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.
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.”

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.”
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

D2L DESIRE2LEARN
“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
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
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.”

Toby Cummings, Executive Director, IMSA