Global Trainer

By W. Duncan Welder IV

You've been a trainer for years, but have you tried doing it globally yet? Implementing training globally comes with surprises. Just your luck, there are seven lessons on the subject that will get you off to a good start.

In the last 10 years, leading organizations have recognized that a well-managed training function is not only an essential link in the value chain but also contributes to a significant competitive advantage. They view training as an investment in value creation, not an unavoidable expense. Rather than marginalizing training by relegating it to business units and departments, they leverage best practices across the enterprise and realize economies of scale in the purchase of systems and content. Global organizations can extend these benefits beyond borders, provided they avoid the unique pitfalls of multinational, multi-language learning management.

Why Global Training?

In prior decades, training was generally silo-based. Each business unit developed its offerings in a vacuum, and courses were rarely equivalent across the enterprise. Three key problems with disparate training functions drive the need for a centralized learning management system (LMS):

1. Siloed training makes global reporting extremely difficult. Even if training can be administered simultaneously across continents, incompatible data from disparate information systems will make data comparisons all but impossible. Bottom Line: You can't compare "apples to apples" when the data comes from different systems.

2. Cross-referencing is difficult. To be competitive, companies need to look at global employee populations to determine qualifications for promotion, transfer, and succession planning. When each location has its own course titles, coding conventions, and training requirements, this task is virtually impossible.

3. The cost of purchasing and supporting multiple systems can be astronomical, and companies with disparate systems cannot take advantage of economies of scale for purchases of software and content.

Firms with international branches and global organizations with common reporting requirements need a centralized approach to deliver high-touch training in a cost-effective manner with minimal training staff at each site.

Seven Lessons Learned

Moving from the myopic world of training silos to a centralized, enterprise-wide function requires a major culture shift, strong commitment from the top, and thoughtful planning. Take advantage of the lessons learned from organizations that have already implemented a global LMS.

1. Defining reporting needs first. In moving to centralized learning management, reporting needs should drive system configuration, training processes, data storage requirements, and organization of employees and courses. For example, some developing countries have reporting requirements associated with mandates to hire and train local employees. If the appropriate data cannot be captured by the LMS, it will be necessary to purchase and support ancillary systems·

2. Manage employee organization. Carefully consider how employees should be categorized to ensure training is delivered to those who actually need it and to ensure optimum granularity of reporting. It may be necessary, for instance, to

group employees by country of origin or discipline in addition to department and division. Get a grip on the make-up of the employee population from a top-down vantage point.

3. Manage course catalog governance. Global organizations need to build a governance model for their course offerings. Someone has to take ownership of the catalog in order to prevent duplication. A workflow or approval process for new courses is strongly recommended. Develop a structure of responsibility, identify roles, set common operating protocols, establish procedures, and determine system access. Clarity in these areas prevents runaway or inaccurate data.

4. Accommodate and integrate varied HR systems. While an LMS can facilitate the global delivery and tracking of training, information about the employees and their organization usually comes from a variety of sources—SAP, PeopleSoft, spreadsheets, internally developed systems, etc., depending on the country. Integration with these systems helps reduce clerical error, reduces data maintenance tasks, and ensures consistent reporting.

5. Navigate data privacy. Storing training records has become a legal minefield as more and more countries develop their own data privacy laws. For example, a U.S. headquarters that hosts a training application needs to comply with E.U. data privacy laws when storing data for employees based in Europe. In addition to E.U. regulations, some countries and local municipalities have their own data privacy laws that may also apply. Create a process to track and comply with the laws of different nations. If the training data will be stored in the U.S., consider joining the Department of Commerce's Safe Harbor program. For more information, visit www.export.gov.

6. Scale the language barrier. Content delivery in multiple languages is challenging enough, but don't forget the back end. How can multi-language, multi-character-set information be pooled to create reports? Develop ways to associate

codes with courses to ensure comparability of training content and systems that allow the tagging of courses across locations.

7. Know how to make the right decision. A costly mistake is to roll out an LMS that effectively tracks training at headquarters, but fails to meet the needs of a facility overseas. Training needs and reporting requirements are best identified locally, not at the senior management level where capital decisions are made. Get input from the right cross-section of learning stakeholders at all levels of the organization and expect to incorporate conflicting needs.

8. Finally, stay focused on the needs of the organization. The system, governance, and operating model should be driven by organizational needs, not by the capabilities vendors happen to offer. One size does not fit all.

What will it cost?

With the right decisions at the outset, a globally managed training function can lower expenses and enhance efficiency. Yes, it may be a lot of upfront work. Of course, there will be costs associated with the centralization, but these costs are small compared to the costs of managing disparate systems. Don't just look at the hard cost of systems and content, but also consider the vast human resources involved in entering, updating, and reporting on incompatible data. Developing a proper governance model, an efficient systems' architecture, and a centralized approach to common training needs can provide a tremendous return on investment. Once the decision is made, don't start from scratch. Take advantage of the lessons others have learned.

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