

The Life Sciences Industry Turns to eLearning

The Drug Information Association unveils the first in a series of professional development programs delivered through eLearning technologies to members worldwide

The life sciences industry continuously evolves as changing regulatory guidelines and an increasingly competitive landscape fuel the need to be first to market. But to remain competitive in this industry, changing technology and regulatory requirements are not the only “moving targets” that companies must aim for.

Companies must ensure that their workforce keeps up with other changes in this field. Hard-earned competitive advantages can rapidly deteriorate because of problems with product development, management, and production. Leading companies must provide their executives, physicians, scientists, and frontline medical professionals with the opportunity to keep pace with the latest educational and informational resources.

This purpose can present its own obstacles. Even if prospective students can fit an educational program into their busy professional schedules, classroom-training sessions typically fill to capacity quickly and often do not facilitate the comprehensive, needs-based education that such professionals require.

To deal with this dilemma, some organizations are looking beyond traditional

classroom training toward distance learning. The Drug Information Association (DIA) offers one model for using web-based distance learning, or eLearning. The DIA model delivers continuing professional development education to pharmaceutical industry professionals. DIA’s recently unveiled Medical Communications Certificate eLearning Program is the first in what promises to be a series of professional development programs that DIA will deliver through eLearning technologies to members worldwide.

Pharma Meets eLearning

DIA is developing alternatives to better serve its 30,000 members by providing meaningful professional development education programs. Traditionally, DIA has facilitated classroom training for core curriculum sessions at annual conferences and meetings. These sessions, however, could generally accommodate only 50 to 80 students and often posed scheduling conflicts for the thousands of other members who wished to participate. DIA ultimately concluded that demand for this curriculum was greater than a one-day session could meet. To bring greater value to its members, DIA developed the Medical Communications Certificate eLearning Program.

DIA’s Board of Directors recognized the opportunity to provide medical communications professionals in remote locations with the opportunity to connect and engage in a new, highly interactive online learning environment. This transition posed its own set of challenges. First, the medical communications curriculum was so detailed and specific that DIA had to build a customized eLearning system that would

specifically meet the needs of medical communications professionals throughout its geographically diverse membership. Second, DIA sought to leverage its existing classroom instructional materials to reach a significantly larger audience by repurposing the materials into an eLearning format. Third, the eLearning program’s infrastructure would need to be transparent to students so that the training content could be seamlessly administered without impeding their learning. Finally, DIA would have to investigate several potential vendors to determine which provider could offer the best solution to meet these unique and strict criteria.

The Medical Communications Program Committee (MCPC) began shaping the curriculum that served as the foundation for the morning tutorial sessions into a self-paced, online format that DIA members could study at any time and from anywhere. In tandem with refining the curriculum, MCPC began to collect and define criteria for a proposal to solicit vendor quotes for developing and delivering this curriculum as a self-paced eLearning program.

Selecting the Best eLearning Vendor

Through fortunate coincidence, this exploration of eLearning happened almost simultaneously with DIA’s year 2000 information technology (IT) evaluation and upgrade initiative, for which DIA contracted the consultancy Liquid Hub. Liquid Hub found that DIA could realize cost and schedule efficiencies and provide more learning opportunities to more members by developing eLearning programs to supplement DIA’s traditional, instructor-led classroom courses.



Susan McLaughlin is director of Worldwide Education and Training, Drug Information Association Center for Career and Professional Development, 215.442.6100, fax 215.442.6105,

susan.mclaughlin@diahome.org, www.dia.org.

Learning Online

DIA members can access the DIA Medical Communications Certificate eLearning Program in the "Online eLearning Courses" section of the association's website. Find more information about the program at www.diahome.org/docs/education/elearning_index.cfm.

Because DIA already had in hand the Medical Communications curriculum tailored for eLearning, as well as compiled and documented criteria for bringing the eLearning curriculum to the Internet, an ad hoc DIA eLearning committee approved the use of the Medical Communications curriculum to pilot DIA's first eLearning initiative. This fit well with DIA's new, overall IT strategy. DIA contracted with Liquid Hub to develop preliminary planning and to prepare a Request for Proposal (RFP) for vendors to "web-ify" the curriculum.

One of DIA's primary objectives was to maintain neutrality during the vendor selection process. DIA sent out requests for proposals to 11 candidate companies and then interviewed the four that appeared most qualified to meet the specific needs of DIA's migration from traditional learning to distance education.

DIA selected the Applied Technology Solutions division of RWD Technologies (www.rwd.com) — a Baltimore-based leader in professional services and products for a broad range of technology solutions — in large part because it demonstrated an understanding of the life sciences domain, possessed eLearning and systems integration experience, and had experience in developing and repurposing learning content for life sciences companies.

RWD offers its eLearning infrastructure as a "hosted service" or what is known as an application service provider (ASP). In this ASP model, RWD maintains the software systems on its own computers and provides DIA members with easy access through the Internet. This model relieves DIA of the burden of maintaining complex computer systems, while simultaneously providing immediate access to a host of online eLearning courses. DIA had previously determined that it had neither the internal

resources required to build a robust IT infrastructure nor the resources required to maintain this infrastructure for 24/7 global availability. Fortunately, DIA had already contracted with another company to provide a new membership management system on this same ASP model. This eLearning infrastructure, hosted by RWD and integrated with DIA's new membership management system, created a perfect fit for DIA's eLearning needs.

RWD assembled two teams with unique but complementary skills. One team concentrated on the course conversion and eLearning content development aspects of the project. The second team focused on integrating RWD's learning management system (Learn360) with DIA's internal and externally focused systems to provide a seamless experience for DIA members and DIA's administrative staff.

Putting the Pieces Together

RWD's Applied Technology Solutions Group successfully partnered with DIA to build a comprehensive Medical Communications Certificate eLearning Program that anticipates and responds to the specific needs of medical communications and other pharmaceutical professionals. They designed eight eLearning modules that together cover the learning objectives defined by DIA's Medical Communications members. Individual modules include literature evaluation, literature searching, medical writing, medical inquiries, crisis management, database management, regulatory issues, and product labeling. Participants can study one module, every module, or any number in between. Modules are designed so that students who successfully complete a module, including passing the module exam with a score of 80% or higher, can also receive continuing medical education (CME) and continuing pharmaceutical education (CPE) credits.

DIA's Medical Communications Certificate eLearning Program incorporates other features from RWD's University360 product suite, including a certification testing engine, an asynchronous bulletin board for collaboration, and a web-based conferencing tool that delivers synchronous, instructor-led eLearning events throughout the world. The certification testing feature enables students to complete coursework and then, upon successful completion of the

exam at the end of every module, receive their DIA Medical Communications Certificate.

RWD and DIA integrated this hosted eLearning environment with DIA's hosted membership system so that DIA members can log onto the DIA website, purchase eLearning modules, and then seamlessly and transparently move over to the hosted eLearning site. Each eLearning module is branded with the DIA Center for Career and Professional Development logo so that this transition appears to students as merely a move from one segment of the DIA website to another. The complete program, consisting of eight modules, comprises 19.5 credit hours at the cost of \$100 per hour. Through purchase bundling software, the total cost of \$1,950 can be reduced by 25% if modules are purchased in groups of two or more.

The primary goals of the DIA Medical Communications Certificate eLearning Program are to acquaint new-hire medical communications professionals with the industry's highly regulated drug information processes and to provide established professionals in the field with a comprehensive, systematic refresher course and source of reference. By placing this program online, DIA anticipates that it will provide access to a full library of self-paced training modules — written by recognized experts in the medical communications field — to a greater number of professionals than it could ever reach offering this same curriculum in traditional classroom instruction. Importantly, this program is the first in what DIA expects to be a family of online training and certification programs that respond to long-standing needs of many DIA special interest areas.

DIA's move to eLearning is a milestone in global distance education for the life sciences industry. For life science professionals, keeping abreast of the latest developments, techniques, and methods is not an option but a critical part of career development. Providing effective continuing education is vital. Presenting life science professionals with the opportunity to remain at the forefront of new developments in an ever changing field, at their convenience, creates an invaluable edge for any company operating in this competitive landscape. **BPI**