Distributed Learning Programs for Technical Staff

CEOCFO: Ms. Savage, your website indicates that Obsidian is transforming learning and accelerating business. How so?

Ms. Savage: Obsidian makes learning extremely relevant to people’s jobs. We look at training as a learning program rather than a one-time classroom event. We believe in distributed learning programs, which combine project work and hands-on instructor-led training with other forms of learning, like online modules, forums and discussions with subject matter experts, so that learning can happen when learners need it. Obsidian develops learning the right way, at the right time. We enable learners to use the knowledge obtained to really build competency, which, in turn, boosts the individual productivity and the business performance.

CEOCFO: How would this be different than a more standard way of training?

Ms. Savage: I think the more standard way of training relies significantly on teaching the theory, while the application, critical thinking and problem solving are left for on-the-job training. We, on the other hand, implement problem solving scenarios and activities within the training, so we can keep learners very engaged and simulate as much as possible the situations and problems that people will be facing in their day-to-day job. We do a very thorough stakeholder analysis before designing a learning program, so we can understand our audience and the actual desired outcomes. We try to immerse ourselves in our learners’ job requirements, so we can figure out what the gaps are and determine the most effective training to fulfill the needed competencies.

CEOCFO: Walk us through an engagement?

Ms. Savage: A lot of what we do is targeting highly technical training. We are based in Houston, Texas, and a large portion of our audience is the oil and gas industry. As you probably know, with the increase in...
technology, the need for accelerated skills development is critical. New hires need to get up to speed quickly. Instead of the traditional curriculum that starts someone from college, let’s say a petroleum engineer with some of the engineering basics, and moves them through the upstream process, we look at the roles that these engineers play in the company. We help develop the competency maps for those roles and then design the training, with the support of subject matter experts, to truly target those competencies. For example, a program may start with a series of web-based courses that provide some of the basics. We may create a learning portal that helps learners share some of their questions and experiences. We could have a forum moderated by the subject matter experts to discuss various projects; a face to face workshop could be the culminating piece of the learning program, and we may end with a “project type” assessment.

CEOCFO: What is your geographic reach today?
Ms. Savage: Our reach is global. We work with some of the largest companies in the world, and they have business units and employees all over the world.

CEOCFO: How do companies find you and how do you reach out to prospective customers?
Ms. Savage: We hope that customers find us because of our reputation. We have also been very good at retaining customers. I would say that more than 75 percent of our business is returning customers. “Word of mouth” is extremely helpful. The way we take very technical material and transform it in an engaging content is one of the strengths that makes our customers happy. Clients can also reach us through our website and through our participation in all of the major learning conferences organized by the eLearning Guild, Masie Consortium, and ATD.

CEOCFO: Are you able to update programs for clients or would they typically ask you to create a program for a different segment of their business or both?
Ms. Savage: Definitely both. When we first design and develop a program, we are very careful to ask the client how often they feel they are going to need to update the content. If the answer is very often, then we design the course so that it is easier to make updates. We sometimes develop that program in such a way that it is easy for the client to update itself so they do not have to come back to us. This also helps with developing the client relationship and trust.

CEOCFO: How is business these days?
Ms. Savage: It is very good. We are very busy.

CEOCFO: How do you stay on top of the new technologies and trends so that you know what is available or what might make sense to utilize or keep on the radar screen for the future?
Ms. Savage: All of our employees stay up to speed with the developments in their particular field. Our instructional designers, programmers, graphic designers and project managers attend conferences, follow blogs, and stay in touch with what’s new. Collaboration is critical and extremely encouraged in our field.

CEOCFO: What has surprised you as Obsidian has grown and developed?
Ms. Savage: I don’t know if “surprise” is the best word, but I am constantly amazed with our team’s passion for learning, creativity and
collaboration. Through ups and downs, through successes and opportunities, our team has kept the focus on quality and innovation. I am extremely proud of what we have accomplished so far.

**CEOCFO: What is next? What might be different a year from now for Obsidian?**

**Ms. Savage:** I am very excited about the future. We plan to launch a learning authoring tool, a native HTML5 tool that would make development of e-learning and mobile learning a lot easier. We are working on this right now, and we hope to have it on the market in 2015. Our core business will remain the design and development of custom learning, and we will continue to offer the best service. Developing our own authoring tool is both very exciting and challenging and I believe the experience we have gained in the past 17 years in this business sets us up for success.

**CEOCFO: Put it all together for our readers. Why choose Obsidian?**

**Ms. Savage:** Because we are experienced, creative, and passionate about what we do, we care about our clients and the programs we develop, and we are the team you always wished to know.

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*Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine*