Sun Microsystems - Improving Customer Satisfaction through Learning Outsourcing

April 2005 - Kellye Whitney

In the beginning, Sun Microsystems Inc. (Sun) did it all when it came to customer education. Its learning professionals designed and developed training and delivered it in Sun's classrooms. Of Sun's roughly 35,000 employees, some 1,400 were dedicated to the educational space. Eventually, top management wanted to know something: Why wasn't Sun, a partner-driven company, using a learning outsourcing model—an approach that was beginning to take hold throughout the corporate learning industry?

"That question was, I think, the starting point of the entire story," said Stephan Gropp, director, global education business partners, Sun Microsystems. "We began by asking who could effectively partner with us to design, develop and deliver courses to our internal and external customers in a way that would be both effective and cost-efficient."

After sending out requests for proposals, Sun chose Accenture Learning to be its learning outsourcing partner, and Sun has successfully outsourced its course delivery business to Accenture. By doing so, it has created a seamless customer education initiative while at the same time reducing costs. "High-quality, uninterrupted service to customers was our main concern with the entire deal," Gropp said. "Before the outsourcing took place, our customers enrolled in Sun for every class. They came to our training locations. They knew the instructors because they had attended classes taught by those people already. After the outsourcing, our customers using Sun's previous infrastructure generally did not notice any difference. Actually, it took them a while to figure out that their instructors didn't have a Sun badge on their jackets anymore; they had Accenture Learning badges." In other cases, Sun was able to reduce its classroom space requirements by smoothly redirecting clients to Accenture's existing global delivery network. "The outsourcing relationship has resulted in many changes for our company and our people," Gropp said. "But from our customers' point of view, it was transparent."

Working with European workforce regulations was an interesting part of this outsourcing arrangement. As part of the agreement, many Sun employees became Accenture employees. "If you are outsourcing part of your business to a different company, you have to make sure—and this is actually based on legal requirements—that your partners are taking over the employees on the same terms and conditions they had with us," Gropp said.

Sun retains responsibility for its intellectual property and develops training for its customers on new product lines, but Accenture supports Sun in adjusting course content based on specific customer needs. Initially, Accenture Learning was only delivering the entry-level courses, but the relationship has gone so well that Sun asked Accenture to deliver the higher-level courses that require more technical and sensitive course content adjustments based on individual customer needs. "Accenture Learning is now interacting directly with these business customers, which enables them to adjust the courses by themselves to more effectively meet those customers' needs," Gropp said. "The relationship continues to grow."

The quality of learning for customers has remained high and in many cases has improved, and Accenture Learning is responsible for maintaining this quality. "Our customers are expecting a certain level of quality for the money they pay for these courses," Gropp said. "We use customer surveys to help us figure out whether they are satisfied with the course content, the skills of the instructor and the service around the building. It's very easy for us to monitor whether the quality goes up or down compared to when we performed this function internally." Sun's learning outsourcing arrangement is also an excellent example of how companies can benefit from the additional capabilities of an outsourcer. In this case, Accenture's previously existing reseller role

as a Sun system integrator opened a new sales channel, helping Sun Education to gain back market share from non-certified vendors offering courses on Sun technologies.

The relationship has fulfilled expectations so well, Gropp said, that Sun is looking to partner with Accenture Learning to deliver live virtual classrooms and Web-based training. "Our good relationship with Accenture helps us, no question about it," Gropp said. "In any outsourcing relationship, of course, there will be tough negotiations. That's why you must have a trusted relationship with your outsourcing partner. Both parties must be focused equally on making the partnership a success."

Kellye Whitney is associate editor for Chief Learning Officer magazine