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Best Practices for the Learning Community

Training courses are not offered by traditional training institutions alone. Other industries – ranging from media and insurance to software providers – have recognized how providing educational opportunities to external target groups can facilitate their product rollout, promote customer loyalty, and optimize customer support. Solutions from SAP Education can help industry leaders to drive revenue and profitability.

The benefits of training courses and the targeted qualification of employees have been demonstrated repeatedly: Knowledge transfer and talent development serve to promote employee competency, commitment, satisfaction, and productivity. As part of the process to optimize the value chains of a company with suppliers, partners, and customers, a growing emphasis is now also being placed on further training as a means of optimizing and transforming the business network outside a company (Clarey 2012, Stoller-Schai 2012). The phrase "extended enterprise learning" has been coined for this concept, and this article also refers to the concept of the "extended learning community". This article summarizes the topics considered most important in the various industries.

The external learning community by industry

Each industry focuses on different characteristics and topics:

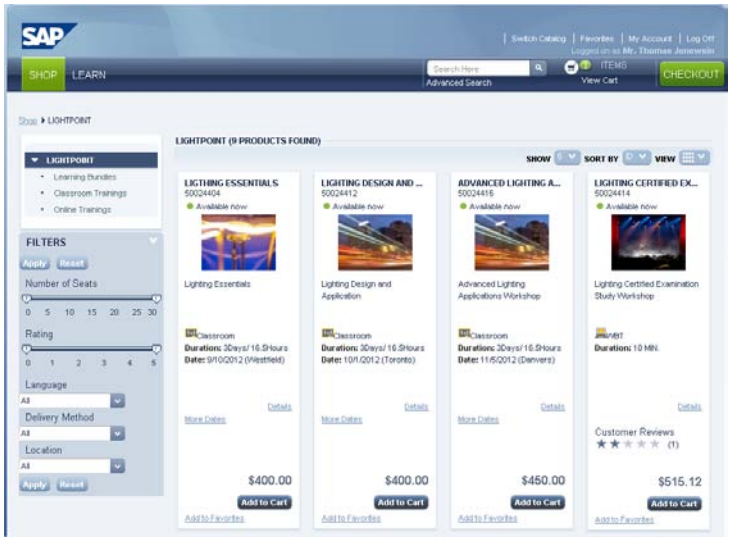
- Highly regulated industries, such as the oil, gas, and pharmaceutical industries, must be able to train external target groups such as subcontractors in compliance-specific topics such as safety, health, and security protocols. In addition, auditors and managers must be able to track and monitor training courses. Formal training and reporting are musts in this respect.
- Companies in the financial and insurance in-dustries are working more and more with freelance sales staff. This requires them to keep their independent representatives fully up to date on new products and updates in good time.
- In the automotive industry, automobile manufacturers need to keep their dealers up to speed with product information and sales strategies for new models. Automotive service companies need to ensure that partner service technicians are trained in handling complex diagnostic tools, so that services and products meet the high quality requirements.
- In the healthcare sector, patients are trained in prevention and aftercare to increase recovery prospects in the long-term. Physicians are also required to stay informed when it comes to the use of medical equipment and practices. As in the previous examples, the issue of quality is again a primary objective.
- Manufacturers of consumer goods are increasingly offering e-learning as an after-sales service – with the aim of reducing support

costs, providing customers with further added value for products, and thereby promoting customer loyalty.

- The software sector uses virtual seminars for unveiling products, approaching customers, and also for presales purposes.
- In the media industry, publishing houses are increasingly relying on e-learning or classroom training to drive revenue – transforming themselves into professional training providers in the process. Companies can consider training an additional revenue stream and transform their training department from a cost center into a profit center.
- In the area of banking and insurance, learning is increasingly considered a service. This learning service can be provided before, during, or after the sale of products such as financing or asset management (Stoller-Schai 2011).

The application scenarios and areas of focus of each industry are relatively different. The objective is to ensure compliance with legal and quality standards, simplify and accelerate product rollouts, promote customer loyalty, optimize customer support, and sell training courses to customers and partners – thereby driving revenue and profitability.

Sample User Interface Figure



Users of e-commerce processes demand an intuitive application system such as that typical for B2C scenarios: This includes functions for reviews and comments, integrated images and media, and intuitive functions to filter searches and personalize the application.

Best practices from SAP

SAP Education is the largest IT training provider worldwide, with a comprehensive offering of training courses and services for SAP and education software solutions. This section explores best practices from SAP Education that are based on the experience of SAP and customers alike.

- Combination of B2B and B2C processes: There are essentially two areas of application: In the business-to-consumer (B2C) area, training courses and learning content specifically target end customers, such as freelance consultants who want to keep up to date.
- In the second area, the business-to-business (B2B) segment, customer or business partner employees are trained. Costs incurred are paid by the business partner – and not by the learner. It is common practice to provide these learners with access to a catalog that is tailored to the business partner with respect to pricing, discounts, content, or branding.
- Basic user interface: Users of e-commerce processes demand an intuitive application system resembling a typical Amazon user interface – in other words, not a system designed for experts. Features should reflect those typical for B2C scenarios. This includes functions for reviews and comments, integrated images and media, and intuitive functions to filter searches and personalize the application. Providing vouchers as a campaign tool can also boost training sales.
- B2B processes/business partner enablement: Access codes or vouchers can help simplify the distribution and use of learning content. Rather than booking individual training courses, interested parties can subscribe to a library or book an entire curriculum. Customer-specific catalogs are compiled for major customers, with individual branding, pricing, discounts, and booking rules defined.
- Alternative payment methods such as customer prepaid accounts, a range of discount types (such as general discounts, course-specific discounts, value-based or percentage-based discounts, or "buy one - get one free" offers) have been developed in recent years to flexibly accommodate customer needs and drive marketing effectively by means of campaigns. Traditional e-commerce functions have been successfully applied in the area of education, with a positive resonance from users.
- Seamless system integration: The seamless integration of financial and billing systems is a must when it comes to education management for external learners, to ensure process automation and avoid superfluous interfaces and inconsistent data. This requires invoices to be generated and sent automatically when bookings are made, and facilitates a direct connection to payment providers such as MasterCard. From a technology perspective, the platform is integrated into the learning management system for employees, allowing courses relevant internally and externally to be reused simply.
- Learning with social media: Social learning, the concept of learning from and with others can be supported effectively by social media – an example of such being course participant discussions in groups similar to Facebook. Younger employees in particular value comments and ratings as a means of obtaining information about courses. Social media make learning more effective by promoting the blended learning approach. To be successful, this media must be incorporated, managed, and facilitated methodically (see Jenewein, Trost 2011). Forums integrated into training courses are therefore facilitated by trainers and their use is integrated didactically, for example, as a media of exchange for homework or exercises.

These best practices, which are based not only on SAP experience but also on that of many customers, have been incorporated into a new product add-on for SAP's learning management system. The newest e-commerce solution from SAP is re-used – providing customers with a hybrid learning management and e-commerce package for their business network training needs.

Looking ahead

The following statements describe how management of the extended learning community is anticipated to develop:

- Learning as an "after-sales" service and to promote customer retention: There is a growing interest in offering learning opportunities free of charge for complex services and products in particular. The formats used may lean more towards documented formats such as edutainment or as social media. In addition, learning can be incorporated more into the sales or presales phases.
- E-commerce for learning: Advertising campaigns, vouchers, promotions and all the familiar e-commerce functions will be used more and more in external learning. And they will similarly offer all the benefits we associate with e-commerce for products, such as personalization, optimized marketing and sales, and more.
- Learning as a subset of campaigns and events: There will be a significant increase in virtual events (commonly referred to as webinars) that save both time and money. Learning must be made an experience and marketed accordingly as an event. From this viewpoint, learning is a marketing element for winning new customers, for example.
- Learning will become less formal, more social, and more mobile – but formal elements will remain: Formal learning such as classroom learning or e-learning is still the method of choice when it comes to compliance and quality assurance. Companies must ensure that training has been provided for certain content or that participants are kept up to date. Social or mobile formats may supplement or even replace existing learning formats in other application scenarios, and may involve communities or the use of user-generated content.

Companies that manage their extended learning community professionally and integrate the technical platform required do not only stand to reduce infrastructure costs. New business areas, from selling training to improved customer support in after-sales service and increased customer loyalty, through to the quality assurance of external service providers, dealers, or service technicians allow companies to develop new potential to expand their business model successfully.

More on this subject

Clarey, Janet: Managing Learning across the Extended Enterprise. Whitepaper. Bersin & Associates. Oakland (Calif.) 2012. www.bersin.com

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Trost, A., Jenewein, T. (ed.): Personalentwicklung 2.0. Lernen, Wissensaustausch und Talentförderung der nächsten Generation, Cologne 2011.

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