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## **E-learning turbocharges engine maker's customer training program**

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ITWorldCanada.com (18 Jan 2007)

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When aircraft engine manufacturer Pratt and Whitney Canada Corp. (P&WC) deployed an e-learning product six months ago, the company little realized the benefits would be so great – and come so quickly.

Deployed to complement its instructor-led customer training program, the company's e-learning offering has since freed-up instructors to create additional courses, increased module availability, and even saved clients up to \$2,937 in travel expenses and incidentals.

Since the 1960s, Longueuil, Quebec-based P&WC has been successfully using instructor-based programs to train customers on the maintenance and care of its aircraft engines.

However, a surge in demand prompted the company to seek out a complementary instruction channel.

"Increased market demand challenged us to provide more courses," said Charles Methot, manager, customer training for P&WC. He said to handle the increased course load, the company chose to go the e-learning route. With the help of GeoLearning Inc., a provider of hosted learning systems based in West Des Moines, Ia., P&WC was able to transform several instructor-led courses into online programs by employing a content authoring product from e-learning systems developer dominKnow Inc. of Perth, Ont., said Methot.

The four new online courses targeted introductory and intermediate topics for some 2,700 students from more than 190 countries where Pratt and Whitney engines are being used.

P&WC's training program used to involve five days of instructor-led teaching, but with the addition of an online component, this was reduced to three days.

The company already has 22 instructor-led courses, but Methot is confident it can introduce some new courses as the reduction in classroom days has freed up instructors. Methot described how the e-learning programs were designed and rolled out.

To develop an online-based instructional platform for P&WC, GeoLearning used dominKnow LCMS (learning content management system) – a content authoring and management software product.

P&WC course developers developed their own material, created the course content and loaded it onto the software

The dominKnow LCMS product enables experienced programmers, as well as novice content creators, to import existing content from Microsoft Word and PowerPoint documents, HTML pages, PDF files and Macromedia Flash files and transform it into re-usable learning materials.

The content can be edited and uploaded using Web authoring tools such as Flash, Dreamweaver, Authorware, Director and Lectora Publisher.

Methot said deployment of the system took just three weeks.

He said his company was spared IT maintenance costs as the e-learning system is hosted by GeoLearning.

We provide hosted services, so our customers don't have to deal with complex IT issues, said Will Hipwell, vice-president of marketing, GeoLearning.

The hosted service allows authorized instructors to update live material anytime and from anywhere in the world.

For students, a Web-based course meant "they could take it at their own time, wherever they are, regardless of classroom or instructor availability," said Methot.

In a recent online poll of its customers, P&WC found 76 per cent of the students approved of the new system, while 86 per cent were highly satisfied with the online course content.

P&WC would not release return on investment (ROI) figures or course prices, but Methot said "customers can save up to \$2,937 (US\$2,500) per student in transportation expenses and associated costs" since there are two fewer class days. However, for those thinking about deploying an e-learning system, two IT analysts have a few words of caution.

"E-learning is a compromise," according to Cushing Anderson, program director, project-based services, for research firm IDC in Framingham, Mass.

He said any mode of instruction that doesn't include the interaction of a "compassionate expert instructor" will have limitations. "It's not a question of how good the e-learning module is, but how good it is in accomplishing what it was designed to do".

Typically companies have recourse to e-learning because of limitations in areas such as time, finances, instructor availability or geographical location, noted Anderson. A good e-learning tool addresses these constraints, he said.

Linda Galloway, spokesperson for e-learning consultancy firm Bersin and Associates in Oakland, Calif. agrees. "E-learning can't be the only answer," she says. "The trend today is towards a blended training method that involves both instructor-led and online course."

Experts also advise e-learning shoppers to stay away from "slide show-type" products.

Anderson said e-learning software has gone through a significant evolution since it first came out in the 1980s and was later commercialized in the late 1990s. "Developers have been able to harness the power of the Web to improve e-learning."

The analyst noted that the previous generation of e-learning applications was akin to slide shows, where users merely clicked from page to page of instructional material. Today, he said, authoring software enables course content developers to incorporate disparate types of files, capture Webcasts, video and audio, or company Web pages, and turn them into instruction materials.

Other features to look for include reporting and collaborative capabilities. There give students instant feedback on answers and provide "intuitive suggestions" about what topics users should bone up on.

"Virtual classrooms can now be created by allowing students from across the globe to collaborate on an online course project," said Galloway.

Learning management systems (LMS) also allow for the tracking of a student's progress against stated career or study goals.

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