

PLDT's eLearning Experience: Riding the Wave with LearNET!

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Abstract

This paper aims to present lessons learned from PLDT's implementation of its own eLearning environment. It discusses the actual case analysis of the drawbacks and success elements of creating an eLearning program in a corporate setting. This paper draws its own story then, from the first attempts to the actual successes of LearNET-the branded computer-based training of PLDT today. The experience and lessons detailed in this paper will hopefully give other companies and organizations important insights on implementing their own corporate eLearning programs.

PLDT's new business environment demands a transition from the telephony business to data and information technology. In order to stay competitive, PLDT's Training and Career Center was tasked with re-tooling 13,000 employees to equip them with skills that the new business requires. Looking for a solution, PLDT was among those to be lured by the buzz created by eLearning. With its promise of mass learning at a cost-effective rate, eLearning seems to be a "heaven-sent" solution.

Even before the eLearning method was formally introduced in the organization, simple forms of eLearning had already found its way into PLDT. But the first fully-interactive eLearning system for PLDT employees was introduced in April 2000.

Excited by the discovery of this eLearning system, the PLDT Training and Career Center hastily launched the CBT Campus to the executives.

In spite of the CBT Campus' promise, it fell short in attracting employees to enroll in its courses. Thus, a paper-and-pencil survey was conducted in order to ascertain causes for the low turnout of graduates and enrollees. Results of this study attribute the low turn-out of enrollees to employees' general lack of information about CBT Campus.

Armed with research data, PLDT's Training group proceeded to re-invent CBT Campus. Three basic marketing approaches eventually proved to work: (1) packaging, (2) branding, and (3) promotion.

Major results were reaped from the eLearning re-launch. The Training group reported dramatic increase in enrollees and graduates because of the program. PLDT's eLearning implementation finally earned significant cost savings. The experience of riding in the wave of eLearning taught PLDT seven valuable lessons: (1) make people appreciate eLearning before asking them to use it; (2) understand users' needs well; (3) product development is key; (4) package eLearning as user-friendly; (5) find ways to make users love eLearning; (6) get top management endorsement; and (7) create a bandwagon by spreading the good news.

INTRODUCTION

This paper tells the story of the Philippine Long Distance Telephone (PLDT) Company's venture into the new and exciting world of eLearning. Being one of the first companies in the Philippines to take the dive into this new mode of learning, PLDT's story is one that is an interesting mix of success and failures in the blending of technology in its training and development efforts.

Background

Our story began in 1999 when PLDT was facing a crossroad after it was acquired by First Pacific. PLDT wanted to assert its dominance by pioneering in the development and introduction of top-line products and services. To ensure a dynamic and well-equipped human resources, PLDT's Training and Career Center was tasked to re-tool around 13,000 employees and equip them with skills they would need for the company's journey to technical excellence.

Indeed there was great pressure on us at the Training and Career Center as we tried to cope with this new mandate. Searching for a possible solution, one of the things we came across was eLearning. It was just a buzzword then but its promise of mass learning at a cost-effective rate seemed to be a "heaven-sent" solution for us. So we said to ourselves, "Why not give it a try?"

Early efforts at eLearning

Our early forays into eLearning began sometime in early 1999 when the team in our Executive Development Division thought of a weekly one-page newsletter which we called *Management Capsules*- electronic word files containing business and management nuggets. Soon, we also came out with monthly book summaries which featured digests of the works of leading management writers and business thinkers. Then, as we matured a bit in terms of web technical know-how, we expanded PLDT's

eLearning and came out with an Executive Development webpage in year 2000. It was a relatively static webpage but we were so proud of it at the time it came out since nobody in PLDT really had a webpage that was as impressive and useful.

The next eLearning tool we developed was also launched in 2000 as our PLDT Central Library (which was under Training and Career Center) computerized our card catalog system. The e-library system allowed users of our library to browse book titles and borrow them on-line.

THE CBT CAMPUS DAYS

A milestone in PLDT's eLearning experience happened in year 2000 when Training and Career Center acquired and introduced the first fully-interactive eLearning system- the CBT Campus of SmartForce. CBT Campus offered a wide variety of CBT modules which learners can readily access from the PLDT intranet. It was really a very promising system and we were all excited about it.

We then hastily launched and cascaded the eLearning system to PLDT executives, thinking they would get as excited as we were about it. However, we were disappointed by the results we got. We found out that we were wrong in hoping that the CBT Campus would attract employee attention to itself simply because it is high-tech. We treated our "new toy" as something similar to the traditional programs we had. We forgot that eLearning was a rather new technology at that time and our employees may have been well-prepared for it. Thus, in the first year of CBT Campus, we had very limited success. We got worried about our investment.

The computer-based training survey

In April 2002, a CBT survey was conducted to explore the causes for the low turnout of enrollees and graduates in the CBT Campus. The paper-and-pencil survey

was participated by 366 respondents, 58% of which are CBT users and 42% are non-users. The following are some of the realizations we had from that study:

- The low turn-out of enrollees and graduates is due to the employees' lack of information about the CBT Campus. It is either they don't know that the CBT Campus exists or they don't know how to take advantage of it.

- There aren't enough technical infrastructures in terms of available computers that can be used to gain access to the CBT program.

After analyzing the problem, we formed a team in our training group to identify possible solutions. They recommended the following actions to be taken:

- Need for massive information campaign on the eLearning program – benefits, features, access procedures

- Need for a reward system to encourage usage by employees

- Need to prepare learners to be comfortable with technology

- Incorporate computer-based training in traditional classroom courses (blended-learning)

- Make trainers more comfortable with eLearning

LEARNET: PACKAGING, BRANDING, AND LAUNCHING ELEARNING

Armed with enough market research, it was time to re-invent the eLearning program. Now we move to the highlight of the story.

Equipped with better understanding of the eLearning system (our product) and the needs of our learners (our customers), we applied the simple rules of marketing and business management in re-inventing the CBT Campus.

Product development

First thing we focused on was Product Development. We dedicated product

managers that bundled the CBT courses together and came-out with packaged Certificate Courses targeting specific niches of learners. We did not develop new CBTs really, we simply took the same SmartForce CBT courses and clustered them in several curricula.

For supervisors and executives, we developed the *On-LINE Business Management Program*, patterned after crash business management courses offered by business schools. There is also the *On-LINE IP Certification Program* which is patterned after Cisco courses. This CBT program allows learners to study Data Communication and Internet Protocol courses which in turn will prepare them for CCNA (Cisco Certified Network Associate). What's innovative in this blended-learning design is the addition of a laboratory component to the basic DataComm and IP theories delivered via CBT. Through this method, learners have a chance to do hands-on practice in our IP laboratory.

Another offering is the *On-Line Telecoms Technology Certificate Program* which targets engineers and technicians wishing to broaden their knowledge and expertise in the field of telecoms.

Still another curriculum we developed was the *On-Line Information Technology Certificate Program*. It is a program targeting employees who want to hone their IT skills and specialize in certain IT skill sets. But what about behavioral and management courses? Can we also teach these using eLearning? Well, yes. These needs were addressed via the *Tarragon Courses* available from SmartForce which we also included under our eLearning offerings. Tarragon works like guided CBTs whereby facilitators refer to a manual as they let learners cover contents of the CBT. Together with the CBTs, the learners go through a student guide which they fill-out like a regular course manual.

Branding

After we developed the products, the next thing we developed was the BRANDING of the eLearning program. The original name (“CBT Campus”) we thought, was such a dry and unappealing title. We needed a name that was catchy and had easy recall. So, we called for suggestions on the program name and eventually the name **LearNET** caught our fancy. We thought it had a nice ring to it and was an appropriate acronym for “Learning through the Net”. LearNET evokes riding into a fun wave of adventure which is really what defines eLearning. In addition to this, we came out with a surfboard logo to visualize the brand. Surfboard = surfing = surf the net, that’s the connection! We anchored the image of LearNET on the theme of something that was fun, a promising adventure, a challenge worth trying, and a “wave of change” which people have to catch fast for them not to be left behind.

And in order to visualize and describe clearly to the PLDT learners what we meant by LearNET, and what it is all about, we produced a LearNET MTV. It bore images of a surfer going out to capture a big wave. We interspersed the imagery with a number of people explaining the benefits of eLearning, employees doing eLearning anywhere, and learners actually having fun doing it.

Promotion

We used a lot of promotion for LearNET. There was a grand launch in PLDT TelTEC and we treated the launch like a big media event. We wanted to catch attention so we did a full campaign.

The surfing theme was fully capitalized upon as we transformed our Audio-Visual Room into a beach complete with surfboards and dressed ourselves with Hawaiian outfits

We also knew that nothing beats trial usage in promoting a product, so we also set-up an improvised Internet café where our

guests drank brewed coffee while trying on LearNET courses. Many of the first-time users found the system simple and eventually got hooked to using CBTs.

We brought this LearNet launch in the different PLDT metropolitan and regional through a series of road shows. The LearNET Caravan became one enriching experience to us in Training and Career Center as we were able to reach-out to more people allowing us to have a better feel of their needs and reaction to eLearning.

And to inform our employees well on how to use, enroll and log-on to LearNET, we came out with a primer that was distributed to the employees as part of their LearNET kits. We also came out with a loyalty program called LearNET Perks wherein employees accumulate learning points which they could exchange for token items.

RESULTS OF LEARNET

We at PLDT Training and Career Center now have our own share of eLearning’s positive business effects. In the first two years of CBT Campus, we only reported 200 CBT graduates on its first year and 1,850 graduates on the second year. From January to June of 2002, still we only had around 2,000 employees doing eLearning in CBT Campus. Shortly after the launch of LearNET in June 2002, a dramatic increase of 6,000 in the number of graduates was observed at the end of 2002! That is totally 8,000 graduates for 2002. Finally, for 2003, Training and Career Center reported 4,500 LearNet graduates.

Moreover, it would be good to note that using the LearNET CBTs as a basic program for preparing CCNAs (Cisco Certified Network Associates), our e-Technical Training Division has already produced 12 CCNPs and 16 CCNAs for PLDT. This approach has saved \$118,181 considering the cost of training for one CNNA alone would more or less entail US\$ 2,000 if we followed

the conventional approach.

How about cost effectiveness? Considering the number of LearNET graduates we had, if we cost-out the opportunity cost of sending these graduates to outside programs (estimated at a conservative \$36 per course per employee), and if we deduct the cost of our lease for our eLearning system, we more or less have ballpark figures on our net savings.

	<u>Training Cost Savings/*</u>
2000	--
2001	\$ 9,091
2002	\$ 2.27 Mil
2003	<u>\$ 2.36 Mil</u>
	\$ 4.64 Mil

**/ Avoided cost of external training (estimated at \$36/pax/day)*

less: Annual Cost of CBT subscription

Seven lessons learned

A good story needs to have lessons. So, looking back at our brief experience in eLearning, here are some lessons we have learned when we embarked into this new learning mode.

Lesson No. 1: If you build it, it does not follow that they will come. The famous quote from the movie "Field of Dreams" does not work for eLearning. You have to find a way to bring people to eLearning, understand it, accept it, find value in it and actually use it. Technology alone will not do it.

Lesson No. 2: Take careful effort to understand your market, products and customers. Market research pays after all. Don't just jump right into it. Find out what it will take for your customers (the learners) to like your product (CBTs).

Lesson No. 3: Develop your eLearning product. Rely on off-the-shelf and build on these. Customize! Don't just take CBT courses as they are. Experiment. Cluster your programs correctly. Create product niches that will target specific sets of learners.

Lesson No. 4: Take away the myth of eLearning -- that it is difficult and intimidating. Make people realize that there's nothing hard about computer-based training. Package technology as an enabling force for making learning more accessible to all.

Lesson No. 5: Make eLearning catch users' attention. Apply what you learned in business school in marketing eLearning. Brand it – give it a name, an identity. Let your creativity loose in promoting eLearning. Make it a fun experience for both the learners and your team in training.

Lesson No. 6: Get management buy-in for eLearning. Let top management endorse it. And when you present your proposal for getting an eLearning solution, talk to them in numbers, in terms of savings, efficiency results – the language that they easily understand.

Lesson No. 7: Constantly measure results and let people know of the good news. Regularly measure your success and publicize this. Small success begets bigger success. Create a wave where people can ride on – a bandwagon.

The future of eLearning in PLDT

We may have reached a milestone but we still have a long way to go. ELearning is continuously evolving and it is a fresh challenge for us in Training and Career Center to find new applications of eLearning within Human Resources. Today, we have expanded our eLearning environment and

ventured into other programs that maximize employee growth and learning.

Career resource center: One new eLearning product we have recently developed and which is currently being used is the PLDT Career Resource Center. It is an on-line facility that allows PLDT employees to do career planning on-line.

LearNET plus: More recently, we have launched LearNET Plus! – the new and revitalized branding of LearNET which will take our eLearning adventure to new heights. We have added a lot of new management and behavioral courses from SkillSoft, which is also part of our original CBT provider. LearNET Plus! offers more interactivity to the learner with its video and audio clips features.

Virtual classroom: Lastly yet definitely the biggest breakthrough among our eLearning innovations is the virtual classroom. This newest facility will put PLDT at the forefront of eLearning practice in the Philippines. PLDT is the first organization in the country to have a virtual classroom facility. Through the virtual classroom, our trainers based in our metropolitan training center will be able to conduct simultaneous classes in remote locations -- using only computers equipped with webcams and head sets. This new technology promises a new dimension for eLearning and can also be used as a videoconferencing facility in which executives based in the metropolitan will be able to “meet” with their staff in the regions.

CONCLUSION

eLearning may have been our “heaven-sent” solution but it is not, as we have realized, custom-made to fit in the culture of our organization. Using the metaphor of story-telling, our supplier of computer-based training system just gave us the plot for the

story of eLearning in our company. We provided narratives, color and texture, treatment, and characterization to our eLearning story in order to come-out with a story that PLDT employees can relate to and will find true meaning for themselves. In short, we worked hard on how to fit-in eLearning into the existing culture of PLDT.

Yes, we have gained some success but amidst all the marketing approach -- the most significant factor in the success of LearNET remains quite unnoticed. The success of LearNET may not have been realized if the people in Training and Career Center were not brave enough in trying out something new -- to ride the wave of change that will propel training to new dimensions and new heights. The introduction of LearNET has been one big ride for PLDT. And like real surfers, the people of Training and Career Center will continuously seek for bigger waves to conquer. End of story.