



SkillSoft: The Learning Curve - SkillSoft

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Learning in the workplace is becoming more informal - employees in the office will seek information from colleagues or their favourite internet search engine, as and when they need it. Kevin Young tells Barry Mansfield how learning specialists are adapting to this change in behaviour.

It has been a time of change for SkillSoft, having acquired rival NETg from The Thomson Corporation last year for approximately \$285 million - which made clear its intention to compete for a greater share of the \$13.2 billion corporate training market. The company has had to absorb the NETg purchase, but it has also recognised the need to adjust to the quickly changing demands of the marketplace itself.

Kevin Young is general manager for EMEA at SkillSoft, says the company's key strategy has been what it terms 'asset ownership'. That is, the company owns the software it builds and deploys. 'This has allowed us, as the market has transformed, to take the solutions we already have and re-engineer them quickly in order to make them more relevant to the new ways in which the market is learning,' explains Young. 'We are now essentially a SaaS partner to many of our key customers.'

For SkillSoft, these customers range from multinationals like Shell and BT to the military and aviation sector, including the United States Air Force.

There are three elements to the business: content, technology and service and support. 'While we're not a pureplay learning management system (LMS), we're very focused on providing our LMS (SkillPort) functionality to our customers. As we have 1,800 or more installations worldwide, with literally millions of connected users, we're probably one of the largest providers of LMS software, and most of that service is delivered via an SaaS-based model' says Young.

'Customers recognise the importance of scalable and resilient technology. To make it successful for them, SkillSoft invests \$95-100 million every year on field-based personnel, consultant support people, who help to tailor the solutions more closely to our customers' individual needs.'

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Kevin Young, general manager for EMEA at SkillSoft.

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CULTURE SHIFT

Around four years ago, Young says, the corporate training market began to change. A report from the US Department of Labor, indicated that up to 70% of learning in the workplace was happening on an informal basis - meaning employees were searching the web, looking at journals and speaking with. 'The challenge for training providers was that historically we had focused on the 30% that was formal learning,' Young says.

SEARCH AND LEARN

The concept of informal learning is that employees need information. Now they need to be able to practise it and apply it. 'That is what we as a business have increasingly focused on. We've modified our content and technology through what we call a 'search and learn' capability. If I need to understand how to put a pivot table into Excel or conduct a recruitment interview, then I can go to the SkillSoft resource and access highly relevant material from a trusted source. It's not the Google-isation of learning - it gives you content from one of our books or courses, and enables you to put it into action straight away. E-learning today relies on immediacy, relevancy and trusted content.'

INNOVATIVE APPROACH

SkillSoft has historically spent \$40 million each year on product development, innovation and new technology, which represents 18-20% of its revenue, pre-acquisition. 'We're investing a lot more this year,' says Young.

SkillSoft offers executive summaries via MP3 so that executives on the road can access and use them. 'We've brought together the printed summaries, but also a range of video material, including leadership quick-talks with business gurus like Covey and Blanchard,' Young says.

The company also runs televised satellite broadcasts, where thought leaders put on a presentation and answer their customers' questions, sent in by phone, email or fax. 'They spend time with an industry expert who might cost upwards of \$50,000.00 if they were to speak at an event you were hosting,' says Young. 'We're bringing in European thought leaders, including lecturers from the London Business School. We're working on building out the European content. 'We're accustomed to companies talking about people being their most important asset. There's a war for talent going on out there. The development of people is critical to staff retention, so the future of informal e-learning is exciting for our customers and for SkillSoft.'