

One small step for e-learning – A giant leap for the British Council

Background and what was the rationale for the project?

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations. Their purpose is to build mutually beneficial relationships between people in the UK and other countries and increase appreciation of the UK's creative ideas and achievements. Founded in 1934, the British Council operates as a truly global organisation with some 7,000+ staff in 110 countries, and they are committed to providing practical support which ensures that their recruitment, selection and performance processes are world-class.

Similar to many organisations, the British Council needs to ensure that both managers and staff understand and comply with corporate policy when they are carrying out performance management, recruitment and selection. Fairness and transparency in these areas is central to ensuring that the British Council lives up to its values. All staff undertakes training in **Performance Management (PM)**, but a HR review revealed that this policy had lapsed in certain places. As a result a refreshed performance management system, based on behavioural competencies, was launched through a global face-to-face training programme. During 2001-2004 over 5,000 staff were trained, representing 71% of the worldwide staff group - but this initial success came at a high financial cost - almost £2 million.

During the first year of implementation of the PM process, feedback from both the project team and staff suggested that there was a need to develop training tools that would maintain staff awareness of the PM processes and highlight their importance as a management tool. It was clear that reliance on face-to-face training through the 'cascade' network established for the main PM roll-out was not a financially viable solution.

In addition the British Council is committed to ensuring that **Recruitment & Selection (R&S)** is conducted in a way that encourages equal opportunity and diversity and meets British Council standards, its code of conduct, its values and is transparent, fair and objective. It is British Council policy that staff who work on recruitment panels must have refresher training every 3 years. Recruiters tend to be in Grade 6 or above, giving a potential trainee pool of some 2,000+ staff.

Making the business case to introduce e-learning to the British Council

Further consultation identified the development of a blended learning solution as both appropriate and sustainable as it would meet the needs of staff who had not undertaken the initial face to face training, or who joined the organisation later, and maintain adherence to the PM process by providing on-demand refresher training. The case was persuasive and it was agreed that a similar system should be developed for R&S (recruitment and selection). A competitive tender process was organised and LMD Learning Solutions Ltd was appointed to work with the British Council. The e-learning development was taken forward by Ian Gibson and Susan Mawson, for PM and R&S respectively. Ian was responsible for managing the project with LMD. Other team members were included on an as-needed basis as were colleagues from the intranet team, equal opportunity and diversity unit, HR and operational staff. Once launched, Shannon West took over management of the ongoing implementation.

What was the approach taken and the solution?

It was agreed that the e-learning modules would be media-rich and rely heavily on the use of cartoon-based animation, but a key challenge was in the style of graphics chosen for a global

audience avoiding exclusion through using any specific ethnic mix in photographs or drawings, and the difficulties of managing humour or caricature in cartoons. This led to the development of a 'parallel universe' - Monster World - where everyone could learn dynamically from life on a different planet which faced the same interpersonal issues in recruitment and selection and performance management. A creative mix of static and animated visuals created a lively treatment.

Once overall treatment plans had been accepted, sample content and prototype materials were developed by LMD to explore options on look and feel. The new e-learning team found it quite hard to imagine the final product from storyboards, so LMD devised a new format which showed a mock-up of the page, with accompanying notes. This prototyping approach made it easier for reviewers to sit together, work through the proposed screens, and approve or amend the content.

Staff in equal opportunity and diversity were involved from the initial tender exercise and remained engaged with the project as they reviewed the material in development and provided feedback on changes that they thought should be made to ensure global acceptability. Meanwhile, there was extensive consultation with IT to ensure that the project delivered to a specification that could be accessed in all offices world-wide.

The e-learning modules have been designed to be:

- accessible to over 7,000 staff in 110 countries across the world
- highly interactive using high-end animated characters and scenarios while still being easily accessible over dial-up connections
- fun and engaging while still putting across a serious message
- SCORM compliant with 'easy to use' management reports available to administrators
- easily updatable
- in line with current best practice and HR policy
- completed in about half a day.

The product uses high impact Flash animations, set in a fantasy world, to introduce the principles and processes of recruitment and selection and performance management within the British Council. Additional support is provided by a resource area within the product which contains checklists, guidance and sample documents for both courses; and links to the intranet where staff can spend additional time looking at issues in more depth, as needed.

Launch of the programme

There was a soft launch of both courses in June 2005 using the intranet to advertise the courses. This proved successful, and remains the key promotional method today. Email congratulations were introduced to provide a tangible 'well done' and to show staff that their learning achievements were recognised centrally as well as locally.

Stakeholder involvement assured quality in development and removed obstacles, so that the courses are widely accepted with almost no technical problems. Staff in the UK L&D team monitors the database monthly to ensure that those who have not finished are given support through email exchanges that check whether there are technical or learning difficulties and help to resolve accordingly. Mail certificates are sent to all staff that completes the e-learning either for PM or R&S. These support initiatives have been welcomed by the users as a way of overcoming the isolation that some feel and as a confirmation and congratulation. They have been instrumental in ensuring that take up and pass rates have gone up over time. Both courses are advertised on the globally available intranet.

In the sample exercise shown below the user works through a scenario in cartoon-strip style, before answering a series of related questions.

The screenshot displays an interactive e-learning interface with five panels. Each panel shows a cartoon character (Raj) and another character in a meeting. The dialogue is as follows:

- Panel 1: Raj says, "I've got to ask you – why did you fiddle about with the newsletter last month? You made me look a fool in front of my boss."
- Panel 2: The other character says, "Well I overheard a few people saying that our newsletter was looking a bit dated..."
- Panel 3: Raj says, "That's no excuse to bring in new design software!"
- Panel 4: The other character says, "I didn't use new software. I just thought I would smarten up the design to give it a bit more impact. It's just that I got it mixed it up with some text from the month before."
- Panel 5: Raj says, "Well, that's another thing Raj – you are always so impetuous. You just go off and do things without asking. And you've got no attention to detail."

The final panel is a quiz question: "Which of the following are the main problems with Tek's approach?" with four options:

- 1. He is not putting it in context
- 2. He is not agreeing the facts
- 3. He is not asking or listening
- 4. He is criticising Raj personally rather than the action

 A "Done" button is located below the options.

This is the British Council's first venture into interactive e-learning. They have deliberately allowed local offices to move to the adoption of the e-learning programmes at their own pace, to suit their local learning culture.

Ongoing implementation and evaluation

The British Council's plans to maintain and improve adoption beyond launch were grounded in rigorous evaluation which takes place at two distinct levels:

1. General evaluation encompassing staff's e-learning experience, take up in all offices, use of appropriate language that's jargon free, simple navigation, minimal technical issues and the use of the Intranet for additional resources of online manuals and information.
2. In-depth review of the learning experience which looks at the learners' experience of e-learning to provide rich observational data on learners' perspectives on e-learning, subsequent academic publications and presentations and to provide the British Council with insight and improved understanding into how its e-learning is experienced and applied back at work, as the basis for making improvements to secure long term, widespread adoption of these and future e-learning products.

Benefits & Results

Achieved with modest publicity, the British Council continue to be pleased with the take up. In the first year they had 1,457 registered users (20% of all staff) and had achieved take up in

89% of the 110 countries in which they have offices - a major achievement. Since then, the database shows that a continuing steady stream of approximately 150 users per month are logging on for the first time. Three years on after launch, the number of registered users (users working through the materials and completers) is 5,211 (70% of staff) with 1,670 passers for PM and 1,135 for R&S. Evaluation results are consistently positive with respect to satisfaction with the content and how learning has been applied after the course.

The British Council has had enthusiastic feedback from staff around the world.

"I have just finished the Recruitment and Selection e-learning course. The course is superb! The whole package is excellent. I could go on ... What struck me was the number of lessons we could learn from the approach taken"

(Tom Hinton, English Language Coordinator, East West Africa)

"As for feedback I think it is a fantastic resource, extremely useful and very well structured and explained"

(Puy Larraz, IT manager, Spain)

The levels of take up achieved to date are seen by management as indicators of commitment and enthusiasm. This project has been the catalyst for the organisation to consider a Learning Management System for the ongoing delivery of staff development and contributes to the design of the business case and user requirements.

Summary comments

The British Council is a culturally diverse global organisation that places great value on its people, equality, diversity, fairness and consistency. E-learning was something completely new to the organisation, but by adopting a humorous and culturally acceptable approach in the content, combined with a well thought through strategy for development, engagement and implementation, the organisation is beginning to reap the rewards.

Testament to the acceptance of e-learning for policy and procedural training within the British Council is that this year the PM system is being updated and replaced, and the assumption and expectation from all staff is that a new e-learning course will be created to support implementation. In fact they are asking for it now! The organisation has moved from a position of "Why should we use e-learning?" to "When is our e-learning going to be ready?" Although it spans a three year period, the adoption and acceptance of e-learning in such a culturally diverse and globally dispersed organisation is not to be understated.

These e-learning modules have acted as the catalyst to change internal thinking on how learning can be provided in the future. It's been a small step for e-learning, but it represents a giant leap for the organisation.