**Background**

**Priory Group** is Europe's leading provider of independent mental health care for acute, secure, rehabilitation and specialist educational services. Its overriding purpose is to bring Hope, Healing, Learning and Sanctuary to its service users and it is guided by the key values of improving the consistency and quality of its services through investing in and developing its people and promoting innovation.

Priory depends on the skills of a huge diversity of staff, including clinicians, educators, carers, chefs, gardeners and housekeepers. The diversity of Priory Group and the complexity of its work present a daunting learning and development challenge.

Traditionally, Priory’s sites have taken an autonomous approach to training, delivering a mix of their own face to face courses, some external face to face courses and one or two off the shelf e-learning modules. Other, job-specific, training has been carried out by on the job observation.

Much excellent work has been done and Priory’s service standards are very high. But in 2004, in the face of rapid growth (expanding in the last five years from 11 acute hospitals to its current mix of 47 healthcare and education sites with over 5000 staff) and an increasingly competitive market, maintaining these standards presented significant challenges:

- **Inconsistency**: Attitudes and procedures varied greatly between sites – yet they provide the same services.
- **Inefficiency**: No parity of training resource between site or job role meant considerable duplication of effort in training provision.
- **Risk**: Priory works in a very highly regulated environment, maintaining staff competencies in mandatory skill areas is an increasing training burden.
- **Culture**: Successful integration of new sites requires embedding of the corporate vision. This is difficult if independent development paths are being followed.

To meet these challenges, Priory Group recognised that their training delivery required radical reworking and centralisation, in a way that would allow them to capitalise on the best of what they were already doing. Alison Innes-Farquar, Priory’s Director of Hospitality, Quality and Learning & Development was certain that if they could find the right e-learning solution to fit their complex and varied working environment, it would meet essential business needs for the organisation.

With this aim in mind, Priory selected Information Transfer, specialists in delivering bespoke training and communications solutions, as its learning and development partner in August 2004, with a brief to develop a blended corporate learning programme.

From the start, three Information Transfer consultants have worked as an integral part of Priory’s learning and development team and members of both organisations have worked together on almost every aspect of the project.
The resulting programme, **Foundations for Growth**, is an ongoing project supporting all of Priory’s learning and development activity. This blended learning programme has, at its core, 30 bespoke e-learning modules which deliver key Priory content and support the development of core competencies to all 5000+ staff. The e-learning also links to offline learning activities, which the learner completes locally, before validation by their line manager, and also ties in with face-to-face courses for more hands-on subjects.

This is the story of how Priory put e-learning at the heart of their new blended corporate learning programme.

**Scoping the project and developing and implementing the e-learning**

**Understanding the needs and engaging the learners**

The first essential requirement was to provide a corporate learning infrastructure. Traditionally, Priory’s units have taken an autonomous approach to delivering learning and development, and much very good work was being done. However, as the group has grown there has been increasing need to develop a corporate learning programme to achieve greater consistency and efficiency, to share best practice and to enhance reporting. Priory was crying out for an online learning management system.

It was also clear that at the heart of the new blended learning programme would be a core of basic knowledge and understanding covering all aspects of Priory’s work, essential for all staff. These learning messages are consistent across the units, many of them are subject to annual refresher training, and many of them are compliance requirements. The cost-effectiveness, scalability and consistency of structured e-learning content made it the ideal medium for this sort of learning.

So the immediate need was for online learning management, plus online content. This is the bread-and-butter of e-learning, but the big challenge was to make e-learning work at Priory. The success of the project would depend on meeting the key requirements and expectations of the end users, as well as the organisation’s business needs. However, with such a diverse audience there were many initial challenges, including:

- Ensuring that the system would be simple and intuitive to use for all users, including those who don’t use computers as part of their everyday work, and those with only basic PC literacy
- Identifying core content relevant to all levels of staff in all roles
- Identifying a presentation style suitable for all levels and all roles, including those for whom English is a second language
- Overcoming any negative perceptions of e-learning, especially amongst users who preferred face-to-face training
- Making use of a limited technology infrastructure – PCs and networks are not necessarily a standard part of the workplace for some sites.
- Managing the learning administration and support so as not to burden managers and learning support staff

Because understanding and responding to the particular needs of Priory’s staff would be crucial, a bespoke approach would be essential. Not least because so much of the core knowledge required for their work is highly specialist – it’s hard to find off-the-shelf e-learning courses in the Mental Health Act or Child Protection, but also that engagement of potentially sceptical users would be critical. By ensuring the materials contained Priory’s content, relating
specifically to Priory’s work, and illustrated with relevant examples, this would help to overcome any doubts about the value of the online learning experience.

E-learning content development
E-learning content development began with the formation of a 19-strong internal working party, reflecting the importance of Priory’s people to the success of the project. Comprised of staff from all operational areas, from chefs to consultants, this group told Information Transfer what staff in each stakeholder area needed. For each core subject area, (everything from Safety in Kitchens to Clinical Risk Assessment) key learning messages were identified, raw content assembled, real-work examples identified and advice given on how the learning should be presented.

From this basis, Information Transfer created an e-learning module for each subject area. The emphasis was on clarity of content and usability. The content was brought to life through the range of media and interactivity that e-learning offers, but always balanced with the need to keep modules ‘light’ and robust for effective use on slow networks or low-specification PCs. Crucially, the modules are illustrated with images of Priory people and locations (in feedback on the e-learning, users report that one highlight is finding a person or place you know in a photo or animation!)

Another essential feature of the e-learning was to link generic corporate learning with unit-specific information. For example, Priory has generic procedures for infection control, but the ones that apply to a particular member of staff, and the way they are implemented, will depend on the site where s/he works. Where this corporate-local tie-up is necessary, the e-learning modules link to offline learning activities, which the user completes at their site before validation by their line manager.

Learning management technology
Information Transfer took the same bespoke approach to developing the learning management system. For each element of learning management - course delivery and tracking, user management and reporting – Priory’s Learning and Development Team worked with Information Transfer to identify exactly what users needed to do and to create intuitive task-orientated interfaces to help them do it. The result was that for administrators there’s virtually no learning curve for using the system. And with local learning administrators in each of the 47 sites, who often have to juggle learning management with other roles as well, that’s a very important consideration.

Identity and communications
It was vital that the new learning programme be aligned with Priory’s corporate vision – to make a difference to people’s lives by providing health care and education services of the highest quality and consistency. But more than just supporting the vision, this was an opportunity for learning and development to play a major role in communicating and embedding the vision throughout the organisation.

Everyone involved wanted to create a strong and memorable identity. This identity would encapsulate the Priory’s vision and values, and would form the basis of the change management communication and internal marketing required to launch and support a corporate learning programme. So ‘Foundations for Growth’ was born, and with it the logo (called ‘Galli’) that adorns every component of the new materials and systems. Figure 1, below, shows a screen from the Child Protection e-learning module.
The Foundations for Growth identity and the messages it embodies were the basis of an extensive communication plan, designed to engage and motivate. As well as broad communication to all staff, two key roles at each site were nurtured to champion the new programme. First was the unit director or school principal. As you would expect, these figures are hugely influential and key opinion leaders for local staff. They were encouraged to ‘own’ the programme at their site and materials were provided to help them present and champion it to their staff.

The second key figure in each unit is the Site Learning Administrator (SLA) – a new role designed to provide the link between corporate and local learning and development, and to ensure there is always a human face to Foundations for Growth. As well as administering learning and development, SLAs receive specific training in how to support users through Foundations for Growth, especially those with little prior experience of using computers.

The following image reflects how the project was communicated to everyone and how the cascade process worked:
Outcomes

After a successful and very informative pilot at six units during Spring 2005, Foundations for Growth was launched across all 29 healthcare sites in October 2005, and 18 schools followed in January 2006. Communication, change management and launch events all came to fruition to produce a user response better than the most optimistic projections.

Since going live in October 2005, there have been 73,307 e-learning module completions, 38,713 training hours delivered via e-learning and 4,397 active users.

Users’ attitudes towards Foundations for Growth have been evaluated through online and telephone surveys of staff satisfaction and behaviour, and face to face interviews. User feedback on Foundations for Growth has been excellent with approval ratings typically over 80% for a range of questions relating to access, usability and effectiveness.

Results from the online survey, completed in March 2006, indicate an excellent response; approval ratings are typically over 80% for a range of questions relating to access, usability and effectiveness (see Fig. 2).

Combined with these very high approval ratings, employees state that it is making a real difference to how they care for patients and students.
In addition, online survey results indicate that learners believe Foundations for Growth has had a positive impact on their performance, as shown in Figure 3 below.

**Fig 3: Approval ratings for learner performance indicators**

- FfG has improved my awareness of Priory’s vision
- FfG was a motivating experience
- FfG has given me new knowledge and understanding
- I think FfG has made me more effective in my role
Feedback comments ranged from the analytical ‘I found the e-learning modules excellent in their presentation. The modules were thought provoking and enabled me to link learning to my role’, to the positively gushing ‘It was so fantastic!’

Encouragingly, the highest approval ratings of all come from among the support services staff (caterers, gardeners etc.) the group who typically have least regular access to computers as part of their work.

“I found the whole process fantastic, and when one module was finished I wanted to start a new one straight away!” **Member of Catering Services**

More user feedback on attitudes to Foundations to Growth is included in Appendix 1.

There have been no significant issues with Foundations for Growth, and in the few cases where learners have reported difficulty in gaining access to a PC at a convenient time, these have been resolved locally by the SLA, usually through negotiation between PC users with competing needs.

So, users are happy, but what about the business? In terms of return on investment, Foundations for Growth is already in the black. Direct costs of comparable training have been reduced by 50-90%, largely through the huge reduction in cover costs for staff attending classroom training. In addition, the telephone survey indicated many specific performance improvements from Foundations for Growth. Examples include:

“The User Involvement module has changed the way I see patients. I make a real effort to talk with them and check they’re OK. My job is housekeeper. I’m not a nurse. But we’re all responsible for making sure patients feel looked-after.” **Housekeeper**

“One area where Foundations for Growth has had an immediate impact is risk assessment – it’s really tightened us up. We organised team discussions following the module and some of the issues raised by the team have been taken to Clinical Governance, and on to the senior management team.” **Addiction Therapy Programme Manager**

More examples are given in Appendix 2.

Business performance measures such as customer service standards or incident reduction, are compiled annually, and it will inevitably take more than six months for Foundations for Growth to impact them. But, the influence of the programme on the organisation has been striking. **Priory’s CEO Dr. Chai Patel** sums it up “As a business we are striving to continually improve the consistency and quality of our services – this is at the heart of our vision. Staff learning and development is essential for performance improvement both as individuals and as an organisation and Foundations for Growth has made an outstanding contribution to the realisation of our vision.”

So in this people-focussed environment of care and education, e-learning is playing a central and hugely successful part in staff learning and development. What have been the key success factors? Undoubtedly a genuine understanding and direct involvement of staff have been key factors. In the design of content and systems and in creating access and in providing support, Information Transfer and Priory Group strove to create a learning environment that was accessible, relevant, engaging and ‘safe’. They provided extensive communication, promotion and training to help embed Foundations for Growth into the everyday work of Priory’s staff. And perhaps fortune favoured a brave approach. There was risk attached to making e-learning such a central part of Foundations for Growth, but confidence in the benefits has been rewarded. It’s exemplified by a **member of Priory’s clinical staff**, who said “I was apprehensive about using the computer but I’ve been very pleasantly surprised by how easy it is. As a night shift worker this system makes training much more accessible”.

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**Work based e-learning**

Helping Sector Skills Councils exploit appropriate learning technologies to impact business performance.
The future

The general feeling within Priory group is summed up in one quote from the online survey: “Foundations for Growth is a good learning exercise and should be on going thing for up-dating knowledge and practice”

By listening to what users want, and evaluating the surveys to identify what the users perceive as gaps in their knowledge, subjects for new content development can be identified and prioritised. Learners have already expressed their wishes for modules covering over 40 new subjects.

With the core learning management system and the core online content of Foundations for Growth successfully established, it is becoming the hub of learning and development at Priory, with a current plan to integrate with the appraisal process in 2007.

In summary, Priory’s work remains focussed on people, and an appropriate, tailored use of e-learning has allowed technology to enhance the way they do it. In particular, Foundations for Growth has:

- Met huge challenges posed by widely distributed learners, a vast range of learning needs, a rapidly expanding organisation and limited technical infrastructure
- Empowered and motivated staff
- Transformed compliance management
- Through technical innovation and learner involvement, it has created popular and effective e-learning in a people-centred care environment.

As Chai Patel says, Priory’s work is all about people. Foundations for Growth encapsulate this view. Learners have been consulted and informed at every stage. This approach has been complemented with a sympathetic use of technology to create an online learning environment that is exceptionally effective and unique within the private healthcare sector.
Appendix 1: Attitudes to Foundations for Growth

“I found them [the modules] to be interesting not boring, colourful and easy to follow. The learning record kept me wanting to do more” A clinical group staff member

“My view is that they are clear easy to use. The learning record is a useful tool.” A member of General Services

“It is very interesting and engaging. You are always challenged to have a go on it once you start.” A clinical group staff member

“I’ve found the modules quite easy to follow and they’ve made me think about the different aspects of the job which can affect me and which i may not have thought about before” A member of General Services

“Keep it up as we are gaining a lot” A clinical group staff member

“I enjoyed studying the modules and monitoring my own progress! I was disappointed when I didn’t get 100%! The presentation is slick and I found the pages easy to navigate. I am impressed with the speed at which pages came up and there were no glitches, freezes or system failures.” A clinical group staff member

“This was the best, less time consuming training, interesting and easy to follow. My professional development profile has been enriched with the knowledge and understanding I gained.” Nurse

“I honestly enjoyed the e-learning hopefully the remaining courses will be that interesting like ethnicity and data protection.” Educator

“Very good. Staff enthusiastic about it.” Nurse

“I feel that e-learning is a fantastic way of improving the employees awareness of Priory’s objectives regarding staff development. Also encourages independence and responsibility for own growth and enhances the quality of patient care” Nurse

“An extremely good baseline learning vehicle on which more comprehensive learning can be built in areas where it is required.” Departmental Manager

“Overall I am impressed with the programme. The narration and display excellent Very practical and relevant learning material. More of the same please!”. A clinical group staff member

“Overall, I think it is a fantastic, flexible learning tool. Aligns itself well to the individual without losing its purpose and has clear targets that are attainable to all.” A clinical group staff member

“I found the whole exercise very interesting and will be a valuable part of my on going training. It will enhance the skills I have already required and will give a greater understanding into patients well being at the Priory.” A clinical group staff member

“Very clear and easy to use, engages your interest all the way through.” Departmental Manager
Appendix 2: Specific performance improvements through Foundations for Growth

“I deal with admissions enquiries and often take calls from overseas patients. The Ethnicity module raised my understanding of the needs of different ethnic groups, like for diet or hygiene. I now respond to their queries much better. This is very important in helping keep them calm.” Hospital Liaison Co-ordinator

“Foundations for Growth has reinforced the importance of documentation in clinical risk assessments. It’s definitely focussed my attention on making sure the paperwork is completed properly.” Mental Health Practitioner

“Staff are now more involved, and are up to speed on a broader range of topics than their old mandatory training allowed for. We’ve been able to get them involved in policy and procedure reviews. In many cases, their suggestions have improved how we do things, and have been incorporated into updated policies and procedure documentation. This wouldn’t have been possible without Foundations for Growth.” Clinical Services Manager

“The Healthcare Commission audit the whole site and they have been very impressed with Foundations for Growth” Site Learning Administrator

“The Admissions Procedures module really made us think about what new patients need. Now I make sure I spend more time explaining things to them and, as a result of Foundations for Growth, we’ve assigned one male and one female member of staff with responsibility for helping get new patients settled onto the ward.” Therapist

“People weren’t really aware of the vision before. The Foundations for Growth videos were excellent; the one with Chai’s talk made it very personal. People started asking questions about what goes on where and how Marchwood fits in. Now people really understand what Priory’s about, and how they can contribute to the vision.” Site Learning Administrator