TAKING THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM INTO THE MAINSTREAM AND BEYOND:

How Web-based Learning Enables Training and Education Professionals to Perform at New Levels

Training and education executives must confront an array of dramatic market trends in the coming years. While continuous learning and skill development are core concerns in this knowledge-driven era, training departments may be challenged to clearly demonstrate their value, relevance, and impact.

Given today's hyper-competitive and rapidly changing environment, training and education decision-makers are struggling to deal with the rapid obsolescence, economic strains, and organizational resistance associated with conventional approaches.

In order to deliver measurable value to the enterprise and reassert their relevance, training executives are increasingly embracing the concept of the virtual classroom. Capitalizing on Web conferencing capabilities that are specially engineered for a dynamic learning environment, these forward-looking individuals have brought clear gains to their organizations.

Not only have they made learning and skill building resources more accessible, they have made them more collaborative, interactive, and effective. Indeed, they've achieved far more with existing budgets than they could have ever accomplished by relying on conventional classroom training alone. Ultimately, they are enabling their organizations to remain agile, competitive, and innovative by smartly investing in their people.

Market Drivers:
Mega-Trends in Enterprise Learning

The field of enterprise training, learning, and education will be dramatically transformed in the coming years. To get a better understanding of the nature of this shift, consider the key mega-trends now shaping the environment and influencing change:

Accelerating Market Evolution: As product cycles shrink and the speed of information accelerates, the pace of innovation increases. Ideas, skills, and competencies that once would have endured for a long period of time are rapidly replaced by new and improved ones. As a result, training systems that once endured and lent themselves to repeatability are prone to rapid obsolescence. Conventional approaches to training, which revolve around conventional classrooms and fixed curricula, can no longer keep pace with the market's intensified pace.

Commitment to Work/Life Balance. A growing number of employees are now seeking to enhance their family lives by negotiating for better work arrangements with their employers. According to a recent article in the Wall Street Journal, "More job candidates are bargaining hard for a perk very rare in the past: less travel."[1] Indeed, the piece cites recent research by the New York-based Association of Executive Search Consultants noting that reduced-travel deals rank among the top three nonfinancial concessions sought by new hires. Travel tied to training certainly represents one area that may bear renewed consideration as employees seek work/life balance and employers seek opportunities to strengthen employee motivation, loyalty, and performance.

Explosive Growth in Online Communities.
The profusion of new Web-based networking technologies and services has transformed the way people share information, consume content, and learn. Consider the popularity of YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, SecondLife, and assorted others. Increasingly, individuals look to dynamic online communities where they can actively connect with like-minded people, rapidly find relevant information, and collaboratively explore areas of interest. This is changing the context in which individuals choose to learn – and is taking collaboration to entirely new levels.

Sustainability and Green Technology.
As concerns about environmental damage continue to rise and gain media attention, enterprises increasingly are seeking opportunities to "go green" and reduce their "carbon footprint."

If they can significantly reduce travel by auto or air, they've taken an important step in this direction. Many organizations – such as General Electric and Royal Bank of Scotland – have introduced green initiatives designed to meet such objectives and enhance perceptions in the marketplace.

More with Less. While the drive for efficiency gains is certainly not new, new technologies, resources, and services now create opportunities to change the economic equation in many fields that previously had defied significant productivity improvements. Training and education is one such area. Considered "cost centers" in most enterprises, training organizations are now under severe pressure to provide more learning and development services without expanding their budgets. This challenges them to "change the game" and provide learning solutions in entirely new – and cost-effective—ways. [2]

Core Problems Facing Training Executives

Given the trends transforming the field of learning and professional development, training executives are facing a series of acute personal challenges. These problems threaten to undermine their careers and organizational success if they are not effectively addressed. Among them:

The Obsolescence Problem. Given the accelerating pace of change and brief shelf-life of much industry knowledge, training departments are struggling to manage increasingly steep learning curves. They struggle to develop new learning materials and stay relevant in an era when today's best practices are so quick to become standard or even substandard.

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[1]Sue Shellenbarger, Wall Street Journal, "The Job Less Traveled: Workers Seek Relief From Business Trips," July 12, 2007.

[2]Walder Arevelo De Azevedo Filho, Gartner, "How to Move to the next Level of E-Learning," September 14, 2005

They can no longer produce course content and expect it to remain relevant for any significant period of time. They can no longer create it once and use it many times. They must customize it on a constant basis.

Learners, meanwhile, increasingly seek knowledge in a just-in-time fashion. They want it when they need it. Course materials that once would have been relevant and valuable for years slip into irrelevance as industry trends and demands continuously change. The workforce must keep up to date with current skills and practices, rules, and regulations.

Under the circumstances, training leaders look around at their assets, resources, and capabilities only to find they are increasingly inadequate. They are unable to keep up with the pace of change, particularly given the flat budgets and increasing demands they face. While enterprises must compete on talent, their training departments are ill-equipped to produce the resources and materials necessary to develop a world-class workforce.

The Economic Problem. The budgets, for most training departments, have simply ceased to grow. Enterprises have decided they no longer can continue to fund them at higher levels. The only hope for career success for those leading these departments is to demonstrate that they can, in fact, radically improve the productivity of learning and training efforts.

The economic costs of conventional training are clear. They include the costs of travel, time away from work, and the disruption of workflow. Less

clear is the payoff associated with training efforts that seem inconsistent with the increasingly rapid movement of business life. Pulling individuals away from their work to engage in multi-day, training events no longer seems appropriate in many cases.

Of course, this problem is not a reflection on the skills and capabilities of the training group. It's just a fact that the demands on such groups have outstripped their ability to deliver by conventional means and within existing budgets. The only way to break out of the trap is to change the way that training is delivered – ensuring productivity rises to much higher levels.

The Relevance Problem. The key risk that training departments face in an era of pervasive information is that they will be perceived as irrelevant. Many learners simply are not interested in sitting in a conventional classroom for days at time – being exposed to too much or too little, too early or too late. The Internet has put enormous amounts of useful learning resources and materials at the fingertips of individuals. They can take charge of their own learning in many respects.

However, there are limits to the resources that individuals will obtain on their own. Training leaders are in a position to identify resources that will accelerate learning and competency building. The question is whether they can accomplish this task cost-effectively and whether they can deliver these resources in a way that is consistent with the demands of their customers. Can they deliver the right knowledge at the right time? Otherwise, training professionals are liable to see their careers stagnate and salary rates flat-line.

There's absolutely no reason for this to happen. Training professionals have the potential to be more relevant than ever. Clearly, employees are struggling to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to rise to the next level of performance in today's hyper-competitive era.

They need trusted guides, advisors, and coaches to ensure they reach their own career potentials. To reach these objectives and remain relevant, the training profession must build professional capabilities in a way that is consistent with workplace requirements and pressures that employees are now experiencing. They must rethink the traditional approaches of their profession and seek opportunities to take training to new levels.

The Virtual Classroom: Raising Performance & Productivity

To address the challenges of obsolescence, economics, and relevance that now face the training profession, a growing number of companies have embraced the virtual classroom.

The virtual classroom is a shared space online that enables instructors to dynamically deliver content, provide rapid feedback and guidance, and engage in a mix of testing and assessment activities. Critically, it's accessible to learners from anywhere – assuming they have adequate bandwidth. It's an environment that simulates and often surpasses the physical, in-person classroom experience. Forrester Research even sees this approach becoming "an integral part of the daily workflow, blurring the line between work and learning." [3]

The approach is interactive, personal, and collaborative. When courses are conducted live, instructors can actively assess the learner's progress and participation. In this sense, it exceeds the limitations of other self-paced and asynchronous forms of online learning. Nevertheless, the ability to record virtual courses and make the assets accessible for on-demand or asynchronous usage further increases their overall value.

While the virtual classroom does not eliminate the value of convening and meeting in person and actually contributes to "blended learning" environments, it does extend the options available to trainers and educators. [4] Relative to conventional classroom training and education, the virtual classroom approach delivers an array of key benefits:

Enhanced Learning Effectiveness. Whereas traditional classroom training often requires that course material be packed into one event, this approach enables instructors to pace the presentation of content over a longer period of time – allowing learners to absorb what they've learned and progressively build their proficiency with the material.

More Collaborative and Interactive: By enabling all participants to actively share insights and perspectives online, the virtual classroom often proves to be more engaging and collaborative than traditional classrooms. Multiple people can ask questions or make comments at a single time via chat functions.

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[3] Claire Schooley, Forrester Research, "Trends 2005: eLearning," November 4, 2004.

[4] Josh Bersin, Learning Circuits, "What Works in Blended Learning," www.learningcircuits.org/2003/jul2003/bersin.htm .

Also, individuals who may be reluctant to participate in a crowded classroom find it easier to ask questions and share comments. As a result, more perspectives can be voiced and heard – contributing to the overall richness of the learning experience.

More Active Feedback and Improvement:
From the instructor's perspective, this approach offers the ability to gain a better understanding of an individual's progress. Drawing on a mix of mechanisms to solicit feedback from the entire group (including polls and quiz questions), it's easier to gauge whether the course is moving at the appropriate pace and whether participants are absorbing and mastering the material.

Anytime, Anywhere:
This is a learning model that fits into the flow of people's days much more effectively than traditional training. Rather than having to book multiple days out of a person's schedule for training, it's now possible to learn in more manageable and accessible "modules." Moreover, it's available to learners wherever they are (i.e. they don't have to physically travel to an event). This convenience factor increases attendance and the scale of reach available to a training group.

Significant Productivity Gains:
By eliminating the costs associated with travel and lost productivity associated with time away from the office, enterprises realize large gains immediately. Indeed, monies that would have been spent on travel can now be reinvested to extend the amount of training available and the number of people it reaches.

Greater Employee Motivation and Loyalty:
Well trained and developed employees are far more likely to be successful in their jobs. As a result, they are more likely to remain loyal and committed to their employers. Meanwhile, they are liable to appreciate the benefits tied to work/life balance associated with reduced travel.

Green Gains:
In an era with imminent concerns about environmental impact, enterprises also to stand to benefit from reducing their "carbon footprint" by cutting back on travel. This enables an organization to claim the virtual classroom as an element of its overall efforts to take a proactive stance on environmental concerns.

Reaching More People with More Relevant Content:
With the virtual classroom approach, course material can be modularized and delivered in a more custom fashion. This allows training departments to train more people, more often, and with more relevance in the content. The economics of traditional training put severe limits on the production and delivery of relevant content.

Increasing the Agility of Training Departments.
By giving training groups the ability to produce and roll out courses in a more rapid fashion, one increases their ability to rapidly adapt to the needs and requirements of employees in a fast-changing marketplace.

All of these benefits contribute to the overall relevance and visible value of an enterprise's training organization. They enable such groups to make a convincing and credible case that they are in fact developing the talent necessary to compete in today's dynamic, knowledge-intensive, and hyper-competitive markets[5].

[5] Walder Arevelo De Azevedo Filho, Gartner, "Justifying E-Learning Investments in Three Phases," October 13, 2005.

Case in Point:
AETNA U.S. HEALTHCARE

One company that has actively capitalized on the benefits of the virtual classroom is Aetna U.S. Healthcare, a leading $15.5 billion healthcare benefits provider with nearly 16 million health members.

Dave Blair, training director for Aetna's healthcare division, came face-to-face with a decision that would ultimately match Aetna's philosophy of care and quality customer service with a cost-effective, online training program. Blair spent five months researching online training technologies and came away enthralled.

Top management was less enthusiastic but approved Blair's initiative to implement virtual classroom software. The next step was to find a provider that could understand Aetna's training needs and match those needs with the right technology. Aetna looked at three leading vendors and finally decided on iLinc. The software is now supporting Aetna's efforts to improve communication and training, while remaining a cost-effective long-term solution.

Success Criteria:
What to look for in a Virtual Classroom Solution

Enterprises that are considering an investment in virtual classroom solutions should keep several factors in mind. These are the success criteria that have guided the investments of other organizations that have effectively deployed this approach. Consider these factors:

Audience Support. In order to ensure that one can provide compelling learning events and experiences online, it's important to ensure that one's solution is consistent with varying bandwidth ranges and network environments (including firewalls). In addition, the solution should be platform-agnostic – accessible with a PC, Mac, or Linux machine. Ease of use is critical in order to ensure high adoption and satisfaction.

Dynamic Interaction. Look for solutions that enable a high degree of interactivity and audience engagement. This is one area where the virtual classroom can indeed surpass conventional classrooms. Instructors should have the ability to solicit and provide feedback in real-time (through polls, quizzes, surveys, spot-checks, etc.) and participants should have the ability to collaborate as a group.

Learning Expertise. One should expect solution providers to have clear and defined domain expertise in learning and training principles. Solutions should be specifically designed for training applications, not merely "bolted on" to an existing Web conferencing technology. The virtual classroom approach must be instructionally sound if it is to deliver the benefits explored in this paper.

Also, ensure that the solution can be effectively integrated with learning management systems (LMS) that track individual skills, competencies, resources, and performance against set targets.

Usage Options. While some solution providers only allow their customers to "rent" software through subscriptions, many organizations can realize the highest return on investment and lowest total cost of ownership by purchasing their software licenses. They should have the option.

Measurable Impact. Look for a partner that can help you define and articulate a clear, compelling, and measurable business case for investing in a virtual classroom solution. In order to strengthen the perception and enhance the impact of the training group, it's vital that clear objectives are outlined and results are tracked.

These are some of the core issues that decision-makers in the field of training and education must consider as they look to maximize the value of their investments in the virtual classroom. By ensuring these criteria are met, training leaders can take the key steps necessary to accelerate learning, cut costs, and enhance overall performance in the enterprise.

About BroadSoft iLinc

Phoenix-based BroadSoft iLinc Communications, Inc., a subsidiary of BroadSoft, Inc. (NASDAQ: BSFT), provides advanced web conferencing services for businesses, governments, and educational institutions around the world. For more than a decade, the company has specialized in helping organizations leverage virtual events and conferencing to reduce travel time, expenses and environmental impact. iLinc and its respective logo are the registered trademarks of BroadSoft, Inc.

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