Helping Aid Workers Make a Difference

Effective training strategies from ICF help aid organizations get competent volunteers into the field quickly

Humanitarian projects around the world need support from aid workers, but volunteers have a lot to learn before they can work safely and effectively in the field. ICF worked with D2L to design a blended learning experience involving online and in-person training sessions to prepare volunteers for rapid deployment—helping aid organizations respond faster in post-disaster situations.

Company

ICF is a global consultancy and digital services provider that engages in a wide range of commercial and public-sector projects. The company has significant experience in working on important humanitarian initiatives in areas such as the environment, social programs, government and health.

AT A GLANCE

Client: ICF

Learners: 600 per year

Industry: Humanitarian aid

CHALLENGE

- Help humanitarian organizations deploy volunteers to projects faster
- Empower volunteers with the skills they need to work safely in the field
- Ensure consistency across the training process

SOLUTIONS

- D2L's Brightspace platform
- Daylight
- Course Builder
- Release Conditions
- Intelligent Agents
- Quizzes
- Spanish and French Language Packs

RESULT

- 14 full training cycles completed in less than three years, training over 560 volunteers
- 600 new candidates are expected to take the course in 2019
- 90% of volunteers give the course the highest possible approval rating
- Estimated 3-5 hours saved per week for each instructor by automating course administration work

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The Challenge

Volunteering for a humanitarian aid project can be a life-changing experience. Whether volunteers are helping a community rebuild after a natural disaster or working on a longer-term project to drive social change, the impact on the community—and on the volunteers themselves—is often profound.

As a result, volunteering is becoming an increasingly popular vocation, and humanitarian aid organizations are always keen to accept the support. However, becoming a volunteer isn't a responsibility that can be taken lightly. To work successfully in challenging conditions, in an unfamiliar culture and among people who may have experienced terrible trauma, volunteers need careful training to ensure they are prepared to contribute to strengthening the local capacity and resilience of disaster-affected communities.

ACCELERATING VOLUNTEER TRAINING
Over a long history of supporting humanitarian aid initiatives, ICF realized that training was often a stumbling-block for aid organizations—particularly when disaster strikes and they need to mobilize.

ICF's subject matter expertise is provided to a pan-European initiative called EU Aid Volunteers that aims to match EU citizens with suitable volunteering opportunities around the world and is funded by the European Union. The initiative requires each candidate to pass a mandatory training program, which ends with an assessment where candidates must demonstrate the competencies that they have learned in various realistic scenarios. The final aim of the training program is to assess if the volunteers are fit for deployment in a humanitarian context since it's vital that the volunteers are well-prepared—but if they are not declared fit then they cannot be deployed.

"Our high-level aim is to ensure that volunteers feel ready for deployment after the training," says Dan Ungureanu, ICF Senior Consultant in the Policy Implementation and Programs team based in Brussels, Belgium. "We also ensure that our training delivers the highest level of quality and expertise by employing over 100 trainers and mentors with at least eight years of field experience in the humanitarian aid sector."

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The Solution

CHOOSING THE BEST OF THE BEST

ICF had worked on several training-related projects in the past, and its teams knew that a learning management system (LMS) could help to improve course design and streamline course administration.

Kat Negron, Senior Instructional Designer at ICF, comments: "I had used various LMS platforms in the past, and using course templates in some of them was difficult. Then I worked on a project usingD2L's Brightspace platform, and it was so much more flexible. You can either use Course Builder or just drag and drop files and folders, and you can preload templates with your style guides. So, when this project came up, it just made sense to use Brightspace — we knew it was the best of the best."

DESIGNING A COMPREHENSIVE COURSE

To ensure the course would teach practical skills that are useful in the field, the team worked closely with European aid organizations to gather expertise in areas such as project management, inter-cultural awareness, safety and security, advocacy and communications, and psychological first aid.

The team then used the Brightspace platform to develop a blended learning program, comprising 25 hours of online training to onboard new candidates, followed by a two-week intensive classroom-based course that includes field day scenarios designed to test their competences in a practical way. Each of the 12 course modules contains interactive elements, such as quizzes to help students test themselves on their progress, and discussions that allow them to ask questions and get feedback from their mentors and peers.

DELIVERING PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Since the training materials are designed to be used across the EU, it was vital to personalize the experience to each learner's needs.

> "As soon as the user signs in, they have the option of choosing their preferred language, and we use the release conditions feature of Brightspace to take them to the appropriate course materials," explains Negron. "We also use release conditions to handle things like obtaining consent to capture personal data for GDPR compliance. It's a simple but powerful way to structure the user's journey."
> *Kat Negron, Senior Instructional Designer, ICF*

To make the experience even more intuitive, ICF decided to use D2L's Daylight user interface, which streamlines and simplifies access to course materials, and provides a responsive screen layout that works seamlessly on any device from desktop PCs to smartphones.

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The Opportunity

In less than three years since the launch of the new training program, ICF and its partners have completed 14 full training cycles, and more than 560 volunteers have successfully passed the final assessment. Enrollments have grown steadily over that time, and this year promises to be the biggest yet: eight training cycles have been confirmed already, and around 600 candidates are expected to take the course.

Feedback from learners has been almost universally positive—90 percent of candidates surveyed gave the course the highest possible approval score.

ACCELERATING DELIVERY

"One of the best aspects of the project was the speed of delivery," says Ungureanu. "We started from nothing and within six months we had a full-fledged online and in-person training program with 12 modules in English. Then we translated it into French and Spanish, and the whole thing was done in a year."

Besides saving time on course design, the platform also increases efficiency by reducing the amount of manual course administration that instructors need to do.

"We use the intelligent agents feature to send notifications out to users automatically. Reminding people to sign up for courses, finish the modules they're working on and take the quizzes is very time-consuming when you need to do it manually, so automating the process probably saves each instructor three to five hours per week."
Kat Negron, Senior Instructional Designer, ICF

CREATING LONG-TERM VALUE

Finally, the team has seen an unexpected benefit from the platform: volunteers often continue to use it after they've completed the training while they are deployed in the field.

Ungureanu concludes: "The fact that volunteers continue to refer to the course materials after they've passed the training is really heartening. It shows that the content we've built isn't just something they need to learn to complete a training, it's genuinely useful in their day-to-day work in the field. That's the best testament we could have that we've built something of real value."

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