A blended e-learning approach to intercultural training

Joan M. Stewart

The author

Joan M. Stewart is Manager of International Projects, Intercultural Services, Cendant Mobility, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Abstract

As employees become more globally and technically savvy, it is inevitable that e-learning finds its way into the practice of intercultural training. After a decade of providing customized face-to-face intercultural training, Cendant Mobility's intercultural experts are responding to the changing profile of the global workforce. Together with their e-learning partner, Mentergy, they embarked upon a journey toward developing a blended learning solution that is designed to unlock the potential of e-learning, while maintaining their commitment to genuinely impactful skill-based intercultural training. The focus of this article is on challenges and lessons learned which include: maintaining cultural appropriateness; technological accessibility; training trainers for this new modality; and attaining user acceptance for a global rollout of a blended e-learning intercultural training program.

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Intercultural training has been a cornerstone to success for international assignees and global business executives for many years. In today's economy, however, the global company's bottom line is affected daily by the intercultural competence of all levels of the workforce. Thus, as a greater percentage of the total global workforce is interacting across cultures, the need for intercultural training has expanded. This need may be met by infusing a layer of cultural awareness and competencies into existing corporate training and systems and by providing intercultural learning products that focus on cultural competencies. As employees become more savvy, both globally and technically, and the pace of global business constantly quickens, it is inevitable that e-learning would find its way into the practice of intercultural training. This creates exciting opportunities but also presents the challenge of developing solutions that are designed to unlock the potential of e-learning, while maintaining a commitment to skill-based intercultural training that is genuinely impactful. Cendant Mobility, working in conjunction with our e-learning partner, Mentergy, has begun to explore these opportunities. The following are some of the lessons we have learned along the way.

The importance of cultural awareness

Culture is a very complex subject that is challenging to address in any medium. To create intercultural training with integrity, regardless of the modality of delivery, one has to keep in mind intercultural learning objectives and instructional design principles, while covering the subject matter with cultural appropriateness. Therefore, Cendant Mobility's intercultural subject matter experts (SMEs) have worked closely with instructional designers and technical experts in the intercultural e-learning development process. This is important because considerations of cultural propriety are not confined to training material and design. The cultural implications of an electronic delivery modality for a particular audience must also be considered. For example, recently a large multinational corporate client put a number of training courses online for worldwide employee access. This created a huge backlash from managers in some countries, because it meant they no longer controlled the

timing and accessibility of training for their employees.

When asynchronous elements are used for intercultural training, a major challenge is maintaining the integrity of the training without human interaction. Capturing the nuances of culture without face-to-face interaction is essential, yet extremely challenging. One solution we have employed is the technique of attaching specific cultural experiences and assumptions to particular characters, whom the learners get to know over the duration of a course, as they might get to know an actual person (or, more modestly, a character in a novel.) We gave these characters visual appearances, histories, accents, thoughts and opinions that would make them come alive for learners. In addition, we provided a mentor-type character, a gender neutral cartoon figure that has a global perspective and interprets and discusses situations or provides background information much as an actual instructor would in a live class.

Cultural awareness extends to appropriate design that takes into consideration different learning styles and language facilities. For example, designs that present characters' thoughts and speech in both audio and text format can address: accessibility to technology; different learning styles – both visual and auditory; and consideration of language needs for non-native speakers of the language being used, and for native speakers working with unfamiliar accents.

Blending for motivating learners

Another important factor driving any training product design – but especially non-technical training – is learner motivation. Many intercultural training participants are not self-motivated, so they may require guidance or coaching to complete a course. Also, culture is not a subject that can be understood in a completely objective, black and white framework, so many learners benefit from discussion or debriefing with an expert. Further, preferences for relationship-based interactions in some cultures may mean that learners will not respond to e-learning without at least some type of human introduction to the electronic delivery method. In any of these cases, learner or manager preferences may dictate a "blended" learning solution that

includes a trainer/consultant/coach. In fact, a 2000 study by The Masie Center, a well-known US-based e-learning think tank, found that the majority of e-learners highly valued some sort of trainer involvement in their e-learning event: 35.3 percent highly valued a trainer available via telephone; 83.5 percent highly valued a trainer available via e-mail or threaded discussion; and 67.6 percent highly valued a trainer available to evaluate project work and provide feedback and assessment. Blended learning, a mix of self-paced (asynchronous) work and instructor-led (synchronous or face-to-face) elements is being promoted by many in the training and executive education fields as the best way to capitalize on the strengths of e-learning, while maintaining the benefits of traditional training.

Addressing accessibility issues

When considering global deployment of training programs, it is immediately apparent that even the most culturally appropriate training interventions are subject to the vagaries of technology savvy and access worldwide. Therefore, in addition to cultural appropriateness, course content and learning strategies must also be evaluated for accessibility in terms of bandwidth, firewall issues, and connection speed. Although e-learning currently is most widespread in the USA, by 2004 the total e-learning market in Europe is projected to grow to $3.9 billion. Meanwhile, the Asia-Pacific region is expected to surpass both the USA and Europe with Internet usage by 2003. One cannot assume, however, that connectivity issues will only be a challenge in less developed markets such as Latin America and Asia. There are technology challenges to face from corporate cultures and systems, as well as user sophistication issues, even in the more technologically advanced markets of the USA and Europe.

Because of the technology limitations presented by our target global user base, Cendant Mobility needed to explore the various delivery options available to us. Together with Mentergy we examined the pros and cons of Web-based delivery versus CD/DVD delivery of course material. We looked at issues of access, course speed, data tracking and security, maintenance issues,

media elements and client preference. Although ultimately we decided on Web-based delivery when possible, that meant that we had to balance the need/desire for a rich media solution with the reality of the low bandwidth of many of our clients worldwide.

Training the trainer

Developing the trainer skill sets for the delivery of blended learning solutions is another consideration for rolling out a blended solution for intercultural training. Trainers need to be technically, as well as culturally, savvy. Our trainers, who are used to driving the tenor of a course through face-to-face interaction with participants and area experts, have to learn new ways of interacting. For asynchronous sessions they may develop job aids and supplemental materials to capture learning. They will conduct synchronous online sessions in which they must multi-task to effectively employ all the features of the learning system being used. Virtual coaching and ongoing consulting may become elements of their jobs as well. Developing and delivering blended solutions will be an ongoing learning process for trainers. Implicit in all of this is the trainer's growing competency in controlling the nuances of cultural appropriateness without face-to-face interaction. This leads to new considerations for screening when recruiting new staff.

User acceptance

Most important for effective implementation of intercultural e-learning, whether the ultimate solution is asynchronous, synchronous, or a blended product, is obtaining ongoing user feedback. Consider users' business needs and technical requirements, the course content and cultural appropriateness, and the enjoyment and ease of use of the course in order to make any

learning experience meaningful and memorable for the participants. Even with all the hype surrounding e-learning, it is not necessarily a truism that "if you build it, they will come." When developing any type of training, but especially in the high-cost arena of e-learning development, it is essential to secure client/user participation during the development stage to address the direct needs of the stakeholders.

Continuing on our path

As the need for intercultural training continues to grow, the market will take many approaches to meet this demand. In fact, there are already a number of intercultural e-learning tools in the marketplace. However, while many of these are valuable, most are informational tools rather than true training. Cendant Mobility and Mentergy decided from the outset that we wanted to create a true learning environment, continuing to focus on cultural competencies, rather than just knowledge acquisition. Therefore, along with all of the considerations mentioned previously, in our product development we have focused on learning objectives and instructional design principles appropriate for adult learners. We know that adult learners need to be challenged, and our material needs to be interactive in order to move learners from cultural awareness, to knowledge acquisition, to skill development. Although these criteria are essential to us, we also know that we must continue to solicit feedback and evaluation from our clients to better understand their requirements for intercultural training based on business needs, target populations and technical requirements. With commitment to these principles, and the benefits of constant technological advances and strong partnerships with Mentergy and clients, we hope to optimize the benefits of e-learning to reach the largest global audience possible with meaningful, skill-based intercultural training.