Sweet Spot International (SSI)

Using IBM Kenexa's e-Learning solutions, SSI finds its sweet spot in Canada

Overview

The need

SSI needed an e-learning system for its advanced javascript simulation capability and overall rapid application development features.

The solution

After the successful installation of a large-scale web deployment, SSI became a reseller of IBM Kenexa Learning Solutions. Together they have installed IBM Kenexa LMS and LCMS solutions for several government and municipal companies.

The benefit

- Oil company achieved savings by reducing contractor training time
- Achieved resource savings by reducing new recruit training and learning time for large metro fire department
- Virtually eliminated laborious manual work for a major police force
- Cost-effective transition significantly reduced training costs and time between a government agency and several private energy companies

Sweet Spot International is a customer-focused and highly capable organization based in Calgary, Canada. The company provides knowledge and electronic performance support solutions to a variety of organizations, with particular expertise in the police, government, oil and gas, and transportation sectors.

Sweet Spot International (SSI) offers customers a full range of turn-key services, including learning strategy consulting, project management, curriculum instructional design, media production, scriptwriting, authoring, programming and sustainment. Founded in 1985, SSI also works with larger companies to implement and support learning software solutions to help solve complex challenges.

Solution component:

- IBM® Kenexa® LCMS on Cloud
- IBM® Kenexa® LMS on Cloud

SSI is in the business of selling and implementing technology platforms and then driving long-term solutions for its customers. SSI has evolved two models of customer engagement. Typically, SSI's services fall into two categories: support for the customer's production team, or full contract-in production services.

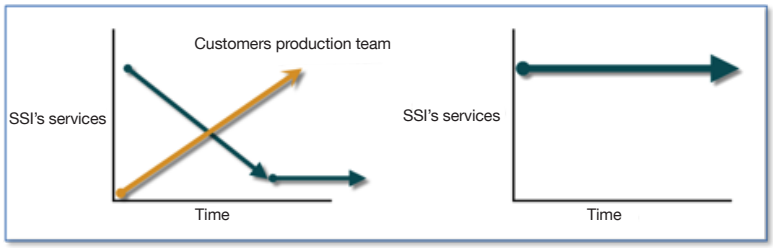

Figure 1: SSI's two models of customer engagement

- SSI implements a technology platform to deliver long-term solutions. The involvement of SSI is very high during the initial implementation process, and then work tapers off to the point where it offers ongoing support on an as-needed basis. A long-term dimension to this first model has also emerged: as evolutionary changes occur to the product platforms, SSI is there to support the customer with additional expertise and guidance. In addition, experience has shown that customer teams change over time. People mature in their careers and move to other departments, or move away completely to other jobs, or take maternity leave and so forth. SSI supports customers in these situations with the continuity of as-needed development and production services.
- SSI also works with organizations to supply expertise on a project-by-project basis. In these instances, SSI provides application, support or production services to a learning platform that few other companies can provide. This enables customers to implement new solutions without making a long-term staffing commitment.

"We wear sales and service hats, basically," said Bob Swift-Hill, director of SSI. "We are unique in what we offer customers in our region, and it gives us a great competitive advantage."

Building strong relationships

For more than a decade, SSI has been a valued business partner of IBM selling IBM® Kenexa® LCMS on Cloud and IBM® Kenexa® LMS on Cloud to its customers. SSI's staff of 25+ people is dedicated to implementing and servicing IBM's learning products, and it has shown to be a successful business model in Western Canada, according to Swift-Hill.

"When I look back over the years, every lasting customer relationship is built around LCMS or LMS deployment," he said.

Our relationship with SSI began in 2001 when the company selected the LCMS for its advanced javascript simulation capability and overall rapid application development features.

After using the system successfully in this first large-scale web deployment, SSI became a reseller of the Kenexa learning solutions. Today, SSI works with both government and large private company customers, providing their employees with access to the learning solutions they need when they need them.

Using SSI services and IBM's LCMS and LMS solutions, several companies have greatly benefited from the learning expertise they provide.

SSI helps large oil company to cut training time and costs using IBM Kenexa LCMS

Oil companies, for reasons of health and safety, risk management and due diligence, must provide certain orientations and safety awareness training to contractors and service providers who enter its worksites. This government regulation is especially challenging for one major Canadian oil company because it operates many worksites in two provinces and deals with thousands of contractors and service providers at virtually any given time.

One particular worksite instance involves a large military weapons range. In this particular location alone, up to 8,000 independent contractors enter the range each year, and they all must provide proof of training to gain access to the facility. Previously, the oil company maintained a small training office and delivered one training orientation in a small room that only had room for a few people at a time. The orientation ran on a 30-minute loop, meaning contractors could be stalled at the gate area for up to an hour depending on their arrival time. The calculation of this wasted "waiting cost" to the company was 8,000 people x $50/hr. = $400,000 per year. The potential benefit far exceeded the investment in adding the external-facing portal server.

With SSI's help, the oil company had already selected, purchased and implemented the LCMS for internal use. However, the company did not want to incur licensing and remote network login capability for up to 8,000 additional seats per year in order to deliver and track external training. SSI devised a new delivery portal using capabilities and an additional LCMS installation that could serve up to 8,000 people annually (or more), had a self-registration feature, a built in certificate function, and an extensive tracking record of completions; and a portal that did not need on-site monitoring.

By implementing this new e-Learning delivery program, the oil company saves significant money each year by reducing the training time for contractors. Other divisions in the company have discovered the benefits of the new training delivery system and have also worked with SSI to create customized external-facing portals to solve their training challenges. As more portals and audiences were added, the number of people who complete on-site training in near real-time now surpasses 20,000.

Vital city service benefits from LCMS and service from SSI

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a fire department in a large metropolitan area implemented a training program to help newly-commissioned recruits get up to speed before their official start date. The training amounted to sending recruits an 800-page binder of the organization's rule and regulations, a piece of rope and a CD-ROM that included video of different knot-tying techniques. When the recruits reported for duty, often times up to six months after they accepted their offer to join the department, they were required to pass a basic knowledge test before the orientation process began. When recruits scored lower than the required percentage on the first day of recruit school, it meant automatic dismissal from the program. These dismissals happened over and over again. It was very disheartening to the City (which had invested in selecting and preparing the dismissed recruits) and heartbreaking for the recruits who failed. They too had made significant investments in this new career direction and often moved from another place in the country. Something had to change.

Because the department had worked with SSI to arrange for an externally-hosted server solution for the LCMS, the delivery of specialized threshold courses to recruits in their homes (outside of the City network, and in fact across the country) was feasible. SSI's team worked with the department's trainers to develop the curriculum. The proposition was clear: identify the material that recruits should know before arriving at the training academy. SSI then worked with the department's internal media team and contributed its own illustration and design resources to provide media-rich learning experiences for these remote recruits.

Now when recruits accept an offer to join the department, they get access into the e-Learning system and they can start their training in a meaningful way right away. Recruits are given 90 days to access the e-Learning portal and must score 100 percent on all 13 courses and the corresponding knowledge exams. Since implementing this new training method, each single recruit has passed each of the academy's training program knowledge tests (and no one has been dropped from the program for knowledge-related reasons). More importantly, this "elearn prelearn" model has enabled the curriculum designers to adjust the on-site program significantly. Because of the common threshold established through the preliminary courses, they can devote more training to areas that involve physical or kinesthetic capabilities. This saves the department valuable resources by reducing training and learning time for each class of new recruits.

The 100 percent score requirement on knowledge e-Learning courses is a standard that SSI has successfully advocated with all of its customers. This is based on a competency-based learning strategy. SSI takes the traditional classroom model (where students achieve varying scores over a fixed period of classroom time) and transforms that into a learner-led experience where the learners must score 100 percent and they are given all the resources and time needed to achieve that knowledge "standard."

SSI uses IBM Kenexa LCMS to help joint venture train people

A joint venture between a provincial government agency and more than 600 private energy companies needed to streamline its reporting process to the government by switching from a paper-based to an electronic system. In addition, each entity needed access to the database it would create. SSI was chosen to build a learning platform that would support the 8,000 people in the industry that needed to be trained on how to use the new system. This had to take place before the system was built.

Using the LCMS rapid-development features, SSI designed and created a simulation of the reporting system and each of the data sets it would support. In less than 10 months, SSI created more than 100 e-Learning courses in the system, providing valuable content for those who needed to be trained and for those who would use the system on a regular basis.

As a result, users of the new system were thoroughly competent when the new reporting system went live, helping ensure a seamless and more cost-effective transition. As an added benefit, when another government department joined the joint venture, SSI was able to repurpose 100 e-Learning courses, significantly cutting down on the cost and time the agency's trainers needed to get up to speed on the platform.

In this aspect, SSI helped draw upon the content management system's strength in that the training is built with reusable learning objects.

SSI works with major police force to strengthen knowledge tests

During the initial pilot implementation with a major city police force, SSI worked with police academy representatives to identify problem areas where the LCMS could provide solutions. One of these areas was in regards to knowledge tests, and three distinct contexts: bulletins, e-Learning and rank promotional exams.

In the first instance, the academy had a long-standing approach of developing training bulletins, some of which would take months to prepare as they were vetted by various departments, subject matter experts and lawyers. Inevitably, these training bulletins were updates or reactions to changes in law, or in legal precedent that affected police procedure. Prior to the LCMS implementation, the bulletins were distributed to the various police stations and posted. At "parade" the sergeant would circulate a sign-off sheet in respect to the various bulletins. The key question, though, was whether virtually anyone had read the bulletin. There really was no way to tell. And, once the bulletin had been posted for a period of time, it was filed away.

SSI introduced the concept of "rigor" into the discussion, and it was determined by the academy that while they would like to track the distribution and acceptance of the bulletins by officers (which would put their diligence in monitoring significantly higher than the sign-off sheets), they did not want to make it required learning. They would prioritize the mandatory material, and unless a bulletin was prioritized in this fashion, the majority of bulletins were classified as an "ownership" level. In other words, in respect to these adult learners, the academy wanted their officers to take ownership for the material without having to answer knowledge check questions. There is no specific mechanism in the LCMS to provide this, but SSI repurposed a conventional diagnostic to achieve this purpose. In the LCMS, the method by which ownership is transferred is a final page (after the presentation of the bulletin, sometimes with rich-media elements) in which the officers are presented with a statement and an "I agree" button. Because the fill-in-the-blank object can be used in the diagnostic as a valid "question object", it fulfils the requirement to send full completion and scoring to the LMS.

A second level of rigor was defined for e-Learning. In these courses, the determination of the academy is that officers must achieve the knowledge standard score of 100 percent in order to achieve completion. Inside the LCMS courses, SSI showed the internal development team how to set up a simple loop so that when someone scores less than the standard, they understand that they have the option to go back and review the content or retry the exam.

SSI has worked with several customers on a standard practice for e-Learning knowledge checks in which they are interspersed in the e-Learning and are reused as the question pool at the end. In working through the content, the learners are given the knowledge checks complete with the visual scoring feedback and the standard incorrect or correct feedback. Then, in the final diagnostic, the same questions are reused with two new features of the LCMS: Exam mode turns off visual feedback so learners answer the question, click submit and it auto-advances to the next page. Then the diagnostic cluster randomizes the sequence of the questions in the order that the learners first saw them in, as part of the course. Randomization - SSI recommends using randomization at the question object level (when the format allows it), so that learners see both a jumbled sequence of questions as well as jumbled answers. These two features streamline the development process both at the curriculum design level and at the authoring level because the different people involved in these phases create just one set of questions and repurpose them.

This approach also further supports the learning standard of scoring 100 percent, and the understanding that learners are given all the time and materials they need to achieve a perfect score. By the time they get to the final knowledge check, in the e-Learning course, they have seen all the questions already and have had remedial feedback at that stage. Especially at the police force level, there have been people who ask whether it is necessary to score 100 percent. The answer is consistently and firmly "Yes" for the reasons of achieving a level standard. As a citizen, imagine when an officer comes to your home. Citizens should have an expectation that each officer they encounter will be able to respond consistently. The way to achieve that is by setting a uniform standard for learning and behavior in the workforce.

The third level of rigor employs advanced functionality of the LCMS. Advancing in one's career is critical both to the police force – who need officers to progress up the line – and to the officers who want to achieve different levels of responsibility and pay grades. The Human Resources (HR) department works closely with the academy on developing the pool of 1,000 questions per rank that are used in each promotional exam. Prior to the introduction of the LCMS, this process was done manually and required that thousands of questions to be reviewed and updated manually in text documents. And then their HR representatives manually pulled a random draw of questions that would be the basis for each year's exam.

SSI worked with both teams to provide a two-part solution. First, studying for the exam involved going to the police library and withdrawing binders of study information, which the librarians had to assemble and prepare. The solution was to prepare electronic packages of study material for officers – and to grant access when officers qualified for the rank promotional exam. The packages were made available in the LMS for review, taking a huge burden off the librarians' shoulders.

Second, SSI showed the internal team how to use the advanced question pool features in the LCMS which enabled them to achieve two important objectives. They could aggregate the thousands of questions in the content management system and several team members were able to maintain them for HR; and they could design exams that drew from different question themes and provided weighting across the themes.

One of the most significant changes for the police officers were the ability to study using the electronic materials and receiving prompt scoring rather than waiting for their paper-based exams to be manually/mechanically scored. Officers would arrive for the exam, the proctor would check their credentials and then would open the exam for the allotted period of time and close it at the end of the session. Scoring results were automatically calculated by the LCMS and reported to the LMS.

The police HR team benefited from shifting to the LCMS because it virtually eliminated all of the laborious manual work. It benefited the team managing the LCMS to work more closely with HR as well as the team that oversaw the exam process. The entire force benefited by this dramatic shift and the ability to use a high level of rigor in the rank-promotional testing process. When this was introduced, the academy noted a wide "upswing" in interest in the learning system overall.

For more information

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