Government
Elearning!
Powering the Public Sector with Learning Technologies

WPA Award of Excellence Best Trade Magazine 2010
WPA Award of Excellence Best Three-Time Trade Magazine 2011

November / December 2011
Volume 3 • Issue 2

2011 Best of Elearning!

pg 31

>> E-learning's 'Need for Speed' pg 16

>> What's Up with M-learning? pg 43

>> 'VALU' at Veterans Affairs pg 46

www.gov.2elearning.com

Department of Veterans Affairs' Education Provides 'VALU'

THE V.A. LEARNING UNIVERSITY PROVIDES A SINGLE TOUCH-POINT TO ACCESS A FULL SUITE OF COURSE OFFERINGS.

When Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary for the Department of Veterans Affairs (V.A.), issued the call to transform the department into a leading 21st-century organization, he knew investment in human capital was pivotal to success. The challenge facing the V.A. was enormous: the organization needed a flexible, scalable solution capable of providing effective training to 320,000 employees operating in medical centers and facilities nationwide.

The answer? The V.A. Learning University (VALU), a comprehensive employee development corporate university that offers in-person training and Web-based curricula, providing users with a single touchpoint to access a full suite of course offerings, professional certification programs and interactive online communities.

A HOMEGROWN SOLUTION

"When we established VALU at the enterprise level in January 2010, we knew we would face sizable challenges," says VALU Dean Alice Muellerweiss. "We needed a solution that was sufficiently intuitive, engaging and adaptable to satisfy the diverse range of needs for employees in lines of business ranging from medical care to home loan counsel-

ing to burial services. A one-size-fits-all approach hadn't worked in the past and could not meet the demands of our diverse workforce."

After months of collaboration between internal working groups and technology partners led by Dr. Reginald E. Vance, director of VALU Learning Infrastructure, V.A. advanced from a basic learning management system (LMS) to an employee development-centric talent management system (TMS) — the largest non-Department of Defense TMS in the United States government. For fiscal year 2011, VALU (www.valu.va.gov) registered nearly eight million training completions — an impressive number by any standard. The program's success has garnered industry-wide recognition, including a recent win of the Best Launch to Organization award at the Insights 2011 international conference.

VALU's curricula are based on a three-tiered competency model. These competencies — which include leadership, technical and organization-wide competencies — set a common standard for employee performance, help employees understand the path for career growth, and prepare teams to better meet the needs of America's Veterans. By aligning course offerings to competencies, VALU ensures that training and development activities directly support VA employees' personal and professional growth.

HARNESSING THE VALUE OF E-LEARNING

"Regardless of content, we design all of our training programs around a single overarching concept: empowering our employees to provide better service to our veterans," says Vance. "But we realized from the outset that we needed to offer a range of education approaches to meet the demands of a nationwide organization. To augment traditional in person training, we provide more than 17,000 downloadable book titles on leadership, management and other critical business topics and currently offer more than 30,000 different e-learning training options."

While most organizations' employees can only access best-selling thought leaders at leadership and national conferences, VALU has provided V.A. staff with direct access to leading-edge concepts. Led by Dr. John D. Garvin, director of Leadership Development at VALU, V.A. launched a new program in October that includes a series of videocasts featuring Dan Heath, author of the book "Switch." Broken into four segments of approximately 7 to 25 minutes each, employees from the front line to the executive suite are able to download digestible sessions focused on change management. Within the first week following launch, VALU recorded nearly 1,800 completions of the Switch video training.

> 'The training shifted my perspective on our mission at the V.A., as well as the needs of veterans I engage with through our call center.'
> *-Arminda Guerrero, training technician*

As VALU gains traction throughout the V.A., industry is starting to take notice: the United States Distance Learning Association (U.S.D.L.A.) recently crowned VALU's Military Cultural Awareness (M.C.A.) Program with its 2011 Best Practices in Distance Learning Programming (Gold) Award. The 90-minute module is intended to help staff understand the nuances of military branches, armed conflicts and how to engage with multiple generations of veterans.

Like the rest of VALU's courses, the M.C.A. training was developed through intensive, cross-domain collaboration and employee feedback. Recognizing that it needed to pair its employees' commitment to veterans with a deeper awareness of the complexity of each branch of military service, VALU senior leadership worked with internal resources to build a course that provides a foundational knowledge of common military culture, customs and courtesies through real-world context and compelling stories. As part of the onboarding process, VALU welcomes new employees by introducing them to the M.C.A. and TMS.

"I was nearly brought to tears — it brought so much about our veterans to life for me," says Arminda Guerrero, a training technician at the Topeka V.A. Health Resource Center who completed the course. Guerrero recommends the training to every employee at the V.A., whether or not they are directly interfacing with veterans or processing benefits. "The training shifted my perspective on our mission at the V.A., as well as the needs of veterans I engage with through our call center."

DIVERSE OPTIONS, DIVERSE WORKFORCE

Many of the V.A.'s offices are located in rural settings, far removed from state capitol headquarters or major metropolitan areas. VALU's e-learning approach

The VALU portal provides V.A. employees and the general public with a snapshot of all VALU products and services.

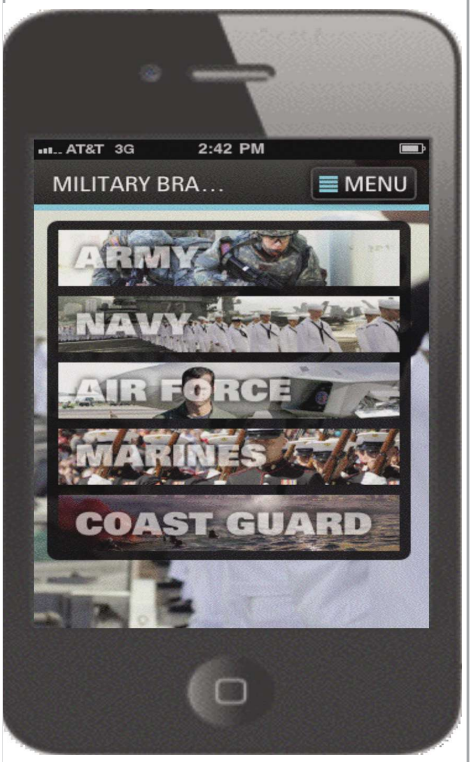
helps ensure that staff serving these areas, especially employees who operate in shifts or in stressful, unpredictable environments, are afforded equal opportunities for growth.

A central component of this strategy is using Webinars that provide instruction on topics ranging from clinical care to transformational leadership. The Webinars allow staff in dispersed geographic locations to engage directly with one another, increasing opportunities for information sharing and cooperation.

"The outcome of the VALU training has been amazing," says Bonnie Pearce, associate director for Patient Care Services at the Jack C. Montgomery Medical Center. "After the VALU team worked with us to deliver training programs on leadership and change, we saw an incredible uptick in collaboration. Professions that normally would not talk freely to each other began to share thoughts about patient care, and the level of tension declined as staff applied their conflict resolution skills."

The V.A. understood that building a rich, engaging learning system required a fundamentally different approach than offering a static "how-to" series of trainings. As it seeks to recruit diversified talent, a central part of its strategy is to speak to digital natives in their own language by pursuing an experiential approach to training. The V.A. is introducing innovative technology and learning delivery methods that will attract future employees.

With that in mind, VALU has bolstered several e-learning courses with interactive and multimedia features that enhance the participant experience. For example, the V.A. has replaced standard multiple choice baseline and evaluation tests with a "Jeopardy!"-style format that allows users to select categories from which they can answer questions of varying difficulty. It has also added animated narrations to several classes, providing participants with the look and feel of an instructor-led session with the convenience of a Web-based format.



VALU is currently exploring options to make its M.C.A. training available through mobile technologies.

> 'We understand that we need innovative, agile approaches to design and deliver education, leadership development, learning and training-both now and in the future.'
> -John U. Sepulveda, assistant secretary

Social learning plays a central part in VALU's core offering. On July 20th, VALU hosted the department's first Social Learning Summit, which brought together industry thought leaders such as Elliott Masie and internal V.A. social learning champions to discuss the benefits of collaborative technologies and highlight their use within the V.A. One such program is the V.A. Leadership Portal, a Web-based resource that hosts a series of online communities which enable V.A. leaders to connect with each other and subject matter experts to share content focused on improving leadership.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As a living community designed to adapt to the needs of a changing workforce, VALU will continue to evolve over the coming months. The V.A. plans to expand the program's footprint into mobile platforms, allowing its employees to access content on the go. As the program continues to expand its impact throughout the V.A., it will promote open dialogue via imbedded communities of practice, enabling employees to communicate directly with their peers regardless of work location.

To support the range of training offerings provided by VALU, the V.A. is launching MyCareer@VA (www.mycareeratva.va.gov), an innovative, Web-based career development portal targeted at future and current V.A. employees. The program, led by Dr. Arthur P. McMahan, deputy dean of VALU, will help current employees plan both linear and lateral career paths, identify competency gaps, and generate training curricula to achieve personal and professional growth objectives. Prospective employees can explore the portal's listing of V.A. job vacancies and store multiple résumés in a searchable database.

"We understand that we need innovative, agile approaches to design and deliver education, leadership development, learning and training — both now and in the future," says John U. Sepulveda, V.A. assistant secretary for Human Resources and Administration. "In the months ahead, VALU will help us build upon our existing successes by ensuring that our learning initiatives continue to meet the changing needs of our employees and the veterans we serve."