

Philanthropic Contributions Aid E-Learning Delivery for LINGOs

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Despite the prevalence of e-learning in the private and public sectors, it has not gained much of a foothold in the humanitarian realm. This is partly for one reason: lack of money. Learning for International Non-Governmental Organizations (LINGOs), a consortium of humanitarian agencies such as Habitat for Humanity, Care, Save the Children and World Vision, felt the lack of this popular learning delivery method quite keenly until recently.

“It was clear that these organizations had a tremendous need for help and not a whole lot of resources,” said Eric Berg, director, LINGOs. “Donors don’t want their money to go to infrastructure and administration. They want their money to go to actual programs, so it wasn’t like they had much in the way of budgets for this. And the field was changing so fast, (the various agencies) decided let’s get together to see if we can share our learning resources and experience, and that’s how LINGOs was born.”

Course development options were needed in order to get this learning group up and running quickly. There is some in-house development being done, some was contributed by volunteers and some was outsourced, but the greatest need was for a product to help on the offering side, one that could help speed up development in a development agenda far greater than available resources. Berg said the OutStart SoftSim tool will allow LINGOs to build complex and interactive simulations, while OutStart’s Trainer software already has become the backbone for authoring courses, offering LINGOs the ability to create e-learning experiences that can be loaded onto an LMS and delivered, or build more full-featured options that incorporate video, audio and other testing vehicles.

For instance, LINGOs needed a finance course for non-financial NGO (non-governmental organization) managers, many of whom work in the humanitarian development field overseas, to supervise budgets, warehouses for food, petty cash, etc. Essentially, the managers require a financial skill set that might not have come up in traditional management training or a business background. To aid development of these types of courses, Mercy Corps, Care, Save the Children and other humanitarian agencies have come together to combine generic content across organizations. “Another example would be diversity training,” Berg explained. “That is a huge, complex goal within these organizations because they operate in environments that aren’t necessarily friendly to diversity. That’s two examples but literally there will be many, many more specific, technical-type subjects. The area of conflict resolution or conflict avoidance is another course that we’ll be developing this year using Trainer. These organizations all do very similar things, so to have each one of them create their own security training program or their own civil society or food distribution program really doesn’t make sense. This way we can do it one time, publish it to everybody and everybody takes advantage of it that way.”

Philanthropy is not new for vendors and those in private or public industry, nor is it unheard of in the humanitarian space, but OutStart President and CEO Massood Zarrabian had a more personal reason for making a contribution. “My simple answer is because it existed. The simplest view of this thing for me is that it was there. It was an issue. It is a thing that has worldwide impact. It’s a thing that from a personal company perspective, and I speak for the men and women who work (at OutStart), makes us feel good about what we do. The more complicated answer is at one time in my life I was in the Middle East, and I was in need of help.

“My mother used to be a teacher,” Zarrabian said. “She was one of the first women teachers in Iran, and I have enormous respect for people who do (humanitarian work). I’ve always wanted to donate technology software. The problem is in many businesses it doesn’t matter if you donate a CRM system to a non-profit organization. It doesn’t materially change things. It might make things a little bit more efficient, but when this came to me it was a no-brainer because we could actually have impact. We could have measurable impact and a measurable return and do things that actually impact people’s lives, which is different than when you do commercial stuff. (There) you always talk about return on investment, but you can’t really convince yourself that there is a measurable impact on people’s lives. In this case you can.”