facilitate online interviews or brainstorm activities. Desktop video conferencing facilitates real time collaborative spreadsheet,

statistical analysis, and project management work. Text, audio, and video streaming files are used for presentation of information, facilitation comments, or review of analysis results.

An Online Platform: Maximizing Access And Interaction—The Differentiation Of The Virtual Business Training Center

Now, imagine a working environment where small or technologically challenged companies could benefit in three key areas. First, companies can access many dimensions of business information or analysis, the basis for the corporate university. Second, they can engage in training resources that improve retention and optimize the user's learning needs, the basis for Web–based training. Third, companies can work in a real time virtual environment that adds project management support—all done within an online format, the basis for a virtual business training center. When several businesses participate with our Virtual Business Training Center (VBTC) on their own corporate university projects, the common Web–based center functions as an incubation site. When a business interacts and partners with the VBTC on an actual business project, the center provides Just–in–Time training online and also functions as a higher level interactive WBT site.

Key differences between VBTC and existing corporate universities include:

1. VBTC has multiple business participants vs. single in–house user
2. VBTC involves interactive business research with give and take between sponsor and training center vs. obtaining syndicated type research reports
3. VBTC provides flexible access to project information vs. standard open or scheduled training hours

One of our corporate university projects involved gathering market information for a board of directors committee that was charged with reviewing the overall compensation plan for their not–for–profit health care company. A student team gathered general information in specified categories, including: incentive pay systems, base wage and salary systems,

organizational reward systems, and employee benefits summary. The sponsor could join the research activities in progress and poke and prod so the information was useful, timely, and presented effectively. The learning was interactive, and the online platform maximized this access to information and interaction for all participants.

Steve Alexander, in *ComputerWorld*, reported that one of the most significant drawbacks to even very good WBT programs was that they still lacked appropriate levels of interaction while learning (Alexander 1998). The VBTC model that we have developed as a course and training module maximizes interaction while learning. The online platform we use allows higher level of access and interaction between experts, participants, facilitators, and sponsors.

Key differences between the use of VBTC and the WBT focus on access and interaction issues and include:

1. VBTC has live project interaction and training vs. text–based format with multi media graphics accessed by online platform
2. VBTC can optimize an employee's time on training project vs. training activity
3. VBTC will maximize outcome performance as training is delivered as work project is completed vs. WBT training that still must be applied after training has concluded
4. VBTC increases interaction between training program sponsor and trainees' activities vs. report of activities at conclusion of training
5. VBTC facilitates more effective means of tracking training progress (observation and interaction can occur during project) vs. some assessment of training success at date well beyond conclusion of training
6. The VBTC platform facilitates cohort teams to work on projects and complete training at the same time from any remote location vs. individual participation (Hoyt and Stockman 1999)

Our review has addressed three key education and business training issues. First, we have examined the basis and growth of corporate universities and online education. Then, our review has examined the gaps in traditional delivery vs. online and Web–based education and business training deliveries. And finally, we have presented a viable

training and learning delivery using a virtual project based and online environment—The Virtual Business Training Center. The crux of our model is based on positioning our delivery environment in the most flexible arrangement so that we can absorb the dynamic nature of content, delivery, and performance needs of learners and their organizations.

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