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Education for the 21st Century:

Q &A with Louis J. DeGeorge III, Director of Corporate Training, Harborside Healthcare Inc.

For Boston-based Harborside Healthcare, which operates 55 facilities in diverse locations, the concept of a computer-based, “virtual university” has offered a flexible and cost-effective solution to the challenge of employee training and education. Provider spoke recently with Louis DeGeorge III, former corporate director of education and training at Harborside, who contributed to the development and management of the company’s virtual university. DeGeorge, now an independent consultant, is a frequent lecturer on the application of technology in training and education.

What is a virtual university?

A virtual university is a way to provide educational experiences without the geographic confines or expense of a physical plant. Virtual universities use a variety of instructional methods and media—including written correspondence, audio- and videotape, CD-ROM, online learning, interactive TV, and sometimes even traditional classroom instruction—to reach students who are typically separated from instructors by time, location, or both.

At Harborside Healthcare, the virtual university (known as “Harborside University”) is defined as the central home to all education programs—not just clinical education. Through Harborside University, the company can provide its employees with educational opportunities 24 hours a day, seven days a week, using both distance learning and conventional methods. Interestingly, in just a few years, distance learning has become widely accepted, sponsored by both educational institutions and businesses. According to a 1997 federal survey, an estimated 1.4 million students were enrolled in online college-level courses for credit. Today, 75 percent of the nation’s two- and four-year colleges offer online courses, and before the virtual university approach was embraced by higher education, it was part of the corporate education environment. Hospitals, in fact, have been using computer-based education for years, and now many multifacility long term care companies have implemented or are evaluating distance education as a way to better manage their staff education needs.

Why did you choose a virtual university approach at Harborside?

Through a virtual university, Harborside can combine classroom (or one-to-one) education, cyber-education (computer-based education on the Web or on a server), and other techniques. With such a wide variety of instructional methods to choose from, the company can determine the best method for delivering each course by considering the content to be presented, the audience to be instructed, and the importance and time constraints involved in getting the learning message out to the organization.

All in all, choosing to create a virtual university was a fairly easy decision--one that can work for any size organization, from an independent facility to a multifacility chain. Harborside began the process by assessing its critical training needs, which were:

- 24/7 availability, to accommodate around-the-clock shifts;
- Control of content, to ensure that consistent training messages were being provided to employees throughout the 55 facilities it manages;
- Speed and agility, so that the company can produce and update material quickly and be responsive to the ever-changing health care environment;
- Resource efficiency, to minimize staff time spent on routine tasks; and
- Cost-effectiveness, through an educational delivery system that could better accommodate the high employee turnover prevalent throughout long term care.

Although classroom and one-to-one education are usually the instructional methods of choice, they are not always the most practical choices. For example, to comply with certain regulated training requirements, a staff development coordinator might need to run an inservice program three to four times a month. Between keeping up with employee turnover and providing training for all three shifts, that's no small task using only traditional training methods. Today, those mandatory inservice programs are delivered on a personal computer [PC] in each facility through computer-based training. Employees now sign in to Harborside University, see their course assignments, click on a course, and complete their mandatory inservice education at their convenience--24 hours a day.

In addition to these logistical advantages, the virtual university approach creates a sense of belonging to something. It also enables owners and managers to show their commitment to the professional development of their employees. It sets a professional tone and expectations for employees, demonstrating that the organization embraces quality education and quality care. All of these factors help employees feel that their employer is investing in them and their professional future, which in turn motivates employees to stay with that employer.

How can a virtual university help promote quality standards and support regulatory requirements?

For Harborside, a significant advantage of the virtual university approach is that it delivers a consistent educational message to all employees at all facilities, based on Harborside's own protocols and policies.

All students need to "test out" of every inservice program with a grade of at least 80 percent. This feature further enhances Harborside's clinical product and quality of care in that the company can be assured that employees understand what is being taught to them.

At each Harborside facility, the virtual university system frees the staff development coordinator from the more routine tasks of delivering basic courses and keeping track of inservice participation.

Now, the staff development coordinator can focus his or her educational efforts on quality issues specific to that facility that directly affect the care of its residents. This is a very effective way of maximizing educational resources at each facility.

How did Harborside convince its employees to accept the use of computer-based training?

It was done on a gradual basis over a three-year period. First, Harborside offered a computer-based course to its licensed staff, allowing them to take the course home and load it onto their PCs if they wished. In doing this, the company learned that about 51 percent of its licensed nursing staff had PCs at home. Many of them had fun having their children show them how to load the course and use the PC. It is likely that many more nurses have PCs since Harborside first introduced the virtual university concept.

The company's second phase included a CD-ROM course for nurse assistants and licensed staff. It was found that many of the nurse assistants were comfortable with PCs, and if they weren't, they were eager to learn.

In the third phase, Harborside University offered a falls-prevention training program on CD-ROM that was required for all staff, including dietary, housekeeping, and maintenance. By this time, everyone was excited about the opportunity to learn on a PC.

The company now offers more than 30 clinical courses (with an additional 24 in development) and 12 courses on Microsoft Office products (Word, Excel, Powerpoint), enabling all interested employees to learn these software programs for their own personal development.

What advice would you give to other providers as they explore these training tools and methods?

The first step is that the company must fully embrace the idea. The further a company can advance the level of technology in its operations, the more opportunity it is going to have to *use* technology in other ways--like capturing minimum data set [MDS] data and patient information right from the unit floor. Collecting such data will not only help to better manage residents' care, but it will also help manage the facility more efficiently. In today's health care environment, becoming more efficient is key to survival. It starts by creating a technology-friendly work environment, and the education department is the best place to begin.

Second, a provider should make sure it has a long-term plan that introduces the technology in phases. The university approach is a good place to do this because it's nonthreatening and can serve as the cornerstone of an organization's educational vision. Third, providers should work with many instructional methods. No one method can be the solution to all education needs. It is often true that people need to be taught something four or five times before they retain it. People have different learning styles, so using a variety of educational methods increases effectiveness. It is also important to know that no one vendor can meet all of a provider's needs. It is best to use several vendors and require them to work with each other when designing curriculum and technology.

Lastly, everyone in the company should enjoy the adventure--including the chief executive officer [CEO]. In today's health care environment, it's important to have a dedicated director of education as part of the senior management team. At Harborside, the position reports directly to the company president and chief operating officer. This is important for three reasons: 1.) A company's educational goals need to be tied to its overall mission in order to develop a workforce that will drive the organization to its strategic objectives; 2.) Education is change, and today, a successful health care organization is one that can effectively keep up with--and nimbly get ahead of--the constant change that characterizes long term care; 3.) If the CEO doesn't take ownership

of the educational process, it will fail. This is a major shift in management thinking for many in the health care industry. Senior management needs to recognize that education is no longer only a human resources or clinical function. It is an important tool for achieving strategic business goals.

Distance Learning Glossary

ASP (application service provider): Third-party organizations that supply software applications or software-related services over the Internet. ASPs allow companies to save money, time, and resources by outsourcing some or all of their information technology needs.

Asynchronous learning: Learning in which interaction between teachers and students occurs intermittently with a time delay. Examples are self-paced courses taken via the Internet or CD-ROM, Q&A mentoring, online discussion groups, and e-mail.

Audio conferencing: Voice-only connection of more than two sites using standard telephone lines.

Authoring tool: A software application or program that allows people to create their own e-learning courseware. Types of authoring tools include instructionally focused authoring tools, Web authoring and programming tools, template-focused authoring tools, knowledge capture systems, and text and file creation.

BBS (bulletin board system): An online community run on a host computer that users can dial or log into. BBS users can post messages on public discussion boards, send and receive e-mail, chat with other users, and upload and download files. BBSs are text-based and often related to the specific hobbies or interests of their creators.

Blended learning: Learning events that combine aspects of online and face-to-face instruction.

CAI (computer-assisted instruction): The use of a computer as a medium of instruction, for tutorial, drill and practice, simulation, or games. CAI is used for both initial and remedial training, and it typically does not require that a computer be connected to a network or provide links to learning resources outside of the course.

CBT (computer-based training): An umbrella term for the use of computers in both instruction and management of the teaching and learning process. CAI (computer-assisted instruction) and CMI (computer-managed instruction) are included under the heading of CBT. Some people use the terms CBT and CAI interchangeably.

CD-ROM (compact disc read-only memory or media): A computer storage medium similar to the audio CD that can hold more than 600 megabytes of read-only digital information.

Chat: Communication between members of an online service using text. The messages are sent between members in real time, as in a conversation, by typing in short statements.

E-learning: A wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN), audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV, and CD-ROM.

Full-motion video: A signal that allows transmission of complete action taking place at the origination site.

Fully interactive video (two-way interactive video): Two sites that interact with audio and video as if they were collocated.

ILT (instructor-led training): Usually refers to traditional classroom training, in which an instructor teaches a class to a room of students. The term is used synonymously with on-site training and classroom training (c-learning).

Internet-based training: Training delivered primarily by TCP/IP network technologies such as e-mail, newsgroups, proprietary applications, and so forth. Although the term is often used synonymously with Web-based training, Internet-based training is not necessarily delivered over the Web, and may not use the HTTP and HTML technologies that make Web-based training possible.

Knowledge management: Capturing, organizing, and storing the knowledge and experience of individual workers and groups within an organization and making it available to others in the organization. The information is stored in a special database called a knowledge base.

LCMS (learning content management system): A software application that allows trainers to manage both the administrative and content-related functions of training. An LCMS combines the course-management capabilities of an LMS (learning management system) with the content creation and storage capabilities of a CMS (content management system).

LMS (learning management system): Software that automates the administration of training events. The LMS registers users, tracks courses in a catalog, and records data from learners; it also provides reports to management. An LMS is typically designed to handle courses by multiple publishers and providers. It focuses on managing courses created by a variety of outside sources.

Online community: Meeting place for people on the Internet. Designed to facilitate interaction and collaboration among people who share common interests and needs. Online communities can be open to all or by membership only and may or may not offer moderator tools.

Satellite TV: Video and audio signals relayed via a communication device that orbits around the earth.

Streaming media: Audio or video files played as they are being downloaded over the Internet instead of users having to wait for the entire file to download first. Requires a media player program.

Synchronous learning: A real-time, instructor-led online learning event in which all participants are logged on at the same time and communicate directly with each other. In this virtual classroom setting, the instructor maintains control of the class, with the ability to call on participants. In most platforms, students and teachers can use a whiteboard to see work in progress and share knowledge. Interaction may also occur via audio- or videoconferencing, Internet telephony, or two-way live broadcasts.

Videoconferencing: Using video and audio signals to link participants at different and remote locations.

Virtual classroom: The online learning space where students and instructors interact. For instance, a completely virtual university does not have actual buildings but instead holds classes over the Internet.

WBT (Web-based training): Delivery of educational content via a Web browser over the public Internet, a private intranet, or an extranet. Web-based training often provides links to other learning resources such as references, e-mail, bulletin boards, and discussion groups. WBT also may include a facilitator who can provide course guidelines, manage discussion boards, deliver lectures, and so forth. When used with a facilitator, WBT offers some advantages of instructor-led training while also retaining the advantages of computer-based training.

Whiteboard: An electronic version of a chalkboard that enables learners in a virtual classroom to view what an instructor, presenter, or fellow learner writes or draws. Also called a smartboard or electronic whiteboard.