



Capturing Expertise to Drive Global Growth

Smith empowers employees with continuous learning powered by D2L

In the fast-moving electronics industry, innovation is the only constant. Smith needed a way to keep its employees up to date with an ever-changing portfolio of products and markets, and turned to D2L to host “Smith University”, a learning platform that enables the company to deliver customized, consistent learning experiences across its global workforce.

Company

Smith is one of the world's leading electronics component distribution companies, supplying manufacturers with products, solutions and supply chain services that help them get innovative products to market fast. The company is growing rapidly, with 16 offices around the world.

AT A GLANCE

Client: Smith

Employees: 450

Learners: 450

Industry: Electronics

CHALLENGE

- Standardize corporate learning across a global organization
- Support employee learning from on-boarding through tenured development
- Provide visibility into employees' knowledge and learning performance
- Facilitate anytime, anywhere learning with an accessible, mobile-enabled platform
- Support customized courses and third-party curated content in one platform

SOLUTION

- D2L's Brightspace modern learning platform
- Language pack—simplified Chinese
- Integration with Open Sesame
- YouSeeU for virtual classroom across 16 global offices

RESULT

- 250 new courses developed in just seven months
- 50% reduction in training time for new hires
- Mobile access globally



The Challenge

BUILDING SKILLS THAT EVOLVE WITH THE BUSINESS

In recent years, Smith's international expansion strategy has been highly successful, enabling the company to become a global leader in the electronics distribution industry. To support this strategy, the company needed to overcome a number of scalability-related challenges.

Mark Bollinger, chief globalization officer, explains: "The market that we're in moves very quickly. There's innovation every single day, and it's important for our people to be on top of every new development in the industry. However, as we grew, training our teams was becoming more and more difficult."

Dr. Lisa Cairns, director of e-learning, adds: "Face-to-face training wasn't reaching all the people that we needed to reach. It was a huge challenge to try to get trainers in front of new employees in 16 different offices around the world."

Smith decided to find a learning platform that would empower its entire global workforce to enhance their knowledge and skills, and enable them to learn whenever, wherever and however was most convenient for them.

"Corporate learning needs to be truly global," says Bollinger. "Everyone across all offices should have access to the same level of information and the same opportunities. We wanted a platform that would give us an efficient, consistent way to achieve those goals. That's why we turned to D2L."

MEETING THE KEY REQUIREMENTS

As Smith researched its options for a learning platform, it became clear that D2L would be able to meet all the key requirements.

Since the company's learners and trainers had not used a learning platform before, it was critical that it be easy to use and quick to develop new course materials.

“There’s an inherent elegance in D2L that allowed us to achieve this kind of agility... We went from zero experience with a learning platform to launching our first courses in eight or nine weeks. That’s unheard of.”

Dr. Lisa Cairns, Director of e-Learning

Dr. Cairns says: “What makes a company able to thrive and grow is the knowledge that it has internally. We saw the potential of D2L to empower our Smith U team to record our subject-matter experts and then to build our own courses instead of just relying on third-party content.”

Equally, since the company would be reducing its emphasis on in-person training, it was vital that the solution provide ways to support customized, robust assessment and reporting capabilities to enable the company to monitor course performance and ensure that learners were gaining the skills they needed. Accessibility was also critically important.

“In some cities, our employees need to commute long distances by train, for example,” says Bollinger. “The fact that D2L would enable them to make that time productive by accessing their courses from their mobile phones or tablets was really important to us.”

The Solution

ACHIEVING VALUE QUICKLY

One of Smith’s main reasons for choosing D2L was a desire for agility and speed of implementation. With new employees joining the company daily, and no existing set of online learning resources as a starting point, the team needed to be able to build course content from scratch as quickly as possible.

D2L provided a week of initial training for four key team members at Smith, followed by a few days of additional training on specific topics. With just this minimal introduction to the platform, the Smith team could start building content independently, creating a program of courses known within the company as “Smith University”. The team began beta testing its first Smith University courses with a live training group in Hong Kong within two months of the initial sessions with D2L.

“There’s an inherent elegance in D2L that allowed us to achieve this kind of agility,” says Dr. Cairns. “It’s clear that a lot of thought has gone into making the platform simple, so you can work productively and get courses out to learners almost immediately. We went from zero experience with a learning platform to launching our first courses in eight or nine weeks. That’s unheard of.”



The achievement seems even more impressive when you consider that the Smith University content was being developed by a team in Houston, Texas, during late August 2017, when Hurricane Harvey struck the city. Despite significant disruption to their personal and professional lives, the team was still able to deliver their objectives in record time.

DEVELOPING UNIQUE CONTENT

One of the most important features of the Smith University course content is the way it captures the knowledge of subject-matter experts from across the business—not only senior team members, but also newer employees who have brought their own skills and experiences to the organization.

Dr. Cairns explains: “D2L frees us from the limitations of a fixed course structure so we can make every course our own. The content we’ve built really encapsulates the unique intellectual property of the Smith team. Smith University brings corporate knowledge up from the grass-roots of the business and empowers experts in every functional area to share their expertise.”

Much of the Smith University course content consists of videos led by Smith employees themselves and enhanced by texts with links to bonus material.

The custom content is augmented by curated material provided by Open Sesame, a D2L partner that provides a wide range of more general courses in areas such as business skills, team building and leadership development, safety, compliance, IT, and compliance certifications.

“We use Open Sesame more for the soft skills content,” says Dr. Cairns. “The ability to import their content so seamlessly into our course structure means that our learners don’t see these as different worlds; it’s all one experience. Having those bases covered by Open Sesame also means that our e-learning team can focus on the Smith-specific content that really makes us unique.”

A CREATIVE PARTNERSHIP

Smith appreciated the contribution of the D2L Learning & Creative Services team, which helped to build a number of custom interactive elements to make the course content more engaging. For example, the D2L team developed a “flip tile” widget, which displays information about each module on the main course homepage, giving learners a quick overview of the module and showing them their progress within it.

The D2L Learning & Creative Services team also shared ideas with the Smith team around best practices and widget ideas that improve engagement. Out of these collaborations the Smith U team

“Previously I had to walk each individual new trader through our processes one-on-one. With Smith U and D2L, we can relay that same information to all our new traders at once, so I probably spend 50% less time onboarding people to our team.”

Joseph Chung, Trading Analyst

developed a course request feature, which learners use to request enrollment in courses and learning paths. The backend server determines if prerequisites have been met and whether to enroll or place the request on hold with automated notification to the learner throughout the process. This advanced widget not only helps learners map out their future studies—it also gives Smith’s e-learning team insight into learner engagement and the demand for each of its courses.

The D2L platform’s tests and quizzes also help the quality team ensure that everyone keeps up to speed and is competent and certified in their role—a significant advantage during external audits. “When we showed one of our auditors how we use Smith University, he was really impressed with the system,” says Spears.

Joseph Chung, trading analyst, also appreciates the way the D2L platform has transformed the company’s training processes:

The Results

FEEDING A GROWING DEMAND FOR LEARNING

In just over seven months, Smith has used the D2L platform to launch over 250 courses, a pace they don’t see slowing down.

Brian Spears, quality engineer and operations training, comments: “There’s a cross-functional advantage to using the D2L platform because it helps people from different departments get on the same page about how our processes work and who is responsible. It also helps us standardize across our three global operations hubs and makes sure we are being consistent.”

“Previously I had to walk each individual new trader through our processes one-on-one. With Smith U and D2L, we can relay that same information to all our new traders at once, so I probably spend 50% less time onboarding people to our team.”

The company is keen to continue building on the success it has had with D2L so far. Looking to the future, Bollinger concludes: “When I think about what’s next for Smith, I think about taking the platform that we’ve already built and working with D2L to make that even more meaningful to our employees by constantly evolving and pushing the envelope. We’re dedicated to giving our staff the skills that they need to build our business and improve the processes that they work on every single day.”