McKinsey Is MOOCing on Up

BY SARAH FISTER GALE

Getting senior staff to participate in learning programs can be tough. But at McKinsey & Co., it can be particularly challenging.

"We can't insist that partners do anything," said Tim Welsh, director, senior partner and chair for the global management consulting firm's learning and development council. "They have to want to do it."

McKinsey has more than 1,500 senior partners who are expected to have deep knowledge and expertise about the latest business trends, management strategies and innovations that could affect their clients' businesses. In an ever-changing economy, these partners have to constantly update their skills to stay current, said Liz Gryger, director of functional and diverse profiles learning at McKinsey in Pittsburgh. "Typically this group learns about trends though conversations with peers," she said. "We wanted to find a way to scale that."

SNAPSHOT

Skeptical, uber busy senior executives can be tough critics when it comes to new learning offerings. McKinsey & Co. managed to not only make MOOCs appealing but also made sure the learning transferred immediately to clients.

can I grow revenues while still serving customer needs?" Then they set out to build content to answer those questions. "We realized that we would need internal experts from all the industries, functions and delivery models we serve to weigh in with specific experiences and ideas," Welsh said.

They invited 125 experts from across the company to a meeting in Amsterdam to discuss how they might answer these questions — and 75 showed up. Hosting a live event to shape the program demonstrated to the

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—Jon Duane, director and senior partner, McKinsey & Co.

So in 2014, the learning and development team began building Partner University, a blended learning program that included a series of massive open online courses, or MOOCs, featuring content developed by in-house McKinsey experts, and two on-site events at Harvard University in Massachusetts and Oxford University in London where partners could come together to build on what they learned in the courses and network. "The goal was to make it very context relevant using internal and external expertise," Gryger said.

Hundreds of Experts

A small group of senior leaders, including Welsh, led the project and identified 10 critical questions the partners' C-suite clients might ask. For example, "How

experts that the learning and development team was serious about the project, which helped generate participation, Welsh said. "It never would have worked if we did it via videoconference."

Experts were divided into teams based on the 10 business themes, and together they interviewed experts on video, shared customer cases studies, curated relevant documents from McKinsey's massive client database and gathered ideas from external experts to round out the online courses.

At the same time, the learning and development team had to select an online platform to host the content. They wanted technology that would be easy-to-access, user-friendly, secure and robust enough to support all of the modules. Ultimately they chose a

platform from Intrepid, which met all of their security and usability needs, though users need Internet connection to gain access to the courses. That means partners can't take the training while on airplanes, but it was the best option available, Welsh said.

By the end of 2014, the first online courses were built and ready to deploy. The team refers to all of the online content as MOOCs, though they don't follow the traditional college-based format in which traditional linear course materials are combined with interactive user forums. "Our content is more SPOC [small private online course] than MOOC," said Mary Andrade, director of learning design and development in Los Angeles. The McKinsey courses can be completed in any order, but partners don't have live online forums to share ideas or compete lessons.

The courses are designed to be completed in about 30 minutes, including watching the videos, which are four to eight minutes long. At the end of each course, users are encouraged to answer questions in their client notebook, detailing the most effective parts of the training. "The notebook forces people to think about how they would apply what they learned in client meetings and to write that down," said Chief Learning Officer Nick van Dam. "This is all about creating client impact."

They are also encouraged to post questions and answers to an online bulletin board, and to network with their peers through assigned cohorts — teams of 20 to 40 partners with a designated leader who hosts monthly calls to talk about training topics. "The cohorts are another way for them to reflect on what they learned," said Ashley Williams, COO and deputy CLO at McKinsey in Atlanta.

We Need to Have The Talk

Partner University launched in early 2015 and was heavily promoted by senior leaders and the learning and development team. Having a lot of senior stakeholders involved caught many partners' attention, including Jon Duane, director and senior partner with a focus on biotech, pharma and medical device clients. Duane has been with the company for 29 years and wasn't totally convinced he needed to take the online training. "I'm used to finding ideas in conferences and through talking to colleagues," he said.

But Partner University received enough fanfare and promotion to hook him. He went through the course catalog and admitted if he hadn't found a topic relevant to him, he might have blown it off. When he saw the topic "Thinking Like an Activist Shareholder," it piqued his interest. Shareholder activists try to generate company changes by bringing public attention to an environment or social issues like using child labor, or destroying rainforests. Duane said the McKinsey

course teaches partners how to have these kinds of tough conversations with clients in a safe environment, before an activist shareholder brings them up.

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As soon as he started, he said, he was engaged. He especially liked that the videos were of colleagues he recognized, and they weren't perfect or overly produced. "It felt more like I was in a dialogue with another partner than taking a class. It made it feel more real, like if I didn't pay attention, they would know." Before he was even done with the course, he set up a meeting with a client to have an activist stakeholder discussion, and he reached out to one of the featured experts to help him plan his approach.

Badges and Leaderboards Spur Competition

Even though the training is optional and the audience is made of busy executives, by early summer roughly 1,100 users had taken at least two courses. That is an 86 percent rate of engagement — almost 20 percent higher than the program's initial target, Andrade said. "It was really exciting, especially with this group because if it wasn't engaging they wouldn't have done it."

Even better, Andrade said all the feedback she has gotten is either positive, or has suggestions for future improvements, which suggests that users expect Partner University to be an ongoing offering. "That tells me it is working."

To keep partners coming back for more, the learning team used gamification and the upcoming live events to spur participation and some healthy competition. The live events were marketed through emails, online alerts and cohort meetings to build on the learning happening online, so partners knew they would be missing out if they didn't complete any courses. "It was good to have a time-bound incentive," Andrade said. "As the events got closer, we definitely saw a bump in participation."

They also created leader boards and established

20 different badges partners could win for being among the first 800 to finish a course, or being the first to sign up for more than two courses. "It drove a lot of competition," she said. Winners received pins to wear on their badges at the live event.

Looking back on the program's success, Gryger said the biggest lesson they learned is to never make assumptions about what an audience will respond to. "We faced a lot of skeptics who said partners would never take online learning," she said. But by using stakeholders from across the company to create actionable, easy-to-digest content, they were able to engage busy partners and deliver a valuable learning experience. "We got the best thinking available and created something that was very relevant to their needs."

While the team hasn't formally measured learning impact, an early survey showed more than 600 client conversations have taken place on topics covered in the training, which is a key metric. "It demonstrates that they are applying what they learn with clients," Andrade said.

McKinsey will continue to track the number of client conversations as well as client feedback to judge the program's ongoing effect.

Even though the live events have ended, the learning team expects to keep Partner University going. The learning and development team is currently exploring new time-bound events for the future, and considering plans to tweak the format for junior staff by adding live speakers and a more linear, six-week program.

"It is important to find a balance for continuous learning that doesn't create fatigue," Williams said. She said the live events can't conflict with the many other events partners attend every year, but that it may become a biannual event, or possibly tie content to smaller regional meetings for local teams.

Users are excited by the prospect. "This training showed me there are more modern channels to transfer information than conversations with colleagues," Duane said. "It was an effective way to move information and ideas to the people who need it." **CLO**

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