

Re-Discovering Knowledge

Datatel made innovative and strategic learning a first priority—fusing formal and informal methods and encouraging employees to discover development opportunities for themselves.

By Jennifer J. Salopek

As a leading provider of technology solutions and professional business services to higher education institutions throughout North America, Datatel is in the business of facilitating learning. That commitment extends to its more than 500 employees, who design, develop, implement, and train on products and services that allow its clients to build strategic academic enterprises.

Despite the recent economic downturn, learning and development budgets at Datatel were unaffected; the company has been profitable for the past 42 years. “As our clients have reduced their own budgets for onsite training, we’ve tried to become more creative in how we deliver training,” says Kari Rairdon, manager of learning and development.

“Circumstances did inspire us to identify new opportunities in the marketplace, to become more focused and more strategic, and to leverage the things we’re really good at,” says Alexia Carney, director of professional services.

One of the things the learning and development organization is very good at is developing employee and client learning deliverables in an aligned, multipurpose approach. Datatel completely overhauled its user interface in 2009; goals were to increase client productivity, modernize the product’s look,

and improve its technical infrastructure. To ensure readiness among sales and professional services staff, Rairdon and her colleagues approached the challenge with content reusability, performance support, and just-in-time learning in mind. They created both technical and application learning tracks.

For technical providers, for example, the learning path was designed to ensure that they could install and troubleshoot the new user interface. It included hands-on installation sessions; learning roundtables for sharing information; a technical overview class; and short, self-paced, recorded technical topics for performance support.

The employee application path included virtual overview sessions from the product and sales perspective and a required interactive e-learning fundamentals course followed by a hands-on workshop. In this way, Datatel is leveraging informal learning in an organic learning environment in which participation is often mandatory for some divisions.

For one of their next major programs, they supplemented the formal learning tracks with the creation of a virtual knowledge café. The café includes learning paths tailored to roles, as well as discussion forums, FAQs, and tips and tricks to share knowledge.

The café metaphor is apt: “We want people to be able to help themselves to



Kevin Boyce
Chief Financial Officer



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Chief Financial Officer, Datatel

knowledge and to engage in any conversation that interests them, in any area,” says Rairdon. “Now our employees really recognize the café as a place to get information.”

For two client services packages, also designed for technical staff and end users, learning staff repurposed content from the employee workshop to support client performance with self-paced e-learning. Client feedback is positive and many have requested the ability to download the e-learning courses to their local sites.

Rairdon and staff are experimenting with Moodlerooms Joule for the next iteration of the knowledge cafés. This open-source software is a blended LMS and learning portal; the hope is that it will make the knowledge cafés more robust and easier to navigate.

Datatel follows the Gallup engagement model and enjoys industry-low turnover of less than 12 percent. Employee engagement is measured in an annual satisfaction survey. “We do know how important strong learning and development offerings are to employee engagement and to our corporate culture,” says Carney. To that end, the company devotes an entire week each August to employee learning.

Known as “Discovery Week,” the event is a five-day offsite conference at a local hotel. In 2009, it was attended by 88 percent of employees and 100 percent of the executive team. Remote employees travel to Virginia and stay at the hotel. The company provides a cyber café, wireless Internet access, ad hoc meeting rooms, and tables in

the hotel’s central atrium to encourage networking and enable informal learning. The days are filled with 95 learning sessions given by employees, executives, and professional trainers, as well as external and internal keynote speakers, divisional meetings, and community of practice meetings.

“Our culture supports a core value of sharing information early and often,” says Carney. “Although Discovery Week is a dedicated event, that message is out there on a daily basis.”

Special events include a wellness fair, a showcase in which teams educate other employees on their business and support strategies, and an innovation challenge. For the challenge, 23 employee teams presented their most innovative ideas to move the company forward; the top three were funded. Postsession and postconference feedback has been positive: 87 percent of respondents reported an increase in knowledge or skills, and 92 percent found it a worthwhile investment in career development.

“We know that to attract great employees, we must provide a balanced work environment and the right learning to provide maximum value,” Carney says. “We’re fortunate to have great management buy-in and support.”

The learning and development organization designed a second knowledge café in response to a productivity improvement initiative: Datatel launched a SharePoint intranet to facilitate employee productivity with team sites, document sharing, discussion boards, and so forth. The learning

team’s performance improvement solution included knowledge management, ongoing training, and the café, which featured an “ask the experts” discussion board, job aids, document libraries, and training paths. Its design modeled effective SharePoint use. Early adopter employees were identified and paired with trainers to lead clinics on how they increased their productivity by using SharePoint, which were delivered live and virtually.

All employees at Datatel participate in annual performance goal setting, receive annual performance reviews, and have individual development plans. The company has adopted several long-term strategic programs that link to its strategy and business goals. Learning and development consultants work with the senior managers of those programs to identify and document employee performance and learning needs, then partner with instructional designers to design appropriate initiatives, which could include training classes, mentoring sessions, or broader applications such as the knowledge café. Although there are only 10 people on the learning and development staff, their efforts are enhanced and extended by another 180 professionals nationwide who assist with training programs.

“Our philosophy is to take care of our people. If our people are prepared, knowledgeable, and have the right skills, they will take care of our customers. If our people are engaged, they are productive, and our customers are happy. So we continue to invest in our people,” says Kevin Boyce, chief financial officer. Direct learning and performance expenditures average \$3,000 per employee annually, and employees average 80 hours a year in training. **T+D**

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T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

090938.63250

