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E-learning can give law firms a competitive edge

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It's a more competitive world in the changing landscape of the legal profession with mergers and consolidations that make it more important than ever for law firms, regardless of their size, to maximize the potential of their workforce.

There to help with innovative Internet e-learning solutions is Way2Smart, based in Jackson, which got its start by developing LegalPeople proprietary office skills training for legal support staff.

"Looking back five to seven years ago, no one would have believed that the rate of consolidation and competition in the legal profession would have increased so dramatically," said Alan Lange, vice president of business development for Way2Smart. "Firms face the challenges of gaining scale through size and/or maximizing productivity to remain competitive."

Clients have grown more sophisticated and demanding of better legal service. They get it or take their business elsewhere. Not only do they expect quality service from their attorneys, they also expect quality interaction with staff as well. Therefore, firms must get proactive about how to deploy technology and train the best asset they have — their people.

Elizabeth Robinson, president and co-founder of Way2Smart, says the case for e-learning in the legal environment makes sense.

"Technology enhanced learning such as interactive on-line courses or live video and audio seminars are all efficient and economic methods for training in the legal office," Robinson said. "However, legal firms are behind the corporate world in embracing e-learning training tools, relying still on traditional instructor-led classroom training."

The good news for the legal field, she says, is that law firms benefit from the lessons learned during recent years of e-learning evolution in the corporate world. More is now known about how to combine e-learning tools with instructor-led sessions to reduce costs and increase effectiveness at the same time. This is called "blended learning."

Several of Way2Smart's regional and national firm clients are using blended learning solutions. In handling a migration from Word Perfect to Microsoft Word, in advance of classroom instruction these firms are enrolling staff and attorneys in an online, interactive course covering basic skills training. Then the instructor-led session is focused on higher functions or customized firm applications.

Robinson said this blended solution reduces the need for excessive classroom time and keeps the downtime for attorneys and other billable staff to a minimum.

Way2Smart was launched by Robinson and co-founder Jane Sanders in 1998. The company grew out of Legal Resources Inc., which is a full-service legal staffing firm. One of the biggest components of the staffing business was the placement of legal staff such as paralegals, legal secretaries, and litigation assistants.

Meeting demand

"Demand for qualified staff was high and supply was low, so I just decided if we couldn't recruit good candidates, we would create them," Sanders said. "We developed an intense six-week cram course that took someone with good office clerical skills but no legal experience and gave them foundational knowledge of law

office litigation procedures. That effort served as the basis for the courseware we developed and are now marketing as Way2Smart.”

An unexpected use of e-learning that is catching on fast, according to Sanders, is the ability of firms to use the same tools it uses to train its own staff and attorneys to provide value added services to their clients.

“We are working with a client who has an employment law practice,” Sanders said. “This firm is going to provide work place compliance training directly to the client’s managers and employees that is delivered seamlessly from the law firm’s Web site. So, e-learning can also be a tremendous client relations tool as well.”

Although Way2Smart is an e-learning company, it recognizes that e-learning is not an end unto itself. Clients are strongly encouraged to use e-learning as a component of a training solution and not a solution in itself.

Knowledge managers

“It is our goal to help firm trainers become more like knowledge managers,” Lange said. “The Way2Smart solution allows them to reduce their personal time in the classroom. Then through the learning management systems we provide them with tools to guide and assess their students progress as they use online courseware, live/on-demand video sessions, as well as the instructor-led classes.”

Lange said from a sales perspective Way2Smart has made significant strides in a very short time. Several regional firms in the U.S. and Canada use Way2Smart’s content and delivery services. The company has landed partnerships with two large national e-learning firms, ProsoftTraining and ElementK for additional content. It has also partnered with Interwise for live/on-demand video and communications delivery services to round out it’s e-learning offering.

“We have also developed relationships with several smaller legal software training vendors and converted that content into a format that is standards compliant for delivery on a wide range of platforms,” Lange said.

Turn-key learning solutions

Way2Smart offers “turn-key” legal e-learning solutions. The company’s fully-hosted platform blends customizable online courses, such as legal specific software, compliance training and procedural skills, with a delivery system that allows administrative staff to monitor and manage the progress of students interactively.

“Our suite of services is used in firms that typically have 100 or more staff with at least one full-time dedicated trainer,” Lange said. “Regional and national firms use Way2Smart as a way to deliver training to a widely disbursed user base on a wide array of subject matter. Lange said typically a larger law firms’ biggest problems are keeping up with technology and growth.

“They are pushing out new software and technology at a dizzying pace, and they are growing and consolidating even faster,” he said. “We then set about to develop a multi-disciplined approach that satisfied the training needs of firms for information technology issues including legal specific software, our content and compliance content (for example, sexual harassment and workplace violence avoidance training). We developed the capabilities to host all of that content and give the firm’s access to distribute and monitor the courseware remotely.”

Medium- to small-sized firms are also good candidates to use Way2Smart’s e-learning services. Programs are flexible so they can be scaled up or down to meet specific needs.

Struggling to compete

“And its often that smaller firm, struggling to compete with the regional or national firm, that needs every advantage,” Robinson said. “Some of this technology is cost-prohibitive because of the upfront expense. We make e-learning affordable by distributing it as an application service provider (ASP), which means you can use what you need, when you need, for only as much as you need.”

The following are some tips from Way2Smart designed to help think strategically about deploying training assets:

- Take an honest assessment of your firm and all of its users. Split out users into different functional areas (attorney, secretary, paralegal, administrative and information technology staff) and chart how your training dollars are spent. Look for gaps. How much time and support does your staff receive versus your attorneys?
- Factor growth into the equation. Most law firms have one full-time trainer for every 150-200 users. Many law firms are expanding and acquiring other firms at a rate that would make a dot-com blush. If your firm plans on double-digit user growth over the next year, you need to give serious consideration to how your existing staff (and future staff) will be able to accommodate that growth from a training perspective. Consider whether your current training infrastructure is able to handle the kind of growth that is planned.
- Write down your objectives. Is your firm approaching e-learning for the first time with a migration looming on the horizon? Or, is your firm looking to document compliance training for issues such as sexual harassment and workplace violence? No matter, whether you are looking at e-learning as a method to quench an immediate thirst for knowledge or whether it is a longer-term commitment that your firm is seeking to make, write down why you are embarking on this sort of training.
- Set some realistic criteria for success. How do you know whether the program you are going to implement will be successful? Make sure you and your sponsor agree on what metrics equate to success and how you will go about assuring those metrics.

Way2Smart offers its LegalPeople proprietary procedural skills courses as well as access to an array of courses on general business software and leading legal software application courses such as Elite, DeltaView, Concordance, i-Manage, PC Docs, Summation and much more. For more information, visit the Web site www.Way2Smart.com.

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