

2005 Rooney Award

Nomination: Innovative State Human Resource Management



Program Title: “E-Learning Program”

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North Carolina State Government: “E-Learning Program”

With a workforce of 90,000 employees scattered across a 550-mile span, North Carolina struggles to provide our employees, especially those in remote locales and those working on shifts, with equitable access to quality training opportunities. Implementation of an e-learning program in early 2003 has proven a successful, cost-effective means of enhancing the skills and productivity of our workforce, while improving service delivery. The North Carolina Office of State Personnel’s (NC OSP) program differs from those offered by other states in that it offers a creative mix of purchased courses, as well as state-specific custom programs, tailored to the needs of the workforce. The program has gained national recognition for its creative, innovative approaches to delivering quality solutions with few resources.

Online learning provides many benefits, including enormous savings in terms of travel costs and employee time away from work, legal defensibility, just-in-time training (so employees do not have to wait weeks or months to acquire or enhance skills needed today), and the elimination of waiting lists and empty seats for classroom training events. Unfortunately, e-learning costs can be prohibitive for organizations. Through a careful mix of in-house development, identification of low- or no-cost tools for building interactivity and collaboration, and negotiation of creative pricing models for commercial products, OSP is able to offer a varied menu of engaging online courses at minimal cost to OSP and usually at no or low cost to agencies. Additionally, unlike many online programs which consist of nothing but screen after screen of text, OSP’s courses include multimedia programming, interactive quizzes, collaborative activities, live-online virtual classroom training sessions, and classroom “learning labs” to supplement online programs—all at marginal cost. The e-learning coordinator is diligent in maximizing existing resources, and money utilized for vendor products and custom development is spent wisely.

OSP’s e-learning program has been featured as a best practices case study at VNU Learning, Inc.’s Training 2004 and 2005 Conferences, and will be showcased in a presentation at the upcoming American Society for Training and Development International Conference and Expo. It also was featured in the *Institute of Management and Administration’s Newsletter* (May, 2004) and is profiled in an upcoming issue of the National Institute for Business Management’s *HR Specialist*.

1. Description of the program

The OSP e-learning program has 3 key components:

Several programs comprise the *supervisor development* component. “Basic Training for New Supervisors” is a 10-module course meant to provide must-know, just-in-time information for the new supervisor suddenly confronted with, for instance, a hiring event or the need to review performance appraisal forms. The “Effective HR Management” series provides a more in-depth look at human resources-related topics such as our discipline and hiring processes. Leadership development training products from Development Dimensions International, including 30 online courses, are also available through an enterprise-wide license.

A second program goal is creating a learning culture by developing more independent learners. Providing interesting, personally-relevant offerings, available free to all employees, supports that goal. The *employee development* component offers programs for use by all NC employees. Courses include mandated training (i.e., “ADA”), professional-growth topics (i.e., “Email Etiquette”), and personal development issues (i.e., “Dealing with Holiday Stress”).

Consultation is the program’s third component. The e-learning program coordinator serves as advisor to many agency staff members responsible for providing in-house employee training. Significant effort is made in working with these staff to help them make good decisions about buying or building e-learning solutions. Often they are drawn to the cheapest solution (typically an inexpensive “wall of words” product that will ultimately repel learners while achieving none of the product’s stated learning objectives) even when it is not instructionally the best decision. Consultation services extend as well to implementation and technology issues.

2. How long has the program been operational?

The e-learning program was launched in January 2003.

3. Why was the program created?

The program was created to make high quality, consistent, and accurate training available throughout state government to employees, managers, and supervisors regardless of geographic location. Ensuring ongoing equitable access is a key part of building a learning culture in North Carolina state government.

4. Why is the program a new and creative method?

The program is noteworthy for its creative approaches to developing quality online training solutions at minimal cost. Strategies include *sharing licenses*. To obtain a high-quality multimedia-enhanced program on unlawful harassment, the learning program coordinator arranged for several NC agencies to share a license in order to purchase at the bulk rate of just \$20 per seat. We also *add to, rather than renovate, commercial products*. For instance, the purchased “Unlawful Workplace Harassment” program references issues not included in NC policy. Rather than have the product customized (at a cost of \$20,000), purchase a different product (both inferior to and more expensive than the first choice), or encumber resources by developing the product in-house (ultimately more expensive than either of the other options), a brief “welcome” page was developed which alerts learners to differences in the commercial product versus the state policy. The cost of this customization: \$0. Another strategy is *outsourcing “pieces” rather than “wholes”*. The program coordinator is a skilled writer with doctoral-level instructional design training and intermediate Web design skills. As some programs require custom graphics or use of software for which there is a long learning curve, OSP has contracted with providers of supplemental services (such as art and Flash design) who fill in gaps when necessary. In this way OSP obtains a quality final product while avoiding the exorbitant costs associated with outsourcing entire projects. Additional *low-cost outsourcing* is accomplished through the use of vendors offering products such as Flash game and quiz templates and participant tracking tools. Expensive to build and deploy in-house, these products can often be had from external sources at very little cost. This approach offers an excellent means of providing interactivity and engagement even with “dry” material.

Other cost-cutting strategies include *repurposing existing materials*. OSP owns the copyrights of an extensive library of videos. By converting original videotape to a digital format, then using free video editing software, we are able to incorporate NC-specific video into the e-learning programs at no cost. Existing training materials such as checklists, handouts, and quizzes have been adapted for online use. Because OSP is located near several large universities, *using student help* has created a win-win situation: OSP obtains a quality product, and the students gain experience in working with a “real” client while creating a finished product for their portfolios. NC’s online New Employee Orientation program was created by a team of graduate students from NC State University’s Training and Development program. According to contacts in other states bids for

projects of a similar scope fall in the \$15,000 to \$30,000 range. Cost of the student help: \$0.

5. What were the program's start-up costs?

Start-up costs included the e-learning coordinator's salary, a multimedia-capable computer, and basic Web design software purchased at the government discount price. Salary and benefits costs were \$73,563. Start-up costs apart from salary were approximately \$3,000. Additional hardware, such as microphones, blank CDs, and a scanner, were obtained for free via promotions at local office supply stores.

6. What are the program's operational costs?

In addition to the coordinator's salary, operational costs include approximately \$1,000 a year for contracts for custom design. Cost for the host server is \$100 per month. Thus, total program costs are \$2200 per year. Products from vendors are charged back to the agencies on a per-seat basis and are obtained at no additional cost to NC OSP.

Savings resulting from the e-learning program more than offset the program's operational costs. For example, the "Interaction Management" courses were offered in the past as a classroom-only program. Cost of the course for an employee traveling from Asheville, NC, to Raleigh to attend the 3 separate training sessions: \$1070 plus an additional 6 missed work days for the travel. In comparison, the cost of a "blended" program, in which background information and course materials are accessed online prior to 2 sessions of hands-on application of new skills is significantly lower: \$430 and only 2 additional work days for travel.

7. How is this program funded?

The program is funded from state appropriations for the coordinator's salary, equipment and contract services and from agency fees for license sharing.

8. Did this program originate in your state?

To the best of our knowledge, no other state has an e-learning program with these characteristics and capabilities.

9. Are you aware of similar programs in other states?

Other states with sizable e-learning programs tend to provide it via one or more large commercial vendors of off-the-shelf courses. We are not aware of other states offering an extended mix of custom developed as well as commercial courses, nor of agencies within those states sharing licenses and other resources. To our knowledge no other state provides such an array of online training opportunities at no or limited cost to agencies or employees.

10. How do you measure the success of this program?

The most quantifiable measure of the program's success is the high completion rate for our courses. While industry reports estimate typical completion of online learning programs at a discouraging 20% to 40%, NC OSP routinely sees much higher figures. Several online courses, including our "Unlawful Harassment" program, have a remarkable 100% completion rate. Additional evidence of success can be found in the rapidity with which new programs are embraced: the "AIDS Awareness" program, for example, had 300 completions within 5 work days of its release, with nearly 2,000 completions in just six months. Anecdotal evidence supporting the programs can be found in training evaluation data. Fewer than 5% of the learners in the "Effective Discipline" course said they would prefer to take it in a classroom format, while 13% suggested the program be made longer. Additionally, both learners and agency HR staff report that the online program is effective in helping them navigate the complex discipline policy.

11. How has the program grown and/or changed since its inception?

As e-learning grows in acceptance and popularity, more NC trainers are interested in developing their own in-house programs. The coordinator is now spending less time in development and more time in consultation/instruction for these trainers. An additional, positive change has come about in many of the trainers' attitudes. Much time and energy was previously devoted to overcoming resistance to e-learning. Classroom trainers now seek help in learning about Web design and creating and launching online instruction. The e-learning program's scope is expanding to NC county social services offices, who have asked for help in developing online alternatives to much of what is currently offered as a 4-week classroom curriculum for new staff involved in food stamp programs.

In summary: OSP's comprehensive e-learning program has nurtured the growth of a learning culture, offered equitable access to training opportunities to all our employees, and provided a cost-effective, common-sense means of enhancing the productivity of our workforce. We are pleased that the program has been so well received, gratified by the new partnerships that have developed, energized by the challenges of continuing to exercise creativity and resourcefulness in finding low-cost solutions, and excited at the prospect of future growth in the developmental opportunities we will provide to our workforce.