

A Tested Commitment to Learning

Dedication to aligned learning solutions permeates the business culture at ETS.

The organizational mission of ETS is to advance quality and equity in education for all people. About six years ago, that mission was turned inward, with the appointment of the educational assessment company's first chief learning officer, T.J. Elliott.

Elliott serves as vice president of strategic workforce solutions, the company's human resource division, and works closely with CEO Kurt Landgraf and his officer team to lead organizational initiatives.

"Elliott stresses the importance of workplace learning being in service of business goals. Our team is expected to provide relevant employee development opportunities matched to the business needs of the organization," explains Felicia DeVincenzi, executive director of talent management.

Employee education at ETS is the responsibility of the learning and development (L&D) unit of the strategic workforce solutions. The division's 50 employees are organized around "people processes," including learning and knowledge management processes.

"Learning and development has a seat at the business table at ETS, and its professionals are involved early on in strategic initiatives. Willa Thomas, Kirk Messick, and I work with T.J. to make sure that our talent development strategy stays connected to ETS's strategy," DeVincenzi says.

The L&D unit also provides leadership for change management efforts. "We encourage leaders to identify the human resource implications of their initiatives, such as learning or knowledge gaps created by an intentional organizational improvement, and ensure that they are appropriately addressed," she adds.

As a result, L&D is usually involved from the start in the reengineering of new business processes. Such was the case with the latest major system change for tools used by ETS's assessment developers and test item



L-R: Felicia DeVincenzi, Executive Director of Talent Management; T.J. Elliot, Chief Learning Officer; Kirk Messick, Director of Learning and Development; Willa Thomas, Executive Director, Design & Enable Learning



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– Felicia DeVincenzi
Executive Director of Talent Management, ETS

writers. Multiple systems and interfaces had crept in over time, resulting in inconsistency and inefficiencies. New tools, such as XML and web publishing technologies, were about to be leveraged thanks to a systems reengineering project in the works.

The legacy systems and their workflows were heavily ingrained into the fabric of daily work, and much process and product variance existed. ETS knowledge workers and test publishers would need to simultaneously learn new business processes and brand-new proprietary applications while they finished work already in the pipeline of the legacy systems.

The reengineering project posed considerable practical challenges for learning design. The L&D group needed an approach that resulted in significant learning and knowledge transfer, for a system that was entirely proprietary and still under development.

Learning had to be delivered to hundreds of staff, but the new software features and process changes were known only by a handful of experts—system engineers and a small group of assessment development experts, who themselves were fully allocated to technology design and test development.

Hands-on training had to immediately precede the new system’s “go-live”

date, so that productivity would not be interrupted; the large-scale application required both general and customized training for dozens of product development groups. Both the new system and the training to support it had to be developed within four months.

Employees from the assessment division, who were subject matter experts in the generic work process, but not the new system, were recruited to help create training materials and serve as on-the-job trainers. They became an informal user acceptance testing group as they explored the interface.

Working in small teams, these “emerging SMEs” used templates provided by L&D to create content for specific work functions and tasks, accelerating the materials development process and providing the flexibility to customize the learning sessions and materials for specific groups by job function.

In a SharePoint site, SMEs collaborated with L&D and IT on deliverables, logged questions and issues for IT, and made suggestions for future releases. This approach allowed the SMEs to stay abreast of interface modifications and avoid as much rework as possible as they created materials.

In only four months, this new “expert community” produced seven courses (each including presentation, course outline, job aids, glossaries, and lab activities) and 40 reference guides.

At rollout in January, training was delivered on time and on budget to all those identified as first adopters, owing to L&D’s innovative collaborative learning design approach and the dedication and diligence of the SMEs in the assessment division and IT. The project continues as each test program is transitioned to the new system, and additional functionalities and improvements are introduced.

In 2007, L&D supported the company’s change to a new retirement savings investment plan and new fund managers. L&D leaders worked as internal consultants, in collaboration with the company’s treasurer and marketing staff, to create a combined communication-education campaign that would invite employee excite-

ment and participation rather than suspicion or worry.

DeVincenzi says that the corporate practice of after-action reviews heavily informed the process: “The creation of this campaign was the result of organizational learning over time. And we tried to avoid repeating past mistakes. We wanted to communicate this change in a sensitive way and convey its benefits up front.”

Careful testing of messages and methods was key. They piloted all the education and communication pieces with “key communicators”—trusted staff from across ETS who were known as honest critics. Once their input was incorporated, the second phase consisted of multiple face-to-face learning sessions augmented by a SharePoint site, print and online enrollment kits, supplemental educational publications on various aspects of financial planning, and a help desk to answer questions by telephone.

The business impact of the campaign was notable. Match plan participation increased from 85 percent to 92 percent during the first three months of enrollment, and participation statistics from fund providers indicate greater diversification in investment decisions across the new plans, which was a key goal.

ETS tries to maintain sustainability through its organizational design and partnerships through a multidisciplinary solution set that uses systems thinking, and through an action-oriented design approach geared to business objectives.

“Project by project, we tweak our approach, run an after action review, and try to determine what we can learn from our experience,” says DeVincenzi. “We seek to make sure everything we do is business critical, builds capability, and inspires action.” **T+D**



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