

# Recycling Learning

BY BILL PERRY

If we're recycling everything from plastic packaging to software, isn't it time to reuse learning, too? Smart use of technology and increased collaboration can save money and extend the life cycle of learning solutions.



The list of products we try to recycle ranges from cell phones to water bottles. The length to which manufacturers will go to recycle a product is a function of cost and time, of course. Take learning for example.

If you consider the cost of creating training courses, the requirements for developing training modules continue to grow, and the amount people expect to spend is on the way up.

In July 2008, IDC published a report on the *Chief Learning Officer* magazine Business Intelligence Board survey examining the state of learning. Sixty-seven percent of all respondents to the survey believe that during the next two years, spending on design and development of in-house training will grow by at least 15 percent. Sixty percent see the same level of investment over the same period for learning technologies.

While recycling often is associated with environmental practices, manufacturers, including software developers, also see it as a way to keep costs in check while they increase the functionality of the products they produce. According to IDC research, companies spend approximately \$300 million annually on authoring tools and systems for developing training content.

So if we're recycling everything from plastic packaging to software, isn't it worth looking at ways to reuse learning, too?

### The Product Called 'Training'

"Conceptually, when you think about training you have to think about it as a product, and like any other product, you need to think about the development life cycle," said Massood Zarrabian, chief executive officer for OutStart Inc. "So as the product evolves, you have to invest in keeping training products up to date and create a collaborative environment for making changes. And upon deployment, communicate its availability to end users."

Zarrabian isn't necessarily suggesting people spend more on learning technology, although in some cases that might be necessary. Rather, he said people should put in place the strategies and marshal the technology to bring efficiencies into the development process and extend the life cycle of training.

"The most common form of reuse is leveraging the same content for instructor-led training, as well as some version of e-learning," said Cushing Anderson, program vice president for IDC. "So every course that is offered either online or in a classroom could benefit from reuse."

Anderson calls this "content parity," wherein the same content is used across a variety of media. "Content parity is assured by the use of some form

of content management system," said Anderson.

Some companies are just beginning to put effort into how best to recycle learning. Others, such as Xerox, are ahead of the pack.

### The Potential of Recycling

"We've been moving forward with new ways to design our learning content to ensure reuse and repurposing, and figure out how content can be used in unexpected ways," said Steven Rath Morgan, manager of learning content strategy at Xerox, Worldwide Learning Services. "We're also trying to determine what disposable learning is."

According to Rath Morgan and his colleagues at Xerox, the percent of reuse potential depends on what type of business an employer is in. A technology company that's rolling out a steady stream

of product updates might find a higher reuse percentage for its content than, say, a consulting firm, which may train consultants on a project-by-project basis.

The potential for reusability of content may also require a ramp-up period. When content is created on day one, there's no reuse value. But as six, eight or 12 months pass, the potential for reuse rises. Eventually, the potential for maximizing reuse begins to plateau.

Rath Morgan defines disposable content as something that "has an initial purpose, but just can't be reused, such as a table that lists pricing for a particular version of a product."

"You can't just keep reusing content and assets over and over again, so you have to find a balance for reuse, repurposing and development across populations and over time," added Rath Morgan.

### Choose a Common Platform for Reuse

There are many opinions on what can or can't be reused. But technology is critical to making reuse happen. At one end of the spectrum might be a simple authoring tool; at the other end would be a platform to help with the training development life cycle.

Ideally, a common technology platform should do three things:

- Automate the development of content.
- Capture the learning so it can be reused.
- Integrate collaboration among subject matter experts, trainers and content contributors.

"Let's say you've developed a course for a service technician," said Rath Morgan. "Embedded in the

### DATA POINT

Want more benchmarking data for your learning organization? The *Chief Learning Officer* Business Intelligence Report provides a wide range of information in several key learning and development areas. For more information, visit [www.clomedia.com/report/](http://www.clomedia.com/report/).

## IN PRACTICE TECHNOLOGIES LEAD TO CONTENT REUSE AND SAVINGS

**F**irst Federal Bank of California wanted a learning solution that sped up the creation of training, tailored training to the way employees learned, tracked learning and reused vital parts of courses for new initiatives.

“One of our business principles is superior training leads to superior performance,” said Wendy Krieger, vice president and training manager for First Federal Bank of California. Helping 600 employees spread across 38 branches understand the ever-changing financial industry and meet customer needs is no small feat, however.

“When you spend the time to create training, you want to make people aware that it’s available, ensure they take it and guarantee they get credit for completing it,” said Krieger. “You also want to extend the life of that training for as long as you can to keep costs down.”

For First Federal Bank of California, the answer to training challenges evolved over many years. In 2001, the bank adopted Trainer, software from Outstart for authoring courses. Trainer enabled instructional designers to share and reuse training content and also gave them the flexibility to create training in a variety of formats.

After automating the training creation, Krieger said the bank added a learning management system (LMS) to computerize the record keeping linked to training.

“The authoring tool, which we still use today, gives more training for less cost,” said Richard Williamson an instructional technology specialist at First Federal Bank of California. “The software has evolved with successive versions, but what’s always been there is the ability to reuse content in a creative way. That saves an incredible amount of time.”

The tool does this by allowing a training team to recreate the same course in multiple formats, such as an online seminar, a handbook or a CD-ROM. And the authoring tool can enhance the quality. For instance, with online courses, the bank’s authoring tool can embed assessments that automatically point an employee to specific content based on how the test-taker responds to questions in the course.

Williamson added that the authoring tool also plays a critical role in modifying courses to reflect the latest legislation and tailoring instruction for different departments.

“If we didn’t have an authoring tool, it might take weeks, or months, to get a vendor to customize one of our computer-based training modules,” Williamson said.

An additional benefit to tapping Trainer has been its environmental benefits. By creating 50 computer-based training modules and reusing content as needed, the bank has put a dent in its printing costs.

Krieger noted that prior to launching its LMS, the bank’s training staff was spending “hours and hours updating records and tracking who completed courses” in anticipation of audits. According to Krieger, the LMS has reduced her training department’s administrative time by 50 percent.

Williamson would spend at least one day a week simply transferring scores from employees’ tests to the training department’s spreadsheet. The automated tracking capabilities of the LMS now save Williamson that work, so he can focus on performing his role at a higher level.

By investing in learning technologies, the bank’s training department has been able to focus on delivering training when needed. And employees have delivered service that has led the bank to build new branches and see an increase in retail deposits by as much as 15 percent.

The bank’s investment in the development of each employee has, in many ways, been underwritten by the net benefit of learning technologies. [CJO](#)

— Bill Perry

course you may find content that would be helpful to your sales force. But if you’re developing learning in silos, then those connections may not be readily made and you miss the opportunity to reuse the technician’s training in unexpected ways.”

If you develop on a common platform, according to Rath Morgan, then creating training for the technician and the sales force can be done collaboratively and captured for multiple audiences.

IDC’s July 2008 *Chief Learning Officer* magazine Business Intelligence Board survey echoes what Xerox and Rath Morgan already know and do. Among the responses, one survey participant wrote, “[W]e need to maximize online-learning content by re-tooling it for multiple audiences and distributing it to the widest audience as possible.”

### The Value of Recycling Learning

While estimates of the savings of a well-planned and strategic approach to recycling learning vary widely, even the low end of the range could have impact for the average training budget.

To put savings into perspective against real dollars, here are numbers courtesy of “The Corporate Learning Factbook,” published by Bersin & Associates: Average cost per training hour: \$111. Average amount spent annually on learning technology: \$87,000. And average amount of total training expenditures: \$694,000.

Before you run headlong at recycling learning, though, it’s worth figuring out how much content you ought to try to reuse. Some CLOs shoot for recycling approximately one-third of a company’s learning content. In some cases, that number may be much higher. For every course produced in two mediums — such as instructor-led training and e-learning — almost 100 percent should be reused, Anderson said.

Zarrabian added, “Reusing small learning objects across courses won’t save you that much money. Strategically and conceptually, the real value to recycling is having your core content reused across multiple sets of audiences, or via multiple delivery channels.”

Zarrabian defined this as heteroge-

neous vs. homogenous. If the training material is deployed to one audience (e.g., a sales organization) or through one channel (e.g., online), then the product is being developed for a homogenous set. But if the material needs to be deployed to multiple audiences (e.g., customers, business partners and employees) and through many channels, then you need to address a heterogeneous set of requirements.

### Technology for Recycling

“We rely on a common, technological platform for learning content management so we can take learning that’s been created for one course, or group of people, and reuse it elsewhere,” said David VanSchooten, e-learning manager for BB&T University, the training arm of financial-holding company BB&T Corp. “A common platform gives us a way to create a taxonomy and metadata tags for content. Those tags let us find content, update learning objects like videos or images, share objects and reuse them for different business purposes.”

With technology underpinning VanSchooten’s reuse strategy, he noted that BB&T can grab content from one area, update it, and the same content is instantaneously changed in other areas.

“We have a number of mortgage courses, and because of our reuse capabilities, we can use pieces from these courses in a refresher course we offer,” said VanSchooten. “We have to be mindful of the context in which we reuse things. But technology enables us to recycle elements and personalize them for a new audience.”

At Xerox, a common platform for learning content management that includes a taxonomy and metadata makes it far easier to retrieve learning than searching and pulling assets from a shared directory. Xerox training professionals can put their source files into the platform. Then, another developer can extract what he or she needs and put the learning content back.

“We’re not sharing just the files,” said Rath Morgan. “We’re doing internal and third-party course development on our enterprise platform. It’s global collaboration with an eye toward reuse.”

“Without a common platform, a content development vendor designs courses on its own servers and delivers a finished course to you,” Rath Morgan said. “If you want to revisit the content, you have to go back to the vendor.”

If all this sounds like just a matter of initiative and technology, it’s not. Rath Morgan said there’s “a major change-management component to effectively recycling learning.” A lobbying effort aimed at a company’s developers, training professionals and line-of-business managers must underscore the benefits of moving to a common platform.

But if you outline the benefits of such an approach — namely enabling everyone to do their jobs faster and better, since they’ll no longer be tied to any single type of instruction — people see the value.

### A Strategic View of Learning

A CLO ought to think of how he or she will create an environment in which employees — not just training professionals — can collaborate on learning. Consider the delivery vehicles for training, whether Web, wireless or classroom, and put in place the infrastructure that allows for the creation and reuse of training in an automated fashion.

“A CLO has to understand where content comes from,” said Anderson. “Reusing content that the training organization creates is one dimension. But reusing content that another line of business creates for, say, a technical manual or repair guide — well, that counts as recycling, too.”

Anderson advised CLOs to look beyond simply deconstructing training material. He suggested they ask themselves: “Where does my content come from, and is there any source our company is duplicating when it creates content?”

In a lot of instances, people are creating the same course for instructor-led training and, again, for e-learning. The greatest waste, or lost opportunity, for training professionals, said Anderson, is recreating content that exists in one format so it can be put in another. Taking an instructor-led training class and making it an e-learning course is an example.

“Any time you spend manually trying to make sure that ILT and e-learning is aligned is wasted time,” he said. “Instead, there are content-capturing tools and learning content management systems that take content from one modality and put it into another.”

As a final piece of advice, CLOs shouldn’t forget to engage the leadership of each line of business in efforts to build a common platform for recycling learning. Invite line of business managers to contribute content. By showing a plant manager how a manual of procedures for running the plant floor can be turned into training, a CLO can make a business case for recycling learning. The CLO can point to how training can automatically be updated to precisely reflect any changes in shop-floor procedures.

Recycling learning is not unlike recycling any other product. Participation is predicated on everyone understanding the benefits and believing their contribution will make an impact. **CLO**

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