



Case Study *December 2002*

Learning Technologies in the Workplace Award Winner 2002 SaskTel

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses e-learning.

OVERVIEW

SaskTel is Saskatchewan's leading full-service telecommunications company. The company employs over 4,000 people, who work in more than 50 communities throughout the province. SaskTel provides voice, cellular, data, Internet, text, and messaging services through a digital switching network that connects more than 600,000 access lines and over 220,000 wireless customers throughout Saskatchewan.

SaskTel's digital network links Saskatchewan's 12 cities with more than 670 towns and villages, and approximately 60,000 farms. SaskTel's global subsidiary, SaskTel International, designed the data transmission system that controls the Channel Tunnel, which connects England with France.

SaskTel conducts business through the Internet and develops e-business solutions for its customers. SaskTel's transition to an electronic environment put pressure on its employees to develop their computer literacy and e-business skills. Recognizing the opportunities the Internet affords for on-line training, the company aggressively uses technology to enhance learning in the workplace.

Effective practices case study in employee learning through learning technologies

Name of Program
Insights Course Series
Managing the Business

Date Established
1997

Skills Developed

- E-literacy
- Leadership
- Communication
- Teamwork

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SaskTel recognizes the value of raising the skill levels of its employees. To help them become familiar with, and make full use of, the new technologies that shape its business, SaskTel launched three corporate learning initiatives: e-learning, a home computer purchase program, and an Internet concession.

OBJECTIVES

- To enhance workplace learning and create more learning opportunities for employees, regardless of where in the province they are based
- To foster an e-learning culture within SaskTel
- To adapt workplace education to changing working and living patterns
- To reduce overhead costs associated with traditional classroom-based training (for example, travel, overtime, accommodation, printed training materials, and classroom facilities)
- To raise employee skill levels and enhance their prospects for advancement within the company

TARGET GROUP

- All SaskTel employees

ACTIVITIES

E-LEARNING AND THE INSIGHTS CURRICULUM

SaskTel makes e-learning opportunities available to all its employees, regardless where they live, including those who live in rural or remote communities. Employees can currently access over 450 on-line courses from work or home.

More than 60 of SaskTel's blended learning programs (which combine instructor-led and self-directed on-line approaches) relate to use of the Internet and to e-business. Examples include the *Insights* course series and *Managing the Business*.

Insights is a five-course, on-line series designed to provide SaskTel employees with a solid foundation in the principles of e-business and in the fundamentals of

using the Internet. On-line knowledge modules are supplemented by pre- and post-assessments and by assignments that give participants immediate feedback. Courses consist of slides with streaming audio narrative or full-text transcriptions (learner's choice). Users of *Insights* have access to an on-line library, a conference area for threaded discussion, and chat rooms for each course.

Managing the Business is the third of a three-module series, Management Core Curriculum, which consists of core training in strategic and financial management for SaskTel managers. A self-directed, on-line component, it builds on and enhances the first two parts of the core management curriculum, which are delivered in the classroom.

Environmental e-learning Support

Home computer purchase program

Through its home computer purchase program, SaskTel offers employees interest-free loans to purchase new computer equipment or upgrade existing hardware for home and family use. Through this program, the company has tapped into a pent-up demand of many employees—in many cases, driven by their children—to obtain computers and get connected to the Internet at home.

Internet concession

In order to encourage employees to use the Internet, SaskTel provides them with an Internet concession, a tax-free 40 per cent discount off the monthly fee for SaskTel high speed Internet service or Dial-up Internet access. Again, many employees are encouraged by their children to get connected to the Internet and to understand what is available through it.

Web conferencing

SaskTel has created a virtual classroom/meeting room with Web conferencing technology. Live Web conferencing is used for:

- skills and product training, presented by an instructor to employees, via the Internet (employee-learners can submit questions directly to the instructor during the session);
- Lunch 'n Learn presentations; and
- internet meetings, where information is shared among participants.

RESOURCES

- SaskTel established and staffed an Employee Development Centre, to manage development and delivery of classroom and on-line curricula.

- Individual departments now pay for the courses their employees take on-line out of their own training budgets; but, when e-learning was launched, on-line learning was offered as an incentive, without charge.

INNOVATION

SaskTel has demonstrated an innovative approach to its transition to an e-learning strategy. For example, the company is not only committed to engaging its own managers and employees in using the tools of e-business, but is also informally educating its customers, such as municipal government clients and credit union customers. SaskTel sales representatives have put on workshops for hundreds of clients. A more ambitious scheme to deliver on-line training to corporate customers was not pursued, on the premise that training is not SaskTel's core business and, inevitably would require the company to provide learning support to participating employers.

Having said that, SaskTel recognizes the need for all of its employees to be technology-savvy. This, in turn, makes it easier to persuade customers to work with them to develop e-business solutions. SaskTel also knows that passing on information to customers helps to build stronger relationships and, ultimately, makes them better customers.

BARRIERS

For Employees

- It was difficult to get employees to make the connection between participating in e-learning and supporting SaskTel's e-business strategy.
- In the call centre, service representatives traditionally had a service focus; now they have had to develop a sales focus as well. This extends their work beyond developing a clearer picture of a customer's needs to exploring which SaskTel products and services the customer may find useful.

For the Company

- SaskTel needed to measure the impact of on-line learning. This includes measuring:
 - the numbers of employees participating in on-line learning;
 - the performance gains made on the basis of e-learning;
 - enhanced employee awareness of products and services, or specialized techniques or procedures;
 - the ability of employees to trouble-shoot, on the basis of their new knowledge; and
 - changes in employee skills, attitudes, and behaviours, including their abilities to retain and apply newly learned information consistently and reliably on-the-job.
- SaskTel had to figure out how to give credit to employee-learners for completing "snippets of learning," or parts of courses.
- The company needed to develop line managers' project management skills, including their ability to give timely and constructive feedback to employees regarding learning needs and performance. This meant that line managers now had to be assessed, in part, on their people management record, in addition to their ability to accomplish tasks "by hook or by crook."
- The company needed to encourage line managers to provide opportunities for employees who had made use of on-line learning to apply, challenge, enhance, and reinforce their newly learned or recently-honed skills.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

For Employees

- Being motivated to learn more: one employee reported that he has read more in the last five years, since the introduction of on-line learning, than in his previous 25 years at the company.
- Being willing to try on-line learning.
- Regarding the provision of opportunities to learn on-line as a way to manage organizational changes that affect them.

For the Company

Four keys to success for the company have been:

1. Building Strategic Awareness
 - The impact of technology-based changes on employees must be understood particularly during:
 - the transition from electronic switching to data packet switching in the technical phone system the company uses;
 - changes from paper-based to computer-based forms of internal communication; and
 - the proliferation of new ways of engaging customers via the Internet.
 - E-learning helps employees make better use of the new electronic tools they use daily. On-line learning helps employees get used to an electronic environment on their own terms, at their own pace, and where they are most comfortable doing it (whether at home or at work).
2. Soft Launching e-learning Strategy
 - Offering on-line courses for four years before the launch of on-line learning gave SaskTel time to build up a repertoire of courses, so that the content was already in place to meet employee demand once the company officially put its on-line learning strategy into effect.
 - Putting in place a “soft sell” communication and marketing strategy to support the on-line learning strategy, which cascades down from senior management. The strategy included:
 - emphasizing the importance of using the Internet to capitalize on emerging e-business opportunities;
 - ensuring that people know what courses are available on-line, discussing why they would want to take particular courses, and how to go about registering;
 - asking employees to help identify gaps in online curriculum; and
 - not making on-line courses mandatory.
 - Encouraging line managers to promote the benefits of e-learning. Employees can take their training within a time window, rather than at a specific pre-determined time.
3. Building a Culture of Engagement in e-learning
 - Making on-line learning as intuitive as picking up the telephone requires the company to commit to providing on-line training in the long term, to ensure that employees continue to learn on-line as they move up through the ranks.
4. Taking a Broad Approach to e-learning
 - Recognizing employee achievement: the company gives employees certificates when they complete on-line learning modules and mentions their accomplishments in their performance reviews.
 - Linking on-line learning back to employees’ development plans and providing the growth they require to perform their roles effectively.
 - Making on-line learning fun, by incorporating accelerated learning strategies into on-line programming and making on-line learning collaborative, so that employees do not feel alone when they are using on-line modules.
 - Striking the right balance between providing employees with traditional incentives for participating in e-learning (such as increased compensation) and whetting their appetites to engage in on-line learning to satisfy their own aspirations.
4. Taking a Broad Approach to e-learning
 - Integrating training material from the Employee Development Centre with “quick links” product and service information produced by the corporate support part of SaskTel, to help call centre employees find information quickly, while they are serving employees.
 - Continuing to blend traditional and electronic approaches to teaching and learning, according to what works best (e.g., on-line learning, classroom-led learning, on-line coaching, team meetings, focus groups, and discussion groups).

OUTCOMES

- In certain technical and health and safety areas, SaskTel employees have to be re-certified periodically, and the company now uses on-line learning, where appropriate, to refresh their knowledge and skills prior to testing.
- Approximately 50 per cent of training at SaskTel is currently done on-line.
- Relevant portions of SaskTel’s call centre curriculum are now being converted into on-line modules, complete with pre- and post-assessment, exercises, and opportunities for employee-learners to collaborate with each other.
- An archived Web conference was used to train approximately 200 service representatives on a new system.

- In a three-month period, 1,500 of 4,000 employees completed *Internet Insights*, one of the five *Insight* modules; and 475 employees completed *e-business Insights*. It would have taken two full-time instructors one year to teach this course in the classroom.
- In 2001, SaskTel employees completed 5,480 on-line courses; on average, that is more than one course per employee.
- empowering employees to communicate among themselves the value of e-business (e.g., cost savings, and the ability to connect with clients);
- providing training on a “just-in-time” basis;
- making use of “off-the-shelf” training products, especially with regard to technical training—approximately 70 per cent of on-line learning courses at SaskTel are purchased off-the-shelf; the other 30 per cent are customized from off-the-shelf products (e.g., leadership training) or are custom-made for SaskTel (e.g., training for call centre operators); and
- offering training at times suited not only to employees’ schedules, but also to customers’ schedules, so that employees are not taking training at peak customer service times.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

Employees gain through:

- taking ownership of their skill development needs;
- having access to training, regardless of where they work in Saskatchewan;
- being able to advance in their jobs after taking training;
- developing skills that are useful in many aspects of their lives;
- retaining and using skills and knowledge more—learning a little bit at a time has proven more effective than taking one-day bursts of training;
- revisiting sites for refresher training, when they need it;
- programs, courses, and modules, matching their needs;
- using e-learning for personal/career development, outside of their current job duties;
- not losing family time by being away from home, while taking a course; and
- learning from each other.

The company gains by:

- increasing capacity to leverage new technologies and transform itself (e.g., through Web conferencing, knowledge can be captured, and reused and shared);
- sharpening employee awareness of how the company can benefit from opportunities in e-business (e.g., by becoming technologically savvy employees contribute to the company’s success);
- opening time windows that allow employees to schedule their training when it suits them (e.g., rather than have everyone taking training at the same time, employees are expected to complete their courses on their own time within a three week period);

USE AS A MODEL

SaskTel’s approach to implementing an e-learning training strategy may be used as a model by other organizations that are prepared to support a long-term cultural shift. SaskTel immersed its employees in on-line learning at a time when its business was being transformed by the imperatives of e-business. SaskTel also integrated modular and course-based on-line learning, with content conceived in a much more targeted way. For example, call centre operators use quick links to obtain product and service information for customers, while they are on the telephone; self-directed on-line learning in this area is also connected with help desk functions within the company.

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About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement, and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces, and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses e-learning and highlights one of the award winners from the National Awards for Learning Technologies in the Workplace, funded by the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources Development Canada.

Learning Technologies in the Workplace Award Winner 2002: SaskTel
by *Kurtis Kitagawa*

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