



VIRTUAL EDUCATION

More law firms are pursuing online learning options to drive career development and satisfaction among attorneys and staff.

BY STEVE GLUCKMAN

Training and development are critical to any law firm's health and the satisfaction of its workers. Departing attorneys and staff, including legal administrators, often cite a lack of professional development resources and learning opportunities as a major reason for leaving a firm. Many firms have recently expanded their professional development initiatives and are realizing tangible benefits. But can more be done? Can firms leverage what they have and make learning even more accessible to lawyers and staff? Can firms provide resources that empower individuals to take charge of their learning options?

Enter online learning, which offers ample opportunities to access important learning assets at any time and from any location.

Online learning:

- > makes learning resources available as soon as an individual has identified a specific training need;
- > offers all training and development resources in one location;
- > provides consistent training opportunities to all constituencies regardless of office location or date of hire;
- > makes learning more engaging and more effective; and
- > makes learning easier and more accessible so lawyers and firm staff can take charge of their own learning.

SHORTCUT

Savvy law firms are pursuing more online learning options to drive career development among their attorneys and staff members. Well-implemented online learning resources substantially enhance educational offerings within firms and promote overall cultures of learning.

ONE FIRM'S APPROACH

Nixon Peabody LLP, one of the United States' largest law firms with more than 600 attorneys collaborating across 16 offices, understands the importance of good first impressions with new hires. Recognized this year by *Fortune* magazine as one of the "100 Best Companies to Work For," the firm recently started to redesign its new-hire orientation process. Previously, each office was responsible for the orientation of new attorneys and staff. The focus now, however, is on creating and implementing a nationally consistent, engaging and interactive program that is more time-efficient to administer.

The firm's new orientation initiative includes an online component that can be used in three ways:

- by new attorneys and staff, to complete as pre-work before their first days in the office;
- by the orientation presenter, in a live orientation session (instead of a PowerPoint presentation); and
- by new attorneys and staff, via a link from the firm's intranet when they need to refer back to information that was presented during orientation.

The online component shares a variety of information, such as a firm overview, benefits information and policies and procedures. It includes direct links to forms and policies as they exist on the firm's intranet, so that when a policy is updated, it is automatically updated in the orientation materials as well. The online component also includes video clips from firm leaders – allowing new hires to "meet" these key individuals – and serves to convey the firm's culture and team environment by presenting images, video and audio from throughout the firm.

"We were looking for a way to streamline the orientation process and make it more engaging," said Molly Kelly, the firm's Training Manager. "By including an online learning component, we can provide this important information in a consistent and clear manner – and in a way that is more accessible and exciting. We now know that all new members of the

Nixon Peabody team will receive the same message and have access to relevant, up-to-date information no matter where they are located or when they join. Orientation is one of the first experiences an individual will have at the firm. As part of our commitment to be a great place to work, it's important that we make our orientation program a great one."

ONE-STOP SHOP

In many firms, training remains decentralized, with some resources dedicated to attorney development, others dedicated to IT training and still others addressing staff, partner or other firm training. However, even when responsibility for these different training areas remains separate, some firms are placing their training resources (course links, catalogs, training calendars, etc.) under one umbrella. For such firms, using one source for all organizational training *resources* has increased awareness of educational resources, boosted course registration and participation and promoted a culture that supports continuous learning.

Such a unified site can exist on a firm's intranet and offer "one-stop shopping" for all lawyers and staff who seek training resources. The online resource serves as a central repository for all firm training regardless of topic area and scope (be it local, national or global in nature).

Some firms have implemented a learning management system that serves as a repository of all learning resources and activities, while others have developed their own "online universities" to house this information. Still others simply bring existing resources together in one place on the firm's intranet. Regardless of the platform, the keys are to make the interface easy to navigate and courses and materials easy to locate and access.

"We frequently uncover independently operating, departmental training silos struggling with similar challenges, but often times using separate, disintegrated solutions for distribution and reporting," said Michael Barshinger, President of SS Solutions, which offers a law firm learning management system called

Developing and promoting a culture of learning should be an integral component of any firm's long-term strategy. Savvy legal administrators and law firm managers should shape their firms' approaches to learning and embrace online resources as valuable tools to facilitate individual education.

UniversitySite. "Our clients have found that by managing all of their learning opportunities under a single system, they can take a 360-degree view of an employee. They tell us that with everyone working in the same system, they uncover new synergies between departments. This leads to new learning opportunities that are rooted in workflow and the firm's culture."

EXPLORING E-LEARNING

E-learning allows users to access learning experiences at any time from their desktop or laptop computers or other device. A good e-learning course may offer a mix of text, audio, graphics, animation and video to enhance the learning experience. Some e-learning courses may also include role play, simulations, games, pre- and post-tests and links to external supporting materials.

While e-learning has been fairly prevalent in law firms to address IT application training, it is a relatively new phenomenon within attorney development circles. Beyond addressing continuing legal education (CLE) requirements, many firms are implementing online courses to improve business and teamwork skills within their workforces. This includes courses to promote improved communication and team interactions, foster client service and cultivate new business opportunities for the firm.

Attorneys are increasingly looking for innovative and efficient ways to get the education they desire, and firms are looking for better, more cost-effective ways to provide it. In turn, more firms are embracing e-learning as an efficient and effective vehicle for attorney development.

E-learning is especially important among a firm's newest attorneys. Law schools are increasingly using e-learning to supplement classroom-based lectures. In turn, law students rely on their computers and the Internet extensively, not only for research and communication, but as an important source of

learning and development. Upon joining a firm, new attorneys expect similar online learning resources from their employers and are often disappointed if such resources are not available. Many prospective new hires have begun asking about learning resources and attorney development options during the recruiting process. Thus, along with their other benefits, comprehensive e-learning libraries can give firms advantages in recruiting top talent.

No one, however, should advocate replacing all traditional classroom-based training with e-learning courses. Rather, e-learning is most effective when it is part of a comprehensive library of targeted live, online and blended courses (which include online and live elements).

LEARNING ON THE GO

Because time is a precious commodity for everyone, setting aside time during the work day to attend training is difficult. In response, some firms have begun using "podcasts" to fulfill training requirements.

Podcasts are audio-only files (most commonly in MP3 format) that can be downloaded quickly to a personal listening device, such as an Apple iPod. Podcast files can be posted on a firm's intranet for staff to download and listen to on their iPods or other MP3 players while commuting or exercising. A podcast is relatively easy to develop and makes learning more accessible for attorneys on the go. Podcasts can be created from recorded classroom training sessions or can be developed specifically as audio-only presentations to serve as learning resources.

LEARNING PLANS

A learning plan provides firm staff with the ability to translate identified development goals into action items and a specific plan (and perhaps even a commitment) for individual development. Access to learning plans gives users the ability to create per-

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sonalized action plans designed to help them set and meet professional development and learning goals. Plans can be created by individuals (“here are the courses I plan to take during the next six months”) or for specific populations (“here are the courses all first-year intellectual property attorneys should take before their anniversary dates”).

Learning plans become even more powerful when integrated online with other learning assets. For example, an individual’s learning plan can be automatically updated to reflect courses that have been successfully completed. Thus, the attorney or a supervisor can review a learning plan to determine how well the individual is progressing. Also, firm managers and training personnel can generate reports across all plans to see how courses are being used, what subjects are being assigned, etc. Such information can be valuable when determining where to invest future course development funds.

Some firms are also linking performance appraisal processes directly to individual learning plans. By placing the learning plan online, a mentor, supervisor or even a professional development manager can analyze an employee’s performance review and work directly with the individual to generate an appropriate learning plan.

EMBRACING THE PROCESS

Ideally, your firm will embrace learning and empower its attorneys and staff to take responsibility for their learning. Such learning should begin as soon as a new lawyer or other employee walks in the door and should continue as an integral part of each day (not just something that happens for a few hours every once-in-a-while).

Developing and promoting a culture of learning should be an integral component of any firm’s long-term strategy. Savvy legal administrators and law firm managers should shape their firms’ approaches to learning and embrace online resources as valuable tools to facilitate individual education.

When implemented correctly, online learning resources substantially enhance educational offerings

within firms and promote overall cultures of learning. This makes firms more competitive in the marketplace, more attractive to candidates and more appreciated by their employees. *

about the author

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LEARN MORE

ALA Resources

These titles are available through ALA’s Web site, www.alanet.org/bookstore.

- *Legal E-Business Guide*, by John G. Kelly
- *The Manager’s Pocket Guide to eCommunicating*, by Laurie K. Benson

The following are accessible via ALA’s Legal Management Resource Center, <http://thesource.alanet.org>.

- “Online Personal Development Courses,” – Type keywords “**online learning**” in the search engine
- “The Training Evolution” – A publication of LawNet Inc. – Type keywords “**online learning**” in the search engine

On the Web

- *The Washington Post*, “Online Degree Programs Take Off” – www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/15/AR2006051501496.html
- “Universities Embrace Distance Learning for Busy Professionals” – <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/tech/98/07/cyber/education/29education.html>

On the Shelf

The following titles are available for purchase or download through many online retailers, including www.amazon.com.

- *Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies, and Application*, by Nada Dabbagh and Brenda Bannan-Ritland
- *Handbook of Online Learning: Innovations in Higher Education and Corporate Training*, by Kjell Erik Rudestam and Judith Schoenholtz-Read