

Press Release

E-Learning in the Real World (A Case Study for HR Execs)

*When business insurance provider CNA needs to train its employees, the “classroom” is just a mouse-click away ... thanks to the vision of its vice president of organizational development and the expertise of a firm called Collaboration Architects.**

Falls Church, VA (April 2002) — These are the times that try the souls of human resources professionals. We are responsible for employee development, and in an era of rapid globalization and limited resources, that can be quite a challenge. When you have thousands of people to train — some teams located hundreds of miles from others — how do you manage the logistics? For everyone to take a week off work and fly to a central location is too expensive. Even worse, it’s ineffective. So what is a good HR exec to do?

The human resources department at a global insurer is developing a better answer. CNA recently teamed up with Collaboration Architects Inc. — a Virginia firm that designs, constructs and implements online work environments that enable people and organizations to collaborate via the Web — to give birth to the next generation in corporate e-Learning solutions.

“We are working to bring the best practices in corporate learning to CNA employees,” says Collaboration Architects co-founder Bill Bruck. “Effective learning goes far beyond sitting passively in a classroom. It depends on interaction and putting knowledge to use in real-life situations. And when you’re talking about a geographically distributed workforce, the right technology is crucial. I’m proud to say that CNA is a company with tremendous vision, and what they’ve allowed us to create is nothing short of revolutionary.”

To make a long story short, Collaboration Architects has worked closely with CNA's Christy Keener, senior vice president of organizational development, to develop the CNA Collaboration and Learning site.

This site is a symphony of different tools and processes — Web-based asynchronous learning modules, real-time discussion forums and classrooms, message boards, surveying programs, etc. — that seamlessly combine to serve a variety of e-Learning and information-sharing needs.

Employee training is perhaps one of the site's most compelling functions. CNA will be using the e-Learning application to train approximately 600 front-line supervisors this year. Basically, the site makes it possible for trainees to earn their supervisory skills certification from their own computers and on the schedule that is most convenient. The week's worth of materials that would once have been covered sitting in a classroom is now spread out over 12 weeks. Here's how it works:

- The participating employee — we'll call her Paula — signs into the CNA Learning Network, an online learning management system, and enrolls in the "Supervisory Skills" program.
- Over the next 12 weeks, Paula will participate in a variety of development activities and Web-based training courses, attend web meetings (led by instructors and offered to groups of 10 students at a time), confer with mentors, do group exercises and build an accountability plan. Her "book work" will be interspersed with practical assignments that she'll complete during the course of her regular workday.
- Throughout the program, two real-time discussion rooms will be available to Paula. She may visit the Coffee Shop if she wishes to establish a topic to discuss with fellow trainees. She may visit the Coaching Room if she needs to ask questions and get advice from a senior HR person.
- At any given time, Paula may access other resources on the site, such as a file store area, a directory of all students and an online tutorial.

This format is undeniably effective. Studies have shown that when people take in a chunk of training and go out and "practice" it in the real world — complete with mentoring/coaching support and plenty of feedback — they're more likely to understand and retain the lesson. Most important, CNA has gotten far more

positive feedback on this kind of “blended learning” than on classroom or Web courses alone.

“In a nutshell, this program will save us a lot of money as well as being more effective,” says Keener. “Because of its immediacy, the Web is a great place to get data, and the interactive portions of our program let employees anchor that data in their own experience. Learn a little, do a little. The ‘classroom’ learning is reinforced and strengthened in the real world. We are planning to use this format in creating programs in many areas.”

Of course, this particular “blended learning” application is only the tip of the iceberg. Various departments within CNA have been using the site for many functions: managing project teams with members in widely dispersed locations, sharing documents, collecting data, conducting immediate surveys, gathering feedback, holding follow-up discussions after face-to-face-meetings, creating and maintaining searchable databases, etc. The possibilities are endless.

“In today’s business world, we must **rapidly** provide people with the capabilities they need to address the issues that are right in front of them,” asserts Keener. “Speed is critical. The traditional way of identifying organizational development needs, testing, refining and so forth could easily take six months. Then, when you factor in the time required to design and develop classes and work them around everyone’s schedule — well, you can see how ineffective that was. Now, with our collaboration and learning site, we’ve cut it all down to a fraction of the previous time. We can now provide our employees with ‘just-in-time’ information for being more effective in their jobs.”

“Let me add that none of this would have been possible without Collaboration Architects,” she concludes. “They took the time to understand our needs and put together a blend of technology that meets them perfectly. Together, we built an online environment that makes sense for our company. We’re delighted with this partnership, and we look forward to seeing where it leads us in the future.”

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Collaboration Architects designs, constructs and implements online work environments that enable people and organizations to collaborate via the Web. The firm offers a wide variety of services, including evaluation processes, implementation plans, customized virtual workspaces, training workshops, change management consulting and hosting.

Co-founders Bill Bruck and John Darling have more than 45 years of combined experience in information technology, psychology and organization development. Their backgrounds are key to their approach — they focus on the “human” side of online collaboration and use their knowledge to create technology-based solutions that are task-oriented and geared to the realities of each client’s corporate culture and capacity to embrace change.

To learn more, visit www.collaborationarchitects.com.**

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