



Giving career development the green light

IMSA helps public safety professionals get ahead by reducing certification time with D2L's Brightspace platform

International Municipal Signal Association (IMSA) certifications help public safety professionals work safely and advance their careers, but the organization's training sessions and proctored exams were often difficult for learners to attend in person. The COVID-19 crisis prompted IMSA to embark on a digital transformation by working with D2L and enSYNC to launch a new education platform that will enable learners to achieve certifications 100% online.

At a glance

Client: International Municipal Signal Association

Learners: 9,300

Industry: Associations

Website: imsasafety.org

Platform/Features:

- Brightspace Core
- LearningSYNC to iMIS by enSYNC
- Integrity Advocate
- Bongo

Interviewees:

- Toby Cummings, Executive Director
- Richard Porter, Certification Manager
- Guy Petinga, Vice President, New Jersey Section

Highlights:

- Enables learners to study and take exams anywhere, without needing to travel or take time off from work.
- Streamlines administrative processes for IMSA, allowing for more effective use of staff.
- Unlocks opportunities for members to provide new types of training and pass on their skills to the next generation.



Challenge

Maintaining professional practice standards

The International Municipal Signal Association (IMSA) is a membership organization whose 22 local sections provide quality certification programs for the safe installation, operation, and maintenance of public safety systems, including everything from traffic controls, fire alarms, and radio communications to emergency medical services, roadway lighting and signage, and other related systems.

In many U.S. states and other countries, an IMSA certification is a prerequisite for working for the Department of Transportation, and public safety professionals are obligated to renew these certifications every three years. As a result, IMSA has issued more than 150,000 certificates since certification began, not only to its 9,300 members, but also to thousands of professionals across North America and beyond.

Richard Porter, Certification Manager at IMSA, explains, “We have more than 20 certification programs in a wide range of disciplines. In the past, each section would run events where volunteers would provide training to help people prepare for their certification exams.”

The problem was that many of the smaller sections only had enough volunteers to run a few events each year and could only cover a subset of IMSA’s programs at each event. If someone wanted to take a certification in a specific topic, they might have to travel to the next state—or even farther—to find an event that could give them that opportunity.

Guy Petinga, Vice President of IMSA’s New Jersey section, gives an example: “Say you have a business three hours away from the nearest relevant event. You would have to stop work for the day, pay to travel two-and-a-half hours each way for two days, and book a hotel room for the whole period so you can attend the class.”



Moreover, the certification process itself was almost entirely manual. Learners would sit in a proctored exam room and use a No. 2 pencil to fill in a Scantron bubble sheet, which would then be physically mailed to IMSA for grading. As a result, the whole certification process might take up to six weeks.

Toby Cummings, Executive Director at IMSA, says, “To me, our old process was alarming, because we’re in the Amazon world now and everybody expects Amazon-speed delivery. It’s not just inconvenient; it affects people’s lives. In many public agencies, your job classification and your pay are based on your certification. So, if you were due to move up and you can’t get the certification in time, you’re delaying your career progression.”

“IMSA’s vision was to go to a more modern solution, and COVID-19 gave us the spark. As an organization, probably 65% to 70% of our entire international revenues comes from certifications, and we do roughly 7,500 to 8,000 new certification exams a year. When COVID-19 hit and we couldn’t do in-person events anymore, we had to find a new way—and fast.”

Toby Cummings, Executive Director, IMSA

“As we narrowed down the shortlist of vendors, the most important question was whether their system could help us teach what we wanted without totally reinventing the wheel. It needed to be user-friendly for our volunteers and members. That’s where D2L and the Brightspace platform really excelled.”

Richard Porter, Certification Manager, IMSA

Solution

Finding an integrated solution

IMSA decided to find a learning management system (LMS) that would provide a platform for delivering both training and examinations online. The organization wanted to adopt Integrity Advocate’s online proctoring solutions to oversee its exams, so the ability to integrate easily with Integrity Advocate was a key requirement for a new LMS. Only four of the seven LMS vendors that IMSA approached were able to meet this need.

It was also important to integrate the new platform with IMSA’s existing iMIS association management system. D2L Premier Partner, enSYNC, provided a turnkey integration solution, which made it easier to get the platform up and running.

D2L’s Services team also delivered integration consultancy services, which helped tailor the platform for IMSA’s rules and criteria. For example, IMSA is now able to automatically distribute different percentages of revenues from its training and certification products to the appropriate parts of the organization—a complex task that would otherwise have put extra strain on IMSA’s busy administrators.

IMSA has now rolled out the platform to its first users and is taking a careful approach to change management.

Toby Cummings explains, “We’re a 124-year-old organization, and many of our members like to stick with a tried-and-tested approach. So, we’re going to roll out the new platform section by section and support them individually to help them feel comfortable with it. Nevertheless, we’re excited to see that 90% of our sections are already planning to use the platform and we’re keen to hear their feedback.”

He adds, “There have been lessons learned too—for example, we had to acknowledge that our in-person teaching methods don’t always work as well in an online space. Instead of aiming for an online experience that looks just like an in-person class, we need to be bold enough to change and adopt best practices for online learning.”



Result

Expanding reach and streamlining processes

Despite the difficulties of rolling out a new solution during the coronavirus pandemic, IMSA has already received encouraging feedback from many early adopters of the platform.

Richard Porter says, “One of our volunteer instructors will be running a class tomorrow online with 60 participants. In the past, he used to run his classes by hiring a room in a government building, and in that physical space, he could never have run a class with so many learners at the same time. He’s really impressed with the ability to scale and expand his reach as an instructor, especially during a time when it’s impossible to do these things in person.”

IMSA also now has an opportunity to make its processes entirely paperless, reducing bureaucracy for learners, instructors, and administrators alike.

Richard Porter comments, “If you’d asked me last year if we could go totally paperless, I would have said ‘no way.’ Right now, we have the potential to do that, which is pretty amazing.”

Going forward, the new platform will enable volunteers to run a course over a weekend and have the learners take their exam on Sunday afternoon. If they pass, they will be able to log in to their IMSA profile and print their certificate on Monday morning.

“Even better, learners can participate in the courses from their own office—they don’t need to travel or pay for hotel rooms. That’s going to help contractors a lot.”

Guy Petinga, Vice President New Jersey, IMSA

“I think Brightspace has the ability for us to do both types of education. We’re using 10% of what the platform can do to provide online classes for certification, but we want to evolve and help our volunteers teach the next generation of people who are coming into this trade. A full-scale apprenticeship or education program could be the next step on our roadmap.”

Toby Cummings, Executive Director, IMSA

This much more streamlined process will remove barriers to career progression. IMSA members will be able to apply for new jobs or promotions with full confidence that they will have the opportunity to gain the certifications they need, as and when they need them.

Looking to the future, IMSA sees opportunities to expand its use of the Brightspace platform beyond certification. At its conferences, many other types of education take place too—such as experienced practitioners sharing practical advice on real-world situations and helping people learn how to troubleshoot problems.

Toby Cummings concludes, “I think Brightspace has the ability for us to do both types of education. We’re using 10% of what the platform can do to provide online classes for certification, but we want to evolve and help our volunteers teach the next generation of people who are coming into this trade. A full-scale apprenticeship or education program could be the next step on our roadmap.”