Using the latest learning technologies

Bob Little

In December 1950 the United Nations General Assembly established The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since then the agency has helped tens of millions of people to restart their lives.

In order to do this effectively, UNHCR's 8,000 or so staff need be equipped with the latest guidelines, best practices and skills. One of the most effective and cost-efficient ways of making this training available to people who are widely dispersed around the globe is via the latest learning delivery technologies.

> UNHCR's mission is to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems around the world. As one of the world's foremost humanitarian agencies, its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally, or to resettle in a third country. It also has a mandate to help stateless people.

In 2009, the UNHCR began developing its learning platform–known as *'Learn & Connect'*–by starting the selection process to find a suitable learning platform. At the time, it was beginning a structural transformation in its training activities that would see it open its Global Learning Center (GLC) in Budapest, Hungary, while keeping its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

As part of the transformation, the UNHCR recruited subject-matter experts, along with other specialists in learning delivery technologies and instructional design, and organised its learning materials into:

- protection of persons of concern (legal, physical and material)
- program and operations management
- staff security
- emergency–how to deploy UNHCR staff and resources rapidly in response to urgent needs

- management and leadership–'soft skills' including interpersonal communication and presentation skills, effective writing, stress management, project management and people management
- finance, supply, HR and administration
- ICT.

In 2009/10, the UNHCR selected a learning management system (LMS), supplied by Cornerstone OnDemand and a learning content management system (LCMS), supplied by eXact learning solutions. It selected eXact learning solutions' digital repository and authoring tool to help it to continue to develop new learning content. After about two years, the UNHCR has developed around 30 learning modules in most of the subject areas listed above.

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Since the launch of *Learn & Connect* in 2010, over 6,000 of the UNHCR's staff–based in 120 or so countries–have registered for over 30,000 online courses.

The GLC's role is to provide learning resources to train not only the organisation's staff but also those of its

partners. Currently, the UNHCR has some 4,000 external learners through the learning platform. These partners include non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UN volunteers. In addition, through an inter-agency collaboration initiative titled 'UNeLearn', the UNHCR has sourced eLearning content on various topics developed by the World Food Programme (WFP), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC). These learning materials are now available, via *Learn & Connect*, to all UNHCR staff and partners.

Using *Learn & Connect*, the GLC can target specific groups of learners to access materials based on their job profiles, location, competency needs and grade, thus making the training they receive more relevant to them as individuals.

"Moreover, *Learn & Connect* has changed the traditional push model of training delivery, giving staff more control and ownership of their own learning paths," said Atish Gonsalves, who is the UNHCR's Head of the Technology & ICT Training Unit at the GLC, in Budapest.

"To evaluate both the learning materials and the learning experience, we're using the standard Kirkpatrick model–at the reaction, learning and behaviour assessment levels," he continued. "All the data we collect, via the LMS and LCMS, helps the UNHCR to identify any areas where further training is required. This means that we can target our training interventions more effectively."

Atish went on to say: "Learning content development takes place with our subject matter experts around the world,

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instructional designers, content writers, graphic designers and developers. We use the digital repository to provide the 'space' for this to take place. In addition, where we have external suppliers building learning content, we need to ensure that they use a standard authoring tool–which is provided by eXact learning solutions–so that the results of their efforts are standardised, reusable and UNHCR retains total ownership of the content."

The eLearning authoring tools and the LCMS support the process of conceptualising, storyboarding and designing content. There are tools for project management, digital repositories for storing media assets and design tools to package all the assets into a structured course. Authoring tools make use of templates to reduce ongoing design costs by creating a toolkit of standard eLearning interactions including page layouts, animations and assessments. LCMS tools also facilitate the reusability of learning assets from a digital repository, thus reducing costs for change management and localisation.

Using Software as a Service (SaaS), hosted in the Cloud, means that the UNHCR has not had to invest in hardware or software development but, rather, leases the services from the provider. Fine-tuning of the platform is achieved through configuration (turning on

options, adjusting parameters and entering content) rather than customising (changing the code). This model allows UNHCR to always have the latest version of the software managed by an external provider, without the hassle involved in upgrading every time a new version of the software is released.

To engage learners where the human contact is lost in pure online learning, UNHCR is using webinar tools, such as Webex, to stream content in real time and as recorded sessions. In addition, UNHCR is investigating delivering learning resources to staff and partners via mobile devices.

Today the world's media picks up on 'humanitarian' stories faster than ever before, thus putting humanitarian organisations and their response to each issue instantly 'under the spotlight'. So it is vitally important that these organisations make the fullest possible use of the available technology to keep their staff informed of best practice in such things as bringing effective relief quickly and safely, and then being able to maintain that relief until it is no longer needed.

This is the rationale for the development of UNHCR's GLC and its Learn & Connect learning platform, since this Center seeks to develop mechanisms to train, inform and enable the organisation's staff and partners

to carry out their work effectively, guided by UNHCR's protection mandate.

The international protection framework– which comprises an evolving set of legal frameworks and conventions–has to be translated into usable content that can be delivered easily and rapidly to staff, implementing partners and NGOs. This means that it's important to have adequate systems and tools in place to make legally complex documents accessible to the staff.

To meet these needs, Atish and his team have started to incorporate social networking tools, such as blogs, discussion forums and wikis into UNHCR courses to make the learning experience more interactive. This can also lead to developing links among UNHCR staff (both in the field and in headquarters) as well as with implementing partners. This is creating new online communities to enable the exchange of knowledge and best practices. ■

For over 20 years, **Bob Little** has specialised in writing about, and commentating on, corporate learning, especially eLearning, and technology-related subjects. His work has been published in the UK, Continental Europe, USA and Australia.
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