

Your company has gone global, and you're itching to enhance (or gain) your "seat" at the executive table. Try offering learning and development support for your CEO's favorite global initiative—before being asked.

BY MARGERY WEINSTEIN



Taking the (Global) Initiative

Around the time your company opened its second office in Asia, or maybe its first office in Europe, you realized something was missing. That something, unfortunately, was you. Working frantically in your (U.S. domestic) training silo, your company's global expansion slipped past the learning department. You heard it was happening, but either weren't given the chance, or didn't seek out the opportunity, to contribute the learning your global workforce needs to take your organization where your leaders say

they want it to go. Or maybe you're one of the prescient ones who foresaw the need to amp up training to support global initiatives, or were lucky enough to be asked to contribute by your CEO. Either way, as global expansion continues, training departments need to be ready for new international initiatives.

PROMOTING POLICY

Sometimes global initiatives are glamorous—flashy new marketing strategies or exciting product rollouts—and other times not so much. Sometimes supporting global initiatives through training just means ensuring a new (often dry) policy is implemented around the globe. Such was the case at Allied International Credit Corp., says Vice President of Development and Facilitation Joel MacCharles.

The company needed to teach its 1,200 call center employees in seven offices, spanning Canada, Scotland, England, and the U.S., a new protocol for workstation behavior. It turns out its clients, who have the ability to monitor the reps taking calls on their behalf, were catching Allied call center employees eating at their workstations and sometimes using off-color language. Callers never necessarily heard any of this since the monitoring recorder is switched on before the call is picked up and continues until after the reps say goodbye, but Allied executives feared a bad impression was being made. In addition, executives wanted dress codes better adhered to and knew security precautions needed tightening, such as one requiring all reps to keep personal cell phones turned off while on the call center floor to ensure callers' confidential information isn't compromised.

Implementing these new policies globally wouldn't be easy given the differences country-to-country of Allied's offices. "Our cultures are very different in each of our locations," says MacCharles. "Our offices in the UK are shirt and tie seven days a week, whereas our North American offices are business casual, and struggle to meet even that." That means learning goals have to seamlessly align even as the message delivered is tweaked to accommodate cultural variances. "The first thing we do is get senior management on a global basis to provide a guiding vision of what we're trying to achieve," MacCharles explains. In the case of changing call center behavior and security precautions, that meant all executives who oversee the work of the reps gathering to discuss what is and isn't acceptable in Allied's call centers—regardless of location.

To ensure those in charge of the training stayed on task, and the learning content was suitable, a steering committee oversaw implementation of the new policy. In three days, MacCharles and his team created a global training presentation that addressed the need for the behavior and security changes. To give implementation a greater chance of success, the training department required not just reps, but also their managers, to complete the curriculum. The managers, rather than the centralized training department, then taught their own teams the material. This approach is efficient when rolling out training globally because it allows managers to tailor the curriculum to the needs and cultural understanding of their learners. "What people did with the program in each of the countries and each of the offices was different, but they still covered the same objectives," says MacCharles. "Our UK and Newmarket [Canada] offices took the same program we taught team leaders and managers, and taught their teams as is," he points out. "But in our office in Virginia, where the culture is more vibrant and a classroom setting would seem stodgy, a fashion show to show 'this is the dress code and this isn't' was rolled out. So they made an event out of it, but they still followed the same core training material."

STRATEGIC PARTNER

At Steelcase, Inc., an international office furniture manufacturing and work effectiveness company, the organizational

structure enables Steelcase University to easily keep pace with the company's needs as it expands across the globe, says Vice President of Global Learning George Wolfe. "We understand the business of our company, and where the company wants to head, both from a fiscal year immediate business and a strategic direction perspective," he notes. "When we identify our company's direction, a group of performance consultants, who are part of our University, become extensions of aligned functional groups across our company globally. Once we know the business result needs of a given function to accomplish and contribute to our company's success, our performance consultants are equipped with tools and processes that identify any existing performance gaps." From there, he explains, customized learning programs are developed to close the gaps, and enable that group of employees to perform in a way that allows them to attain their business results.

Following a directive from the CEO and executive staff five years ago, for instance, Wolfe and his learning professionals were asked to contribute to a global leadership development initiative. The senior executive group determined the company's leadership needs based on common global language and performance behaviors required to implement its long-term strategy and 'win' in a highly competitive global environment. "We identified which behaviors Steelcase leaders must be able to do globally to meet or exceed the expectations established by our company's executives, and then we built a leadership curriculum based on those performance needs that has been rolled out to nearly 750 leaders globally," says Wolfe. "It's all launched here, at the corporate university, but we deliver it all over the world."

GLOBAL, BUT LOCAL

At semiconductor and microprocessor manufacturer Intel Corporation, providing for the company's global strategic needs also begins with a structured process for determining exactly how the learning department can best pitch in. Programming then is developed with an eye toward keeping all employees, no matter their international location, on the same page. "We do a needs assessment on a global basis; we develop the content on a global basis; and then we roll it out on a global basis," says David Kilby, director of Intel University. "For the employee, irrespective if you're sitting in China or Ireland or Arizona, you're going to see the same content. They receive the same content to educate and train them, and then they're also subject largely to the same evaluation model throughout the world. So it's a very consistent experience."

Intel's global programs are delivered by local, Intel-employed instructors (subject matter experts rather than full-time instructors), so although the content is the same as what employees in other locations receive, it's tailored to suit the needs of each site's learners. Kilby says maintaining the curriculum's consistency globally is made easier by the use of

these local, in-house instructors. “Being Intel employees themselves, they’re able to put the material into context, and to provide the stories and anecdotes that bring the material alive,” he says. “It makes it relevant to the Intel environment.”

Sometimes keeping the content both consistent globally as well as relevant locally can get dicey. “Although we have a company with a common culture, and a common way of doing business across the enterprise,” says Kilby, “there always are some subtle but significant local nuances. That means we have to be careful the core corporate content doesn’t feel too generic or U.S.-centric.” To make sure that doesn’t happen, Intel University reviews learning content with local management and their supporting human resources director/manager, before any curriculum is rolled out to that region’s learners. “We provide

the capability for local sites to weave in their own local content. What we don’t want to do is create an environment where people are recreating or redesigning the same courseware wherever they happen to sit in the world. We want them to use the core corporate content,” says Kilby. “Typically we expect it to be 80 to 90 percent consistent wherever it’s deployed across the enterprise, but we also provide some flexibility for people to fit in examples that are relevant either to their local geography or business unit.”

At Carnival Cruise Lines, having an international training audience means developing custom coursework rather than relying on off-the-shelf learning products, says Roberta Jacoby, senior vice president, air and sea operations, corporate training, and strategy office. “We write our own curriculum because anything off the shelf just isn’t going to work,” she explains. Along with custom courses, Jacoby says the best tool for creating learning for a global audience is in-depth knowledge of that audience. Carnival says making the content fun also helps. The company says each program is designed according to its training philosophy that the amount of learning achieved directly correlates with the amount of fun a participant has. Carnival says the educational videos it creates for its workforce is an example of this philosophy in action. Shot on-board by the company’s video services department, the videos use humor by showing outrageous characters in exaggerated scenarios demonstrating the wrong way to handle a work situation. The same scenario is then reshown, with the characters handling the situation the right way.

Sun Microsystems, Inc., offers some of its sales-related training internationally with Web 2.0-style formats that include video and audio components via its online Sun Learning eXchange portal. Despite availability of this common tool, there are still regional changes that need to be made to content. “About 90 percent of what you do will work everywhere,” says Chris James, senior director and chief learning officer, Europe. The remaining 10 percent that needs tinkering with seems small on the surface, but can make a big difference to the understanding of a particular group of learners. In 2008, for instance, James and his team ran into a surprise when they developed learning content that used the Olympics as a theme. Entitled “Going for Gold,” James says the title was meaningless to its learners in countries that had no athletes in gold medal contention. “There were approximately 20 countries in the world that won gold medals, while the other 230 did not,” he says. “So, talking about ‘going for gold’ can be a little bit Western, mature country-centric.”

In another worldwide learning program, imagery of cyclist Lance Armstrong with his U.S. Mail jersey didn’t elicit a strong, positive response. “The thing about Lance Armstrong is he was absolutely a champion,” says James, “but he was a U.S. champion, and he also had a U.S. Mail sponsorship [jersey], so it looked U.S.-centric, even though that wasn’t the

QUICK TIPS

- Take variations in office tone into consideration. If your U.S. office is more informal than, say, your British outpost, allow your Brits to do it by the book, while your LA employees make something more creative out of the curriculum.
- Teach the managers of your international offices the new material first, and then, if possible, have them roll it out to their subordinates. They know their employees best, after all, and can smooth out any semantic or cultural gaps you may have overlooked.
- Take the time to understand your company’s global strategy, so when your CEO asks you to support a new international effort you’re not blindsided. If possible, think about implementing a process by which you send out performance consultants to work globally (either long distance or in person) to ensure training needs are met, wherever they happen to be located.
- If your company has the resources, consider hiring in-house instructors in your overseas offices, so you don’t have to outsource course delivery to people who might not understand your corporate culture, or always rely on managers, who might not always have the needed teaching skills.
- Custom curriculum, rather than off-the-shelf learning products, often is needed to ensure training content is relevant to your international audience.
- Beware of U.S.- or Western-centric imagery of, for instance, U.S. athletes or celebrities. They might not be all that popular overseas, or might not inspire the same positive feelings in other countries.
- Logistically, be aware that combining learning events in one country regionally might not be so easy. Ever try securing visas so hundreds of Chinese-based workers can travel to Taiwan, or vice versa? Distances are relatively small, but the hassle sometimes isn’t.

intent.” To limit such problems, Sun conducts train-the-trainer sessions that guide learning professionals on how to put together international coursework, and it also has a review process before the learning is rolled out overseas. “We’re relying on our subject matter experts,” says James, “to highlight anything they think is not quite international.”

IMPROVEMENT IMPERATIVE

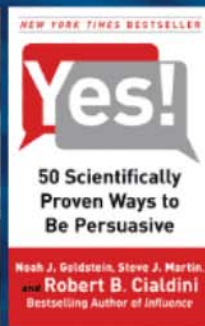
In 2008, the learning department at wireless telecommunications company Qualcomm was asked to support a global software security improvement initiative. Employees internationally would be taught new procedures to maintain the company’s software security, says Senior Staff Technology Training Specialist Mary Pedersen. The initiative was important enough that the executive behind it, Qualcomm’s chief scientist, was willing to have the company pay for engineering trainers to travel to international locations to conduct meetings with local software development team leaders. Though not a typical luxury, Pedersen says the ability to send learning colleagues around the world—to some 25 offices in total, in every region except South America and Africa—to conduct face-to-face sessions with those who would lead the initiative

in their location made a big difference. “Having that face-to-face at the beginning of the initiative helped get each office excited about how it would be expected to contribute and what it would be responsible for moving forward.”

Since 95 percent of its employees speak English as a first or second language, Pedersen and her colleagues only needed software security coursework translations for the Chinese, Japanese, and Italian offices. She notes that the common, largely numbers- and computer-based language of the company’s engineers cut down on the amount of translation necessary. However, logistically, the company ran into a problem trying to streamline training within regions. Just because two groups of learners were geographically close didn’t mean they easily could travel to one or the other’s location to share a training session. “There were multiple offices in certain areas, and if we could get people together from those offices, we’d have fewer visits, but sometimes we couldn’t. For example, in going from China to Taiwan, sometimes the visas take too long. So, sometimes you can’t combine people for training for political reasons. We weren’t able to move those people across country lines even though distances were small.” **■**

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