Educating a Global Industry

Gafta revitalizes its professional development strategy with D2L

Educating the grain industry is one of Gafta’s key responsibilities—but with its membership spread across over 95 countries, face-to-face training is not accessible for everyone. Gafta worked with D2L to rejuvenate its distance learning program, providing a better user experience and innovative new courses.

Company

The Grain and Feed Trade Association (Gafta) is an international trade body whose members include traders, brokers, lawyers and other professionals involved in the grain industry. The organization has members in over 95 countries worldwide and provides contract management for approximately 80 percent of all grain shipments globally and an international arbitration service.

AT A GLANCE

Client: Grain and Feed Trade Association
Members: 1,800
Learners: 150 per year
Industry: International trade

CHALLENGE

- Increase access to education for a worldwide membership
- Develop new short courses to fit the needs of different types of learners
- Enhance the user experience with more automation and interactivity
- Reduce workload for instructors and course administrators

SOLUTION

- D2L Brightspace platform
- Daylight
- Intelligent Agents
- Release Conditions
- D2L’s Learning & Creative Services

RESULT

- Saves hours by automating course registration and assignment workflows
- Intelligent Agents provide instant notifications to help learners stay on schedule
- Release Conditions eliminate the manual process of distributing course certificates
- Reduces support requests by making the user experience seamless and intuitive
- Provides a single platform for both traditional distance learning and new short courses
The Challenge

Gafta prides itself on being an organization that is run by the trade, for the trade—and one of the core aspects of its mission is to support the professional development of its members. It provides in-depth training to help members understand the intricate details of complex grain trading contracts, which is vital to ensure mutually beneficial trades and minimize the risk of disputes.

The organization runs face-to-face training sessions for its Gafta Professional Development (GPD) program approximately 15 times per year. However, with its membership spread across 95 countries, it is inevitable that some members will not have the opportunity to attend in person.

SOWING THE SEEDS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

To make the program accessible to all members, Gafta developed an online equivalent to the GPD – the Distance Learning Programme (DLP), built using D2L’s learning platform. However, after the organization built out the course content itself in 2009, the project stalled, and many of the core features of the D2L platform were not fully implemented.

As a result, Gafta’s instructors were spending hours on basic course administration tasks. From registering new learners to managing work assignments, sending reminders and issuing certificates at the end of the course, everything was a manual process.

“We didn’t realize it at the time, but we weren’t using the D2L platform to anything like its full potential,” concludes Sophie Webber, head of Training and Events, Gafta.

EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES

Gafta saw an opportunity to expand the reach of its education program by creating a new set of short courses, which would complement the GPD and DLP by providing detailed insight into other areas of the grain trade.

The team wanted to build these new courses on a more modern learning solution, which would relieve the pressure on its instructors and administrators as well as offer a smoother and more intuitive user experience for learners. At the same time, Gafta wanted a partner that could provide creative services to help with the design of the course materials.

“We went out to tender for a new platform that would not only be able to host the new courses but could also ultimately run our existing Distance Learning Program (DLP),” says Webber. “But when we explained what we wanted, many of the vendors told us that they couldn’t do what we were asking.”
The Solution

SEEING DAYLIGHT
The Gafta team were pondering their options when they began to work with their D2L Customer Success Manager, who introduced them to the latest version of the D2L platform, with its new Daylight interface.

“The demo really made us sit up and take notice,” says Webber. “We had no idea what a powerful tool we already had. And we realized that switching to Daylight would be quick and easy, which made it incredibly attractive. It was a huge influence on our final decision to go with D2L.”

The team also realized that since D2L was already running its existing distance learning platform—a far larger and more complex course than the new short courses—it ought to be more than capable of delivering all the requirements. As such, it represented a low-risk, low-effort, low-cost route to achieve the organization’s goals.

OPENING UP NEW POSSIBILITIES
After upgrading its D2L platform to the latest release and the Daylight user interface, Gafta gradually started introducing new functionalities to make life easier for its instructors, administrators and learners alike.

“When we switched to Daylight it really opened up new possibilities,” says Webber. “The automation tools save so much time, it’s incredible. Just the fact that learners now upload their assignments to the platform instead of sending them by email saves us hours of work.”

The platform does more than just save staff time behind the scenes—it improves the learner experience too. The interface is much more user-friendly, and the system provides a more structured, automated approach to course management that minimizes the risks of delays and mistakes for learners.

Sophie Webber, Head of Training and Events, Gafta
As Gafta began to streamline its platform, it started using Intelligent Agents to automate notifications to learners to help keep them on track with assignments, alert them of feedback and ensure they are logging into the system. Previously, administrators sent out reminders manually by email, so it was easy for both instructors and learners to forget when assignments were due. Now, the whole process is built into the design of the course; the reminders are sent automatically and the platform’s calendar function is employed fully. The result is assignments are handed in on time, allowing administrators/instructors the flexibility to revitalize and review content on the platform.

After the success of Intelligent Agents, Gafta began to use Release Conditions to structure the flow of its courses and further increase automation in the platform. Previously, sending out the certificates was an email-based process. Now, when a course is completed, it triggers a Release Condition that automatically gives learners access to download their personal certificate directly from the platform itself.

**BUILDING BETTER CONTENT**

After streamlining the usability of the platform overall, Gafta’s second objective was to improve the presentation of the course materials ready for its new short courses.

Gafta worked with experts from D2L’s Learning & Creative Services to design five new modules for the short course program, based on the organization’s need for interactive content and course design based around knowledge-retention. These engaging short courses function as templates for the Gafta team so that they can create and update course content for future courses themselves as and when they need to.

The D2L team also helped make the courses more compelling by introducing interactive elements such as maps, matrices, calendars and quizzes.

“Much of our content is very technical, so it can be heavy going for learners,” says Webber. “D2L made it much more interactive, more appealing and more professional-looking. It was a super-positive experience working with D2L’s Learning & Creative Services team.”
HARVESTING THE BENEFITS OF A MODERN LMS

First and foremost, Gafta feels that its new short courses embody a much more modern approach to distance learning, emphasizing user experience as a central focus.

“Even during the changeover to the new system, the volume of support questions from users went down,” says Webber. “With Daylight, users seem to instantly understand how to find what they’re looking for, so they don’t need to ask us for help. It’s just a much more intuitive user experience.”

By automating many of the previously manual aspects of course administration, the platform is also saving hours of work for instructors—helping them focus on spending time with learners instead of worrying about administrative details.

During the project, the Gafta team decided to clean house and deleted 75 user accounts that were no longer active, expecting the number of total users of the system to fall significantly afterwards. However, only a few months later, they found that user numbers had remained stable despite this cleanse; the new platform had quickly attracted a new audience of learners.

“The look and feel of the new modules [and changes to the platform] is so much more appealing, it’s clearly having an effect on our learners,” says Webber. “As a next step, we’re keen to put the content of our old distance learning program into the same format.”

She concludes: “We now have a platform that we’re actively able to market, so we hope to see growth in participation over the coming months and years. Ultimately, it’s all about making learning opportunities more accessible to our members around the world—helping them develop their skills and ensure that the industry remains in safe hands both now and in the future.”

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