



From vision to reality – lessons from BAE Systems

Social networking, organisational capability, performance, competency are all in vogue at the moment but what practical steps must be taken to ensure that these promises deliver in the real world?

Richard West, Head of Organisational and e-learning at BAE Systems has combined vision and hard work over the past few years to use technology to deliver practical solutions for a staff of over 100,000 operating across 5 continents. When we met recently, he shared some of the practical challenges he faced in his journey of turning a learning strategy into a reality.

The impetus for change

In the late 90's the aerospace and defence industry was competitive, BAE Systems was a diverse organisation which had been formed from a series of mergers with each business group having its own supply chain and processes for learning. With over 500 competency sets in existence across the business, it was not easy for an individual to easily map a career path within the organisation. When it came down to developing learning programmes, divisions within BAE Systems were much more likely to reinvent rather than reuse.

As a result, a new global learning capability was developed with a mandate to align and integrate learning and development for individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole. It was critical that those individuals were provided with the learning support that they needed. Teams needed a mechanism to share and learn from best practice, where existing experience could be reused and exploited and the organisation required a process for capability development which would drive research and development for the future.

A global capability

However, implementing a centralised global programme had a number of challenges and the new capability would need to provide a unified system that would work across many diverse cultures and divisions within the business. Success depended equally on the technical infrastructure, the processes, the people (cultures) involved and the knowledge needed within the business.

The technology had to be right - 'if we build it will they come, if come will they get in?!' so a lowest common denominator approach was used to encourage inclusivity. The processes needed to provide structure for those in need of direction and a light touch framework for those divisions who were more established. Consideration had to be given to local cultures and people to encourage ownership. And there was a focus on not only consolidating



competencies and aligning courses to them but also capturing and sharing knowledge within the business.

A range of web solutions were deployed to implement the strategy. They included a learning and development guide, access to information on courses, placements, mentors, career support and over 350 generic online courses to address skills such as presentation skills, IT etc. All the resources were aligned to competency frameworks to create structure and support for the learner.

To address the knowledge elements, they launched an online benchmarking and best practice forum where staff were encouraged to share their ideas so that others could learn from it.

And the success?

Over the first 2 years, 25,000 staff were using the programme, 6000 online courses were being taken a month and they had over 20,000 web hits per day. Having raised the bar, Richard and his team were expecting a positive response in the company's annual employer survey. However they were surprised that less than 40% of staff agreed that they had the right learning support to do their job. Despite all of their efforts and investment, the levels of satisfaction from learners had not moved.

Digging deeper

The surprising satisfaction results led the team to dig deeper. They found out that staff did not want to search for the development they required; they wanted to be told what is best for me? How do I improve my individual return on investment so that I am valuable? Staff had a learning challenge everyday – training was not just a single shot in the arm after annual appraisal. They wanted to know how to get quick access to all the other useful learning interventions that they relied on such as coaching, news information, and conferences.

It was clear that anything could be a learning asset within the right context and at the right time. Learning is applied knowledge management – their current capability placed all the courses and information at people's fingertips but it wasn't helping them - it was difficult to find and apply in their day to day jobs.

Evolution

The team's thinking evolved, approaching learning from the perspective of how staff were using learning and technology in their everyday lives.

In their previous offering:



- > The learner had to look for learning
- > Barriers were created by the way the site was structured: competency management, online course, knowledge benchmarking were all in different areas on the site
- > Learners might be provided with over 50 options from one question– too much choice was paralysing. How did learners know what to trust?

BAE Systems wanted to use everyday online experiences in order to personalise the learning and encourage trust. Staff were used to Google providing them with all they need to know on an issue – but this often does not help you to know when material is up to date or can be trusted. They are also used to Amazon where the system learns with you, providing you with recommendations based on previous choice and the opportunity to make judgements based on peer ratings. In terms of connecting with others online, sites such as Match .com and Linked in were becoming more familiar as a means of encouraging intelligent brokering of relationships with zero degrees of separation.

Changes for the better

As a result of this review, the team realised that they needed to consider all internal learning assets, present them to the staff in a meaningful way and establish a way of branding the assets so that their content would be trusted.

Technology obviously played a part in this process (BAE Systems worked with Autonomy and Gatewest New Media's University-in-a-box). The updated capability included:

- > Search mechanism became contextual, relying on concepts
- > Potential learning solutions were all presented in the answer, categorised by news items, library, best practice within the business, people and communities, training, policy processes and 'most relevant'. So for example if a learner types in 'Pivot table' they will be provided with the name and number of their local IT floor walker, pointed to a relevant e-learning module, a forum posting or be taken directly to the pages in an online book that describes the process.
- > Security steps were also put in place. Not all individuals can access all information but instead of coming to a dead end, the system can broker a new contact that might lead to learning.

Trusted content

A key feature of the new capability was the concept of Knowledge Branding – how does a learner know if the information they have been given is correct, or



that the learning is suitable or that someone's best practice actually works? Governance became as critical as the technology enabling the learning and rules were created around what content could appear on the site.

The training division developed a system of kite marking content so that courses only appeared on site if they had been aligned to business goals and had been evaluated.

If a piece of information appears in 'Best practice', staff members are assured that the functional council has measured it to ensure that it delivers a tangible business benefit. Peer to peer comments on best practice are also included (known internally as Knowledge nuggets) and these have been invaluable as they not only show how the information is being used but provides a track record of how the knowledge is travelling around the company.

The personal touch

One platform had been established with one set of rules for knowledge branding. With a diverse and global business, central governance had to be able to flex to address local needs if it was going to be adopted. As a result, local communities can work together to create own knowledge brands. An individual can search on their query and their system will reflect back local learning and best practice – it will also link the individual back into the central company backbone of knowledge and learning by asking 'have you also considered....'

Central governance allows the organisation to have control over content and exploit the commercial benefits of head count but clever contracts & flexibility ensured that this could be customised for specific local objectives

From an individual perspective, staff can not only search on a day to day problem but can also plan their careers and development. The personal development review process includes peer, customer and 360 reviews to measure current progress against competency. The subsequent difference helps a personal learning path to be created which could include an integrated e-learning, coaching and classroom portfolio which includes tacit knowledge from mentors, knowledge bank or intranet. The review process also info feeds back into loop so alerts go out to individuals when something new arrives that is relevant to their own development.

Current successes

By aligning learning to business competency through a single global support has been popular with staff – over 70% now consider that the company provides the



learning support that they need. On a tactical level, 76% of individual learning interventions were considered useful. Other benefits included a 1.5 million saving by consolidating multiple contracts and the fact that their existing resources were maximised as the Google type search facilities encouraged use. BAE Systems now provide friends and family learning as a staff benefit and encouragement towards continual learning necessarily for ongoing organisational success.

Success is also measured by best practice transfer and the speed at which businesses can find and redeploy good practice. A classic example included a search for leading edge wing design by one division. The system pointed the enquirer to the exact page in a company manual with details on a new design, it highlighted that the design had won a chairman's award and contacted the enquirer to the main contacts. As a result, the design was adapted and deployed in a completely different part of the business saving millions and speeding research and development.

What of the future?

BAE Systems can't be accused of standing still! This programme is about aggregating demand rather than mandating organisational learning. They now operate as shared service and are looking at extending the facility to their customers and supply chain that will be provided with the ability to search and use same functions. The capability however is only as good as content and they are currently looking to hook up all HR systems and share resources. Their new 'helping hand project' encourages staff to share objectives with each other and to pooling capability around common problems.

BAE Systems have been on a journey towards maturity. Their secrets included establishing systems and processes that would scale, and more importantly flex to organisational demands, allowing local ownership and governance and listening and responding to their customers. Lessons for us all!!!



10 Top Tips for e-learning success

From Richard West, Head of Organisational and e-learning, BAE Systems

1. Consider everything as a potential learning asset
2. Sponsorship is critical
 - Top down (CEO endorsing programme)
 - Bottom up - family learning, learning events getting all help to get learning happening
3. Focus on capability needs of the business not the technology (however the right technology is a key enabler)
4. Work with world class partners eg universities as external partners
5. See learning as a competitive advantage, its not just about compliance
6. New capability needs to consider people, process, knowledge and technology – a four legged stool
7. Traction - start small but then gain momentum (However you need all the legs in place to be scaleable from the start)
8. Involve incentives and communicate with all stakeholders
9. Evaluate where appropriate
10. Be clear on business case.