

Just-in-Time Training

On-Demand Learning Platform Drives Firm's Success

BY LARRY BROWN

In these difficult economic times, law firms need to help their attorneys and staff to perform well and to provide maximum value to clients. Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati – headquartered in California's Silicon Valley and employing more than 1,300 attorneys and staff in eight offices in the United States and China – deployed an online training platform to do just that.

THE CHALLENGE

Our firm provides extensive, customized training to our attorneys and staff to help them deepen their knowledge, strengthen their skills, and better serve clients. Like other firms, we face some training challenges:

- **Timeliness.** Our people need training “just in time” – when they are actually doing the work – in addition to the more traditional ahead-of-time classroom training (“just in case”). Not everyone can attend every class, and those who can attend typically retain only a fraction of a course's content.
- **Time for training.** Taking care of urgent client needs sometimes prevents attorneys and staff from attending training. Though we have made classes available on loaner DVDs, some people don't use them because getting them routed and set up for viewing is slow, and watching a training DVD can be tedious.
- **Remote offices.** Providing effective training to employees in all offices is a necessity, but it's difficult to do well. Initially promising media solutions like video and Web conferencing have had difficulties with cost-effectiveness and reliability. Some remote employees have lost patience and stopped attending live classes.
- **Today's learners.** Different people learn in different ways, and it is difficult for a particular class to appeal equally to all learning preferences. Further, some experts believe that today's adult learners have an especially deep need to be self-directing in their learning.
- **Tech-friendly tools.** Members of the younger generation grew up using the latest technologies, and they expect that at work they will have access to tools such as on-demand video, searchable knowledge libraries, and digital training media.

THE SOLUTION

In 2008, to address the challenges outlined above, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati launched an on-demand learning platform that takes the concepts pioneered by companies like TiVo, Google, and



Concepts pioneered by companies like TiVo and YouTube lead to new learning resources for attorneys.

YouTube and translates them to provide a just-in-time learning resource for our attorneys and staff. In short, we:

- Record our training classes for later playback (like you would do with TiVo if you wanted to attend a class but couldn't because of a conflict),
- Make the video content searchable down to the spoken word (like Google), and
- Enable on-demand video playback (like YouTube).

The result is Wilson University On-Demand Learning (ODL), a Web-based platform developed and hosted by Altus Learning Systems (www.altuscorp.com). While we still provide live classes, ODL allows us to boost the performance of our attorneys and staff at key client service moments. Currently, we have 41 classes on ODL, serving practice groups from corporate to litigation to patent, and addressing not only legal content such as mergers and acquisitions, e-discovery, and patentability, but also professional skills such as legal writing, conflicts management, and e-mail best practices.

Employees can easily access ODL from our intranet and link to specific courses from our knowledge management (KM) system or promotional e-mails. Once in ODL, users can browse the customized catalog and choose to learn via several formats:

- **Video on demand.** This mode includes streaming video with synchronized slides, navigation tools such as speed control, and a scrolling transcript that viewers can use to easily skip forward or back. Users can watch a whole presentation, review a selected segment, or "bookmark" a particular segment for review later.
- **Transcript.** Word-for-word transcripts are provided because many attorneys prefer reading to watching video. Several attorneys have said that viewing or downloading the full transcript is one of their favorite ODL features.
- **PowerPoints with transcript.** The PowerPoint file with word-for-word presenter transcript is popular not only with trainees, but also with other presenters who have to give similar presentations.
- **MP3 and MP4 downloads.** Today's attorneys and staff increasingly use portable digital media players to carry their music and personal files with them to use while exercising, traveling, or relaxing. Many like to access training content in the same way.
- **Searchable to the spoken word.** One of the most unique tools in the platform is the extensive search capability. Users can search not only the PowerPoint slides, but also the entire recorded file down to the spoken word, and then navigate immediately to the desired section. This feature is particularly powerful for delivering just-in-time performance boosts that provide more value to clients. For example: *"I'm an associate assigned to an acquisition that is structured as a tender offer, but I barely remember my earlier training on tender offers because I have not been on that many of them. I can search the ODL site for 'tender offers' and instantly find the courses that address that topic. The search results include hyperlinks that take me directly to the video at that point in the presentation."*

THE RESULTS

Feedback on ODL has been very positive and highlights the following benefits:

- **Ability to view the classes when needed and repeatedly until the material is learned and absorbed.** *"I can review and study ODL classes anytime when I am free and stop in the middle of the section if necessary. If I did not understand one point, I can repeat again and again until I fully understand. It is really helpful to me."*
- **Shortened learning curves that increase client satisfaction and firm realization rates.** *"ODL has been a godsend to me. I don't have a legal background, and the corporate paralegal basics courses gave me the theoretical knowledge and expanded vocabulary that I needed to get going right off the bat. With that foundation in corporate law, securities, and financings at my fingertips, I have been able to become a useful member of the team in a much shorter timeframe."*

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After only one year of using our on-demand learning site, we are already getting more value from our training efforts, increasing productivity, shortening learning curves, delivering better training solutions to our remote offices, and promoting technology-friendly learning to our professionals.

- **Better and more reliable training delivery to distant offices.** *"I find myself always referring back to the e-discovery course. I work a lot with electronic data, and this course offers a plethora of information with respect to collection, preservation, liability, etc. Very helpful."* (remote office user)
- **The opportunity for productive learning (and CLE credits) during slower periods.** *"ODL is an excellent way to get the training you need, when you need it, and at a time when it's convenient. Often I find myself busy on days when trainings are being offered, and I'm either distracted with responding to urgent work-related e-mails on my PDA, or unable to attend entirely due to work obligations. With ODL, I can turn it on when I have some down time and pause it if I need to handle something related to work, or to just take a break."*
- **Different formats that appeal to different needs and preferences.**
- **The availability of tools such as searchability, downloads and video playback that people are used to outside of work.**
- **The ability for adult learners to self-direct their learning.**
- **A tool for retaining top talent.** *"I think ODL is one of the best benefits the firm offers."*

THE LESSONS

While ODL overall has been great, we have learned some important lessons in the course of developing and deploying it:

- **Selecting classes to post requires careful assessment.** Because posting a class on ODL costs money, budget limitations prevent us from posting every class. Therefore, we assess factors such as shelf life, audience size, timeliness of content, and quality of the presentation in deciding which classes to post.

- **Frequent and repeated publicity is important.** Like any other new product or service, it can take a while for consumers/users to get used to its availability and learn about its benefits. We have found it important to repeatedly promote the site and newly posted classes through various media, including e-mail, group, and one-on-one demos and monthly newsletters.

THE FUTURE

After only one year of using our ODL site, we are already getting more value from our training efforts, increasing productivity, shortening learning curves, delivering better training solutions to our remote offices, and promoting technology-friendly learning to our professionals. Going forward, we hope to add more courses (as budgets permit), learn to self-produce and post short segments (three to five minutes) that teach specific processes, set up an ODL site for our client education courses, and implement Web 2.0 features (such as communities and blogging) around training topics.

Ultimately, our ODL site, powered by Altus Learning Systems' learning platform, enables us to transform just-in-case training to just-in-time, improving attorney and staff performance and furthering our commitment to giving our clients exceptional legal service. ✨

about the author

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