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Virtual Learning and Class Participation in Real Time

By Donald F. Berbary

Learning Tree International and EMC partner to develop an online solution that ensures global employees receive top-notch, instructor-led training anywhere in the world.

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EMC²



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THE SUPPLIER:
Learning Tree International



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EMC² is a global leader in the design, building, and management of flexible, scalable, and secure information infrastructures. Historically, EMC's IT employee training had been presented at EMC's headquarters in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Employees outside the area were typically required to travel to the site for their courses.

In 2008, the economy forced EMC to take a hard look at how it could continue to effectively train its staff as travel budgets were being slashed.

This challenge was compounded by the fact that a majority of EMC employees were geographically dispersed across several continents. EMC approached Learning Tree International with a simple challenge: Leverage

training technology to develop a solution that will allow EMC to continue to provide effective classroom IT training to its global staff. EMC needed a solution that would

- allow its staff to continue receiving hands-on training
- maintain the high bar of effectiveness set by Learning Tree International classroom programs
- meet cost-reduction mandates
- maintain both EMC's and Learning Tree's high standards for quality.

Learning Tree accepted the challenge and, through an aggressive, innovative pilot program supported by EMC, developed live, online training that would eventually become "Learning Tree AnyWare" (patent pending).

AnyWare allows EMC employees—located anywhere in the world—to participate via the Internet in live classroom sessions held at EMC's Hopkinton headquarters; all participants receive the same features, benefits, and results as if they were sitting in the classroom. Additionally, AnyWare online participants see and hear everything that happens in the classroom: they engage with

their instructor and interact with their peers by voice and video in real time, and they participate in small group discussions and perform the same hands-on exercises as in-class participants.

How AnyWare works

AnyWare participants experience all the elements of classroom learning—exposure to the most current content, interaction with classmates, and hands-on practice of new skills using state-of-the-art technology. Most importantly, they also have direct access to an instructor who coaches them through activities, answers questions, and tailors the learning experience for each individual.

All that's needed to access an AnyWare course is an audio-enabled computer, a high-speed Internet connection, and a Flash-enabled browser.

In AnyWare, Learning Tree brought together four technologies to create a live, online training solution that connects participants into an actual instructor-led classroom and engages them throughout a multiday course.

MagnaLearn. All Learning Tree's classes are designed around the use of MagnaLearn, Learning Tree's system that allows instructors to highlight, annotate, emphasize, and add to course content dynamically during a class session.

Audio/visual connection. Online participants see the same slides and all the instructor's real-time annotations just as the in-class participants do. This capability, combined with full-time, two-way voice and chat technologies, allows each online participant to be an integrated part of the live classroom.

In-class dedicated PC. Learning Tree courses rely on hands-on exercises to transfer applicable knowledge to participants, and online participants perform all the same hands-on exercises they would if they were in the actual classroom.

This setup allows the instructor to see exactly what online participants are doing, guide them through exercises, and answer questions immediately. Since online participants access the classroom PC via the Internet, there

is no need to download software or applications.

Technical support connection. Should an online participant need technical support, a chat pod is part of the interface so they can communicate directly with a dedicated support team. This allows online participants to have their questions answered without having to disengage from the classroom.

Essential practices

Key practices emerged from the pilot initiative that became critical to the broader implementation of AnyWare across Learning Tree's course offerings. For example, Learning Tree International ensured that AnyWare participants are prepared well before class begins.

Course participants need to receive all course materials—including two-way headsets—at least a week in advance of the course start date. Online participants also complete a system validation process prior to their class and then run a quick check with their instructor on the first day before the start of class.

Additionally, Learning Tree extended its tradition of exceptional instructor preparation and training to include practices tailored to in-class and online participants.

Learning Tree trains its instructors to use varied tactics to ensure that all participants stay engaged, including initiating conversations and addressing online and in-class participants by name, keeping everyone involved in the discussions, and encouraging feedback from all participants.

Learning Tree also perfected its approach to real-time, in-class technical support by achieving the goal of handling participant or instructor technology issues transparently, and without interruption to the progress of the class, for both online and in-class participants.

Results

Because AnyWare delivers a training experience integrated with a live classroom event, EMC employees attending from non-Hopkinton loca-

tions remained actively engaged, completing courses that averaged 26 hours of classroom time over four days. As of November 2010, EMC had run 29 courses with a total of 94 online attendees. When asked why they found the experience so engaging, online participants responded that they felt they "were there."

"The online participants felt they had received the same high-quality presentation as those who participated in the actual classroom and, more importantly, the same rich lab experience they have come to expect from a Learning Tree course," explains Ralph Eldridge, EMC's director of education services for engineering and global IT.

From training within budget constraints and maintaining organizational consistency to sustaining participant engagement throughout a training course, AnyWare is an effective, global business-to-business training solution.

"We were appreciative of this very efficient approach which also enables us to be 'greener' by reducing travel and conserving energy," says Eldridge. "This type of blended classroom model has allowed us to achieve our goal of making quality technical training globally available."

Learning Tree International now offers AnyWare training from its learning facilities around the world, including New York; Chicago; Atlanta; Reston, Virginia; Rockville, Maryland; Los Angeles; Ottawa; Toronto; London; and Stockholm. The company also provides AnyWare as a delivery option for courses held at client sites. To date, more than 5,000 online participants from more than 25 countries have used the technology to participate in more than 1,200 class sessions of more than 150 course titles.

Donald F. Berbarly is president and general manager of Learning Tree International; www.learningtree.com.

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T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

090938.63250

