Cloud-Based Unified Learning System

BIO: Pascal Kaplan Ph.D. launched iCohere with his son Soren in 2001 to provide associations and government agencies with expertise they had gained in a variety of successful careers. Pascal's background includes serving as a professor and dean of Liberal Arts at John F. Kennedy University, serving as a communications consultant to the executive committee of Bank of America, and founding an enterprise software development company whose primary clients included AT&T and BofA. Pascal serves on the board of two non-profits and is the author of books and articles on education, technology, and spirituality. He earned a doctorate in Theology from Harvard University.

CEOCFO: Mr. Kaplan, what is the focus of iCohere today?
Mr. Kaplan: iCohere is what we call a unified learning system, enabling organizations to deliver webinars, online courses, virtual conferences and communities of practice through a single, cloud-based platform. While other companies specialize in just one of these learning formats, iCohere provides our clients with an integrated platform that can be used for all these modes of professional development.

CEOCFO: Why would organizations work with a vendor that offers only one kind of training channel, rather than with a company like iCohere that can deliver professional learning through a variety of venues?
Mr. Kaplan: The underlying issue is that many organizations still tend to be structured around internal silos with separate budgets. They have...
training departments that specialize in offering formal courses, a separate group that specializes in webinars, yet another that is responsible for meetings and conferences.

These organizational silos grew up before the Internet, when these different types of programs required different physical venues and different kinds of expertise. Today, with the ability to gather people online for their professional learning, the organizational silos that were necessary in the past are no longer necessary, though they still persist in many organizations.

We recognized back in the 1990s that courses, conferences, communities of practice and webinars are just different channels for delivering professional development and training, and can be provided at far less cost and to larger audiences when delivered online. Our clients are organizations that see the benefit of breaking out of outmoded departmental silos to pool their staffing resources and funding to take advantage of the efficiencies of the Internet.

CEOCFO: *When might a company turn to iCohere?*

Mr. Kaplan: Typically, the people who find us realize their organizations aren’t serving their constituencies or fulfilling their missions as fully as they could. For example, many associations are able to attract only a very small percentage of their members as little as five or ten percent to their in-person annual conferences. Other organizations discover that the costs of offering courses in different cities around the country much less to their international audiences is becoming prohibitive. So they decide to test the waters and see whether their audiences are ready for webinars, online courses, virtual conferences, or an online community.

What these organizations discover is that by moving professional development activities online, they reach larger audiences, thereby fulfilling their missions at less cost than they can by offering the same programs in physical venues. It also serves their constituencies better. After all, it is a lot more convenient and less costly for someone to attend a course online or participate in a virtual conference than to incur travel and hotel expenses and spend days away from the office.

Moreover, with iCohere, organizations discover they can not only deliver one kind of professional development activity, say webinars, to their members or audiences, but also courses and virtual conferences at no incremental cost. They are able to provide more services to a larger number of constituents, without straining their training budgets.

CEOCFO: *How does it work? What are you implementing?*

Mr. Kaplan: A professional association or government agency has professional development content they need to deliver. The first thing we do is work with them to understand the nature of the content, the characteristics of their audiences, and the staff resources they have available. From there, we help them design and optimize the delivery of that content in an intuitive and engaging manner. Sometimes that looks like a webinar series, sometimes like a formal course, sometimes like a conference or learning community or a hybrid of these activities. The marketing and registration then proceeds accordingly.

We have a road map that helps organizations transition from delivering in-person training in physical venues to providing the same training
virtually. In short, we provide not only the software platform, but also the expertise for moving professional development activities online.

CEO CFO: As people learn and absorb information in so many different ways, how are you able to design the various components so that the broadest range of people will get the most benefit?

Mr. Kaplan: Yes, people learn in different ways, through their different senses, and at different speeds, so it’s hard to serve the professional development needs of a broad range of people with a single type of program.

Webinars are a good example of how iCohere’s unified learning system can enhance learning for a wide audience with different learning styles.

A typical webinar usually lasts from 30 minutes to an hour. There might be time toward the close for a few questions, and that is the end of experience. Participants might get slides as a handout and even have access to the recording, but they are each on their own.

With iCohere, we are able to create a larger envelope for an organization’s webinars. The iCohere platform enables registrants to come into the webinar site several days in advance of the program, not only to pick up handouts and background materials, but also to post questions to help the presenter better prepare to meet the audience’s expectations. The webinar takes place, but instead of dispersing when the webinar ends, participants are invited to reconnect at their convenience within the iCohere platform to continue and deepen the conversation sparked by the webinar. In addition, since time constraints typically prevent presenters from covering all the questions that are posed in a webinar session, questions that haven’t been addressed can be answered in a discussion forum that learners can access at anytime at their convenience. Learners can ask follow-up questions of the presenter and, even more importantly in terms of the learning process, they can ask and answer questions of one another, even sharing documents, video clips, website links and more. What started as a 45 minute webinar broadcast gets transformed into a multi-day or multi-week learning community. Those who learn best through reflection and dialogue benefit from these webinar extensions in a way that is simply not possible when attending a fast-paced, time-bound webinar lecture.

There are also benefits to the sponsoring organization for wrapping a webinar in a learning community. Attendees who might have thought they were signing up for a single webinar now find themselves drawn to richer learning opportunities, resulting in a more meaningful relationship with the organization. Audience members come to view the organization as a source of deeper conversation and learning than just being a broadcast channel.

CEO CFO: Do many of your clients take advantage of the full range and depth of what you are offering?

Mr. Kaplan: Over time they do, but rarely at first. Organizations tend to come to us initially with a single purpose: to offer a course, webinar series, host a virtual conference, or build a community of practice. That’s the first activity their planning and funding initially focuses on. It is only after they see how fluid the boundaries are among all of iCohere’s
different capabilities that they realize that what they just did in designing a course can be used to add a virtual component to an in-person conference. And there is no learning curve to master different software; they already know how iCohere works.

**CEOFO: Do you charge separate fees for each of the components you make available?**

**Mr. Kaplan:** It has always irked me when I purchase software and then learn that I have to upgrade in order to use features I thought I was buying in the first place. So our business model has always been to include all our capabilities with a single licensing fee. Our fees are competitive with single-purpose products that provide just a webinar platform or an LMS or capabilities for virtual conferences or communities. But what we offer is the ability for an association or government agency to start with one of those activities and then to expand to others at no additional cost.

So, for example, after GPO (the Government Publishing Office) had been using iCohere to deliver webinar training to librarians around the world, they realized they could add a virtual component to their in-person conference at no additional cost. Though they had not had any plans to do so, they experimented with that capability and found that they could serve a much broader constituency at their conference than they had planned at no incremental cost. It was a win for the librarians who could not travel to Washington, and an easy win for the GPO staff who already knew how to use the iCohere software and just used it for a different purpose.

**CEOCFO: Would you tell us about the Serving Those Who Serve Others grant program?**

**Mr. Kaplan:** A few years ago, it struck me that though iCohere is affordable for most associations and government agencies, there are some very small, beneficent non-profit organizations that could benefit from the online services we offer, but cannot afford them, either because of a lack of funding or a lack of staff. So we started a grant program called Serving Those Who Serve Others.

Organizations apply to us for a pro bono virtual conference or webinar series and our team votes on which organization to support in this way. This past year, we thought we were just going to give one of these awards, but ended up giving two. One of them was to the Association of Former Members of Congress. Their work is to organize volunteer teams consisting of one democrat and one republican former member of the House of Representatives and arrange visits to college campuses to talk about public service as a calling. The idea is to inspire young people to become involved in public service, despite the partisanship currently impacting our government. The AFMC applied for a grant because it had the idea that they could expand this bi-partisan project to reach community colleges if they could do so through a webinar series.

The other organization we awarded a grant to is a small non-profit that provides support for families that discover that one of the two parents has a terminal illness. It provides professional coaching for how to work through all of the kinds of issues that come up—the social, psychological, financial and legal issues of preparing for a parent’s passing—and it also provides a trip either to Disneyland or to New York
City so these young children can carry forward memories of a special family experience after their mother or father passes.

**CEOCFO: Why choose iCohere?**

**Mr. Kaplan:** iCohere develops strong partnerships with non-profit and government organizations that are ready to start moving their in-person training and professional development programs online. Our unique Unified Learning System enables our clients to sponsor webinars, online courses, virtual conferences and communities of practice for a single, affordable licensing fee, while working within a single platform, developed and hosted by an experienced and dedicated vendor-partner.

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