

New Horizons: Virtual Learning Environments

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Learning has gone virtual. For 12 years, learners have participated in discrete Web training meetings. Today, learners are immersed in learning environments that replicate live meetings but are also truly collaborative. They also host learning portals for informal on-demand learning. These next-generation environments are termed “virtual learning environments.” Is your organization ready to immerse your learners in 24/7 learning centers?

MARKET TRENDS

In a June 2010 study conducted by Elearning! Media Group, 64 percent of all corporate respondents have implemented virtual learning within their organizations, and 18 percent more plan to add them. The same study reports virtual worlds for learning will grow 250 percent over the next year to 21 percent of enterprises. At the same time, social learning and collaboration is exploding, with 77 percent of enterprise using or planning to use these tools for learning.

DEFINITIONS

Four types of virtual learning solutions are currently available:

1 Web meetings. Good examples are the solutions offered by WebEx MeetingCenter and Citrix GoToMeeting that feature audio, full desktop sharing, recording for archiving, changing presenters, drawing tools and presenter/attendee “chats.”

2 Virtual classrooms. Good examples are WebEx TrainingCenter and Adobe Connect, with configurable class sizes that offer uploaded content libraries, reusable tests, materials, polls and evaluations.

3 Virtual learning environments like Unisfair and VirtualEvents365. These browser-based plat-

forms can be used for both internal and external collaboration and learning. These platforms can provide easy access to content, subject matter experts and like minded peers in a 24/7 persistent environment. Learning organizations are leveraging this kind of platform to blend formal learning and informal learning, they are doing this with a blend of Webcasts, virtual classes, learning rooms, networking lounges, resource libraries and social media.

4 Virtual worlds. Second Life is the most well-known, where many colleges and corporations take advantage of both formal and informal learning scenarios. As opposed to virtual events/environments, virtual worlds are software-based, so a download is involved. Yet esteemed institutions like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Notre Dame have set up virtual classrooms in Second Life as cost-effective solutions to distance learning.

Virtual learning environments (VLE) are the newest wave in enterprise learning. They offer easy, interactive, inexpensive avenues to satisfy corporate learning goals. Instructors and learners actually prefer VLEs, because they consider them safe learning environments.

“They tend to make it easier to move from the abstract to virtual,” notes Mary Leah Coco of the



Louisiana Transportation Research Center. “Adult learners come into the classroom with a lot of psychological baggage. But VLEs are safer than real classrooms, because learners can make mistakes, and it’s not in front of a whole class. VLEs are context-oriented and student-centric, and the technology is improving.”

WHY OPT FOR VLES?

Among the sophisticated mid-market and large companies using VLEs on a regular basis are IBM, CA, Intuit, ADP, Medco and the Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA). These organizations use virtual environments for product training, channel education, product roll-outs, hiring/onboarding and sales training. They:

- >>slash training costs;
- >>extend reach;
- >>do more with less;
- >>shorten the time it takes to bring a product or service to market;
- >>create a stimulating learning environment; and
- >>provide “always-on” access to content and subject-matter experts.

Beyond the advantages offered by virtual classrooms, VLEs can also offer detailed reporting on learner activities and engagement as well as easy access to content, even after the event.

Eric Vidal, who leads the learning initiative at Unisfair, contends that virtual learning environments are all about transferring knowledge. “Sixty percent of our training customers are using the platform mainly for marketing and conferences. The other 40 percent are



using the platform for virtual learning environments, and we expect that trend to grow considerably over the next few years.”



THE ACS EXPERIENCE

ACS (a Xerox company) launched what it called its “Innovation Program” to educate and align more than 2,000 employees in 31 different countries. The training event was such a success that the organizing team received a coveted “Spot Award” from senior management.

Kelly Rider, a senior instructional designer at ACS, notes the differences between a “thick-client” 3-D virtual world that requires a large download and a more preferable “thin client,” which can be accessed by users via a Web browser and URL.

“From our perspective, the thin-client market is new and evolving, and there’s a lot of movement in that area,” she says. “Browser-based VLEs only require about 5 to 10 minutes for users to be up and running. The ones that we’ve tested also have been really easy to use.”

She points to virtual realities and virtual learning environments as being even more effective than Web meetings and virtual classrooms.

“The experience in itself is richer,” she says. “The virtual-world environments are always there for access, and they’re a more immersive way for people to meet and collaborate. Rather than learners staring at a shared computer screen, virtual learning environments break down those barriers. There’s a sense of presence. You can see someone ‘raise their hand’ and can share information in real time.”

Virtual learning environments are perfect in a business context for team meetings, brainstorming, sales training that includes role-playing and non-scripted

functions like building sales calendars.

Since ACS is a consulting company, it has done extensive research into VLEs.

“We’re tool-agnostic,” states Rider. “We want to keep an eye on trends and where learning delivery is going. We’ve tested and piloted some of these products in-house, and we’re seeing that they break down barriers among users. People like to be able to see other people, even if what they’re seeing is a graphical representation. Plus, the real-time collaboration benefit is huge: you can add pictures, add graphics, add videos; and if the VLE is advanced, you can even ‘teleport’ learners from a classroom environment to another location like an engineering facility.”

The major limitation, ACS is finding out, is that many current vendors are so new to the market that they may not have some advanced capabilities available. “But there are vendors who are creating all kinds of cutting-edge features like voice chats and group chats,” Rider says. “Vendors are just starting to imagine how these tools can be used.”

THE HFMA EXPERIENCE

The Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA) sponsored two virtual conferences in 2010 for its members.

“There’s an education hall, eight live events over two days with continuing education credit, a booth area, and a networking area,” says Marie Bass, HFMA’s director of education. “It is open and available on demand for three months. Participants can access the educational sessions later, but they are not awarded the credits, because there are different rules for accreditation through self-study.”



Marie Bass is director of education for the Healthcare Financial Management Association and a big fan of virtual events.

“The HFMA sponsors an annual face-to-face conference that attracts 5,000 members.

“We decided on virtual events to allow members additional access to education from their desk and to

provide continuing education,” says Bass. “They also allowed our sponsors and exhibitors another touch point with our members, and they’ve been really good experiences for both exhibitors and attendees. Our members are thrilled.”

VLE RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for companies that are considering integrating a virtual event or learning environment, it is recommended to follow this high-level six step process for success:

Strategy and Planning: Create a plan and goals. Find a helpful vendor with an attentive and supportive staff. Start the process at least three months out. “Put together a business model,” the HFMA’s Bass suggests, “and engage teams from all areas of the organization, like IT, marketing and education. Make sure everybody’s on board.”

Build the Experience: Though one person should spearhead the effort, one person cannot do it all. “It takes a bit of time to get it set up and organized,” Bass says, “but after you’ve done it once, you can establish a production schedule and get everybody on board clicking along on it.”

Promote the Event: Make sure you properly promote your event for up to six weeks before the scheduled date.

Preparation & Training: Train sponsors, speakers, booth staff and others involved in bringing it off. Also, make sure potential attendees have access to the proper resources. “Our members reside in health care organizations — mostly hospitals — so a small percentage of them were not able to access Flash,” notes Bass. “It had to do with firewalls on their side. But our vendor support and internal customer support were able to resolve those problems early in the first conference.”

Day of Event: Launch your virtual event/environment.

Post-Launch Activities and Analysis: Make sure you continue to promote and drive people to the content inside the virtual environment. Review the behavior of the attendees and follow up accordingly. Also, make sure you analyze behavior, feedback, what worked well and what needed improvement, and optimize accordingly.



VLE NEAR-FUTURE TRENDS

While the advantages of scheduling company-wide virtual events far outweigh the disadvantages, companies seem to prefer organizing their recurring events using only in-house employees, rather than having to rely on vendors each time.

“One of the most popular requests is that we help our customers’ in-house staff become VLE experts,” Vidal observes. “But there are high-end Webcasting components involved. Are they as easy to use as e-mail engines? No. Are they as easy as blogs? No ... but at Unisfair we are working on making them easier for our customers to implement themselves.”

Other future trends:

- >> Learning can occur 24/7 with persistent “always-on” VLEs. It’s no longer about the event, but about the learning environment itself — it is always on — and available to learners on demand. “The virtual learning environment can become a place to continue the conversation,” Vidal observes.
- >> Corporate learning/training groups are leveraging the environment for more than events. “It’s having learning rooms built around a certain topic or project with subject-matter experts having open office hours in order to interact with learners,” says Vidal.
- >> The events will become more interactive. “We want to get better at providing more options inside of learning rooms. We already have Skype integration, desktop sharing and streaming, but we want to be

able to do something more collaborative, like integrated telephony and much more,” Vidal continues.

- >> Content will be stored and managed better. “A lot of our clients want to wrap up content in a more engaging fashion. They want to educate 2,000 partners in two days across continents, and they want learners to have immediate access to content, subject-matter experts and like-minded peers. When someone’s trying to find information, they want it quick.”

CONCLUSION

We’ve seen that as the connective power of the web has increased, so has the ability of trainers to engage their audiences. At the same time, economic and environmental forces are driving organizations to invest in new ways to educate, engage and inspire those same audiences.

Benefitting from these trends, virtual learning environments are paving the way for newer, larger learning environments that enable a much broader scope of networking, education and collaboration.

Now is the time to develop your own virtual learning strategy to drive your organization’s learning objectives.

—*Learning Trends* whitepapers are authored by Elearning! Media Group editors. To learn more about the research quoted in this study, visit www.2elearning.com. To download additional copies, visit www.unisfair.com.

About Unisfair

Unisfair provides cloud applications for the world’s most innovative companies to create branded and interactive virtual environments. Unisfair’s Virtual Engagement Center is a new channel to educate and connect with customers, prospects and employees anytime and anywhere. Industry leaders like 3M, ADP, Cisco, Genentech, Novartis, IBM, and KPMG leverage Unisfair’s platform for customer engagement, training, recruiting, lead generation and more.

Unisfair’s virtual environments are easy to use and offer a highly interactive experience through speaking sessions, exhibition floors, learning rooms and networking areas. By tracking the activities of each individual attendee, Unisfair delivers exceptional behavior intelligence.

Backed by Sequoia Capital and Norwest Venture Partners, Unisfair is headquartered in Silicon Valley and has led the virtual events space since 2000. For more information visit www.unisfair.com.