

Next-Generation Blended Learning

Nationwide Insurance Improves IT Staff Retraining by Blending Formal and Informal Learning

—David Mallon, *Senior Analyst* | June 2009

▶ IN THIS CASE STUDY

The phrase “workforce retraining” is often associated with massive government-sponsored programs aimed at relatively low-skilled participants. Retraining of highly skilled workers sometimes occurs at private sector companies, but it is usually targeted at transitioning a specific individual into a new role. Enterprises rarely create sustainable, repeatable programs to retool existing employees in large numbers.

Nationwide, one of the largest insurance and integrated financial companies in the U.S., has a key corporate initiative to expand its presence on the Internet. This new information technology (IT) strategy requires the migration of a significant number of existing software applications to a Java 2 Enterprise Edition (J2EE) web environment. Due to high demand for J2EE programming skills, attracting capable J2EE software developers is both difficult and expensive.

Faced with a shortfall of qualified workers, Nationwide’s IT learning and development organization created a new learning program specifically designed to identify and retrain current IT workers who have a track record of strong performance for these high-demand roles – and to provide them with additional career opportunities. The program also provides an additional method for attracting highly talented recent college graduates to Nationwide’s IT organization.

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MANAGEMENT

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This case study examines:

- Business drivers behind Nationwide’s decision to “build” Java software development expertise in-house, rather than “buy” it through recruiting or “rent” it through consultants;
- The structure of the IT learning organization that developed and delivers the *J2EE Fast Track* learning program;
- How the organization used a performance consulting process to assess and analyze the learning requirements of the audience;
- Details of the retraining program, including executive sponsorship, identifying candidates, implementation, launch activities and reusability;
- Business impacts of the *J2EE Fast Track* learning program; and,
- Lessons learned and best practices.

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Company Overview

Over the last 80 years, Nationwide has grown from a small auto insurer for Ohio farmers to one of the largest insurance and financial services companies in the world, with more than \$160 billion in statutory assets. Nationwide is one of the largest and strongest diversified insurance and financial services organizations in the world, and is rated A+ by A.M. Best. The company (which ranks number 124 on the *FORTUNE* 500 list) provides a full range of insurance and financial services, including auto insurance, motorcycle, boat, homeowners, life insurance, farm, commercial insurance, administrative services, annuities, mortgages, mutual funds, pensions, long-term savings plans, and health and productivity services.¹

Figure 1: Nationwide at a Glance²

- **Year founded:** 1925
- **Annual Revenue:** \$23 billion for fiscal year 2007
- **Total employees:** Approximately 36,000
- **Ownership:** Private
- **Headquarters:** Columbus, Ohio

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

Business Environment

Nationwide's 2007 decision to migrate most of its software applications from a COBOL / mainframe computing environment to a Java / web services model had serious repercussions for talent management. The IT organization faced a classic "buy, build or rent" decision. In order to bolster its Java application development resources, IT leaders had the following three choices:

- "Buy" talent by hiring associates with Java / J2EE expertise;
- "Build" talent by developing existing internal resources; or,
- "Rent" talent by hiring contractors for short-term contracts.

¹ Source: biz.yahoo.com.

² Ibid.

Experts in Java programming (and specifically Java 2 Enterprise Edition) are difficult to recruit. Once hired, these J2EE development experts would still need to learn about the insurance industry and the business. Overuse of IT contractors can increase costs and reduce the internal knowledge base. The remaining alternative was to develop a program that would:

- Retool current application developers who have a track record of high performance in structural COBOL or a mainframe programming, as well as strong knowledge of the business, for the J2EE development environment;
- Demonstrate Nationwide's commitment to its associates and underscore its promise to invest in its employees;
- Provide a morale boost for all application developers by sending a strong signal that the company is keeping the development function in-house and not engaging off-shore resources; and,
- Introduce new talent to the application development job family by providing an opportunity that is attractive to exceptional college students.

Since retooling had to be completed rapidly to meet objectives, this initiative was named *IT J2EE Fast Track*. Following the completion of training, all participants would be expected to follow best practices as established by the J2EE Center of Excellence (CoE) and contribute independently on their post-graduation teams.

Performance Consulting Process³

Nationwide's IT learning and development (L&D) group was tasked with building, delivering, managing and measuring the *IT J2EE Fast Track* program. The group started by analyzing the business problem. The performance consulting process utilized by IT learning managers at Nationwide was similar to the one outlined in *Performance Consulting: Moving Beyond Training*⁴.

³ "Performance consulting" is a needs assessment process that must be completed to identify the root cause of the business problem. Working with the line of business, performance consultants diagnose the business problem and assess the needs, and then work with instructional designers to develop, launch, manage and assess the training solution. Performance consulting does not presume that the solution is training.

⁴ Source: *Performance Consulting: Moving Beyond Training*, Dana Gaines Robinson and Jim C. Robinson, Berrett-Koehler Publishers; 1995.

Senior executives and subject matter experts (SMEs) from Nationwide's J2EE Center of Excellence were interviewed and engaged as partners throughout the business needs assessment, needs analysis and requirements building. The focus was to gather information on:

- What the performance results should be (gap analysis);
- Work environment (e.g., amount of support, team versus individual work and resources like coaching, project timelines, et al);
- Best practices; and,
- How quality would be measured.

Based on the timeline for the pilot session, the IT L&D group's initial design focused on the first, third and fourth items. The program was evaluated following the pilot – and adaptations were made to more effectively address work environment issues and make the program appropriate for use across multiple lines of business.

Audience Requirements

Several processes were deemed important to incorporate, based on the following reach and participant characteristics.

- The quantities of material to be mastered made the immersion learning approach an appropriate methodology.
- Since most participants were strong performers on another team, a process and transition period was needed to allow current tasks to be shifted to another team member with minimal disruption to project quality and timelines.
- Most participants also had to make a mental shift from being an unconscious-competent (e.g., "the expert") on their previous teams to being a conscious-incompetent (e.g., "the novice") during the retraining period. Coaching, team-building and evaluations that recognized progress and skill were incorporated to address this requirement.
- Most recent college grads had limited experience working in a large organization. Methods to cover business norms, appropriate communications and Nationwide's work processes had to be integrated.

⁵ For more information, *The High-Impact Learning Organization: WhatWorks® in the Management, Governance and Operations of Modern Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 2008. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/highimpact.

ANALYSIS

*Our High-Impact Learning Organization*⁵ research identified performance consulting as a clear best practice and a top 10 driver of business impact for learning. Organizations with good to excellent performance consulting teams tend to have 30 percent higher effectiveness ratings, 28 percent higher efficiency ratings and 26 percent higher alignment ratings than organizations with poor focus in this area.

Blended-Learning Strategy

The results of *J2EE Fast Track* were going to be measured on participants' abilities to apply new skills and follow best practices. Adult learning theory, performance coaching research and personal experience indicated that use of classroom training alone would not enable Nationwide's IT L&D group to meet the goals of this initiative. It would instead require a balanced mixture of classroom training, job-related assignments and simulations with feedback.

An integrated learning program (13 to 15 weeks) focused on the multiple skills sets and best practices identified by SMEs was developed by the IT L&D group. Classroom training was supplemented with a combination of significant relational and experiential learning and work with peers and subject matter experts. This team environment encourages participants to learn while helping other team members

The IT L&D group is shifting its instructional design approach to learning and development solutions toward a 70 / 20 / 10 model (e.g., 70 percent of development is through on-the-job assignments partnered with coaching; 20 percent through opportunities to learn through peer-to-peer relations, initial simulations with feedback and work with peers / coaches; and, 10 percent through traditional classroom training). *J2EE Fast Track* was proof of concept for this approach. Business executives supported use of experiential training based on the data from the gap analysis.

"Mastery" (as we define it in *The Blended Learning Book*⁷) is a combination of proficiency and retention – meaning that a true master is not only proficient (he / she could pass any test), but he / she has the ability to retain and apply the knowledge in a wide range of different conditions. When you walk out of a class, you may feel like a master because you passed the test. But only after you apply this information dozens of times to widely varying conditions do you truly come close to being a master.

One of the goals of organizational learning is to drive higher levels of mastery. A "master" of a subject is typically five to 10 times more productive and efficient than someone who is "good." This principle has been demonstrated again and again in fields like software development (in which

KEY POINT

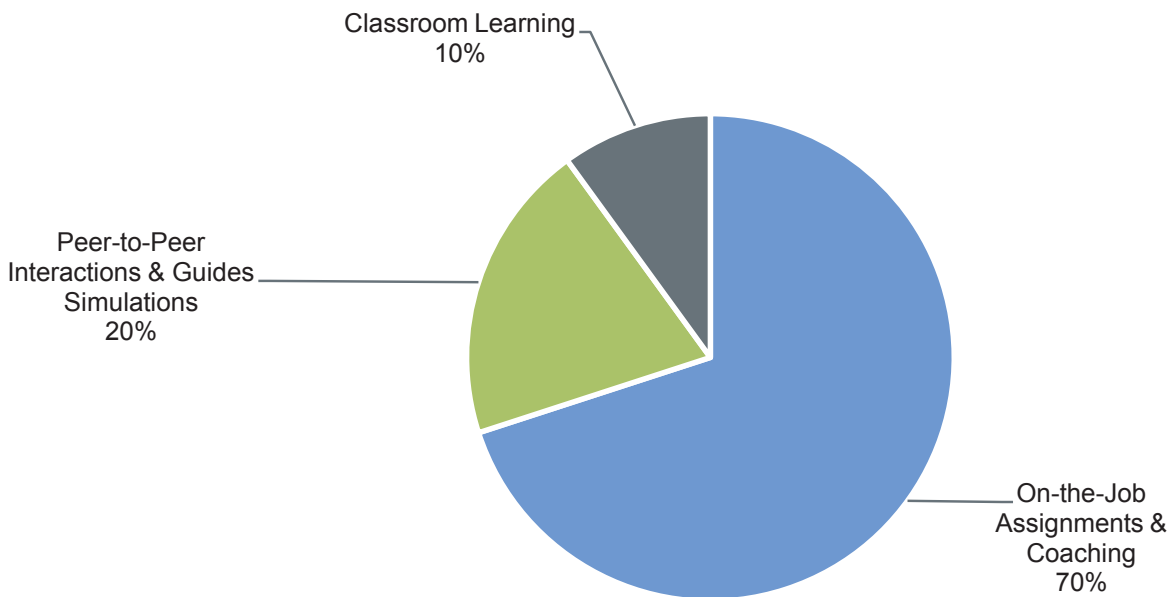
Only 10 percent of the learning approaches used in the *J2EE Fast Track* program are formal classroom training. The other 90 percent comes in the form of what we call "formalized informal learning"⁶.

⁶ For more information, *The Enterprise Learning Framework: A Modern Approach to Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin and David Mallon, May 2009. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of all the options for the design of blended-learning programs, *The Blended Learning Book: Best Practices, Proven Methodologies, and Lessons Learned*, Josh Bersin, Pfeiffer, October 2004. Available at www.bersin.com.

a master can write 100 times as much code as a novice), sales (in which a senior sales representative generates 10 times the sales of a young rep), customer service (in which a seasoned representative can solve 10 times as many problems as a young rep) and even in management. So, one of the goals of the L&D organization is to both identify the definition of mastery, and to deliver programs and solutions that drive mastery.

Figure 2: Nationwide’s Blend of Learning Approaches



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

Mastery demands experience, so much of the role of L&D should be to facilitate and accelerate the ability for a person to gain more experience. Our research from *The Blended Learning Book*⁸ showed that people retain only 10 percent of what they read, 20 percent to 30 percent of what they hear, and almost 50 percent of what they learn through discussion and interaction. When we add direct experience to that mix (i.e., on-the-job experience with the real risks and dangers of making mistakes), the retention and application level goes up to 75 percent or more.

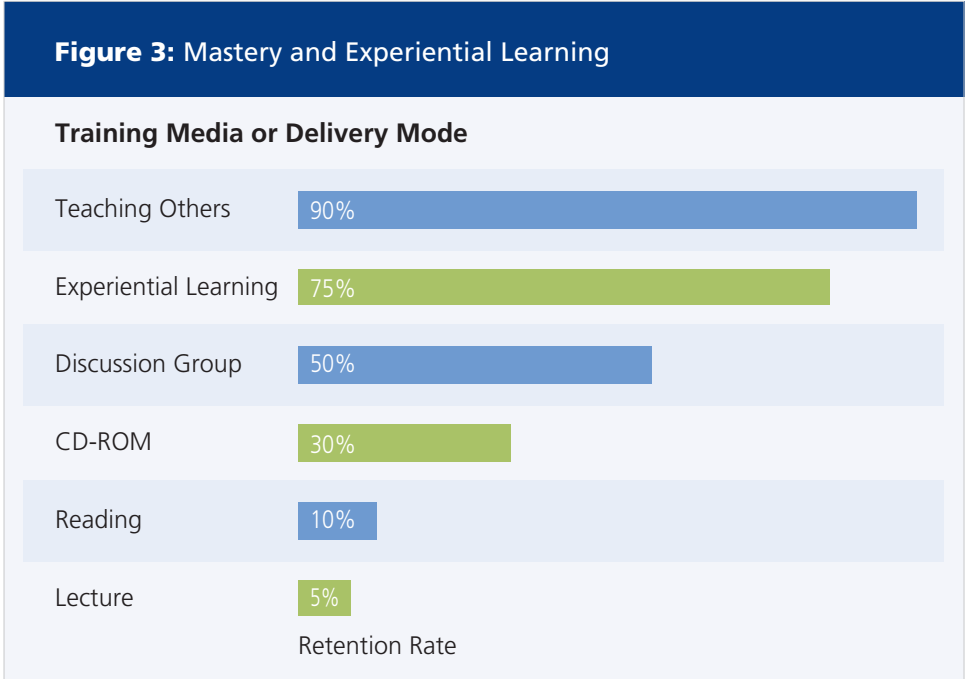
So, in essence, what we really need to do if we want to build mastery is to create and accelerate the process of formal and informal experiential learning.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of all the options for the design of blended-learning programs, *The Blended Learning Book: Best Practices, Proven Methodologies, and Lessons Learned*, Josh Bersin, Pfeiffer, October 2004.

KEY POINT

On-the-job experience can lead to an increase in learner retention and application level of up to 75 percent or more.

Figure 3: Mastery and Experiential Learning



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

IT J2EE Fast Track

Executive Sponsorship

Executive sponsorship was critical throughout all phases, including marketing, selection, training, onboarding, evaluation, et al. Two executive leaders committed to and became the primary sponsors for the project – Nationwide’s vice president, chief technology officer was the *J2EE Fast Track* executive sponsor and an assistant vice president, HR was the *J2EE Fast Track* business sponsor.

Another invaluable component was the identification of a subject matter expert who served as a technical partner. Engagement of SMEs was critical to ensuring that training was targeted to performance outcomes / expectations. The consulting IT architect is a J2EE Center of Excellence member who helps with identifying SMEs, providing a team of people to insure application assignments are evaluated consistently and identifying participants who need additional support.

⁹ For more information, *The High-Impact Learning Organization: WhatWorks® in the Management, Governance and Operations of Modern Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 2008.

ANALYSIS

Our *High-Impact Learning Organization* research⁹ shows that strong executive sponsorship is essential for high business impact.

Program Launch

The pilot session was launched for internal associates using a variety of communication methods, including:

- Information in the IT community newsletter;
- Emails from executive sponsors to the IT leadership team and to all IT associates;
- A series of overview sessions that covered the goals, commitment required, post-graduation assignments, et al.; and,
- Application forms with information from the J2EE Center of Excellence about roles, expectations, et al.

Marketing for subsequent sessions was expanded with companywide announcements on the intranet and word-of-mouth from graduates. Established university networks and processes were used to identify and attract strong college recruits.

Identifying Candidates

J2EE is becoming the industry standard for financial companies and, thus, participation in the *J2EE Fast Track* program is an opportunity to pursue a new career path. Nationwide developers are motivated to join the program because it allows them to become skilled in a high-demand technology.

The success of the program is highly dependent on the careful selection of participants and post-graduation hiring sites. Interested associates apply for the program and those selected are transitioned out of their old positions for the duration of this intense learning experience.

Post-graduate positions are evaluated to insure they incorporate relevant J2EE application development tasks and that the hiring team can provide an SME who can provide approximately 40 hours of coaching time over the course of the program.

Program Implementation

IT J2EE Fast Track is currently 14 consecutive weeks (see Figure 4). During this period, participants leave their prior positions and are immersed in the learning experience, which includes the following components.

- Classroom training covers six major topics, including labs.

- Pre- and post-tests measure understanding and identify learning outcomes that need to be reviewed before moving on to subsequent training.
- Minor courses (developed specifically for *Fast Track*, using the ADDIE¹⁰ model and incorporating significant use of exercises) focus on best practices and the use of software tools.
- Development of application assignments (real-world type work) follow each major topic. Developed by SMEs, this experiential learning requires participants to apply (and extend) the knowledge covered by facilitators. Core, stretch and advanced sections were developed for each assignment to scale them to a participant's ability to absorb material and experience level. SMEs also created an expert solution for each assignment – which are used to reinforce best practices, provide a benchmark for judging a participant's solution and to serve as the starting point for a participant's work on subsequent assignments.
- Review sessions are held for each assignment. The review sessions for the final two assignments are one-on-one meetings. During these sessions, participants present their solutions, explain the thought process for development of the solutions and explain how they were done. If it is not fully functioning, they cover the additional steps needed to correct the problems.
- Final tests cover the knowledge acquired, problem-solving abilities, and the ability to apply and extend the skills / tools learned.

Reusability

J2EE Fast Track was developed as a pilot project to test the concept of accelerated learning in a variety of IT areas. Components have been developed that are reusable for multiple sessions. These include the application form, selection process, participant "draft" process, application assignments, knowledge tests, minor sessions (including facilitator guides) and more.

Now that these components have been tested and are successful, IT L&D is identifying opportunities to reuse them for other areas of technology training. Executive sponsors are also reviewing workforce demand to see if there are other areas in which an IT Fast Track session would be appropriate.

¹⁰ "ADDIE" is a standard instructional design model that stands for analyze, design, develop, implement and evaluate.



KEY POINT

The program includes three different levels of materials and assignments at each point in the program – core, stretch and advanced – in order to scale to a participant's ability to absorb material and experience level.

Figure 4: Nationwide J2EE Fast Track Schedule

J2EE IT Fast Track Schedule -- Combined Session July, 2008							
Week Of:	Week 1 July 7	Week 2 July 14	Week 3 July 21	Week 4 July 28	Week 5 August 4	Week 6 August 11	Week 7 August 18
Monday							
Tuesday	OOAD training 8:30 to 4:30	Java Programming 8:30 to 4:30	Assignment #1 -- OOAD On-Site Expert M. Ramsey Team Mtg 4:30 - 5:00 M & W 4:30 - 4:45 F	Assignment #2 -- Java Programming 8:30 - 4:30 On-site experts: D. Demmon; B. Stephens Team Meeting 4:30 - 5:15 M & W 4:30 - 4:45 F	RAD Team Mtg 4:30 - 5:15 M & W 4:30 - 4:45 F	J2EE Essentials Team Mtg 5 - 5:15 (if needed) T & Th	Assignment #3 -- J2EE Essentials On-Site Expert M Ramsey F Lamantia 8:30 - 4:30
Wednesday	Team Meeting Daily if needed 4:30 - 5:15	Team Meeting Daily if needed 4:30 - 5:00	JUnit Maven Continuous Integration (Cruise) 8 - 5	NW WAS 1:30 - 4:30	XML Overview	Review sessions 5 to 6:30 pm (if needed)	Web Services 8 - 12:30
Thursday			Assignment 2-- Java Programming 8:30 - 4:30	OOAD Reviews 8:30 - 2:30 log4J 2:30 - 4:30	Ajax Overview		Assignment #3 -- J2EE Essentials
Friday	Subversion training OOAD Assignment				Java Programming Reviews		Security 9 - 12:30 Assignment #3 -- J2EE Essentials

Legend	Training Classes- -Majors	Training Classes- -Minors	Assignments	Assignment Reviews	Final Tests & Assignment
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Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

Figure 4: Nationwide J2EE Fast Track Schedule (cont'd)

Week Of:	Week 8 August 25	Week 9 September 1	Week 10 September 8	Week 11 September 15	Week 12 September 22	Week 13 September 29	Week 14 October 6	Redevelopment October 15
Monday		Holiday-- Labor Day		J2EE Presentation Tier Review Profiling / Perf Testing 1 - 4:30				
Tuesday	J2EE Presentation Tier 8 - 5:30 Team Mtg Tues 5:15 - 5:30	J2EE Essentials Review	J2EE Business Logic/Data Access 8 - 5:30 Review sessions 5:30 to 6:30 if needed	Spring/ Hibernate Training 8:30 - 4:30 Team Mtg 4:30 - 5:00 T & TH	Assignment #5 - J2EE Business Logic/Data Access On-site Experts: M. Ramsey; F. Lamantia, B Koch, Team Mtg As needed	J2EE Business Logic/Data Access Individual Review Sessions; (Note: each participant will be assigned a specific 1 hour review time) Begin Work on Final Assignment	Final Assignment; Core checked in by Tuesday at 8 am; Prep for Knowledge & Essay Tests	Final Application Assignment Review Sessions 8 - 5 (Note: each participant will be assigned a specific 1 hour review time)
Wednesday		Assignment #4 - J2EE Presentation Tier On-Site Expert M. Ramsey B Koch 8:30 - 4:30 Team Mtg 4:30 - 5 T & TH						
Thursday								
Friday				Begin Application Assignment 5	Final Assgmt Review; Java Script Framework & Class Loader/Class Path (P. McDonough)	Final Assignment, con't. Team Mtg As needed	Knowledge & Essay Tests Final Assignment Review Sessions 1 - 5 pm	J2EE Fast Track Celebration! Friday PM--Get ready to transition

Legend	Training Classes - -Majors	Training Classes - -Minors	Assignments	Assignment Reviews	Final Tests & Assignment
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Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

Technology

Since the goal of the *J2EE Fast Track* program is to enable associates to be successful in a totally different programming environment, the IT L&D group integrated appropriate technology during training.

Each participant receives a computer configured for standard J2EE application development. He / she incorporates the technology and tools used by their post-grad teams (e.g., RAD, Subversion, JUnit, log4J, Maven, et al) as they develop solutions for application assignments.

Additionally, e-learning modules and online reference books are available. Participants use these resources to supplement classroom training and work on assignments as needed.

Business Impact / Metrics

The IT L&D group has made a commitment to using evaluation that includes Kirkpatrick's levels 1 to 3¹¹. Level 4 evaluations will be implemented when the data required to complete them is available.

Based on feedback from hiring managers, executives and participants, the *J2EE Fast Track* program has been successful for both internal associates and recent college graduates. Key evaluation points include the following from a recent survey of all hiring managers (98 percent response rate).

- Seventy percent of 2007 grads were performing at their salary band within three months; 100 percent were performing at band in less than nine months.
- All 2007 hiring managers would recommend the program based on quality of the learning initiative. One recommended that the hiring criterion for college graduates be expanded to include specific personal attributes.

¹¹ Donald Kirkpatrick's four-level Measurement Model has been widely published in many articles and its terminology is well-known to most training professionals. The original model was published in *Training and Development Handbook*, R. L. Craig, McGraw-Hill, 1976.

¹² For more information, *The High-Impact Learning Organization: WhatWorks® in the Management, Governance and Operations of Modern Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 2008.

ANALYSIS

A sound performance consulting program creates a measurement methodology before design and delivery. Research shows that the single biggest factor in predicting an organization's ability to measure training is its effectiveness in performance consulting. Organizations with performance consulting expertise are more than seven times more likely to have an excellent or world-class measurement program.¹²

- A number of long-term contractors were replaced by graduates. Hiring managers indicated that the quality and speed of work improved when *Fast Track* grads moved into the positions. Estimated savings range from \$50,000 to \$80,000 annually per contractor replaced.

The correlation between the general economy and training budgets is commonly accepted – when the economy softens, most organizations choose to reduce (or eliminate) training expenditures. Nationwide executives signaled their view of the value and strategic alignment of this initiative by maintaining budget and SME resources for *J2EE Fast Track* in 2007 and 2008, while reducing the budget for a number of lines of business.

Lessons Learned and Best Practices

Nationwide's IT L&D managers shared some important lessons learned and best practices that can be used by other training organizations seeking to develop a large-scale employee retraining program, which incorporates a blended-learning strategy.

Lessons Learned

- It was important to almost over-communicate the intensity, expectations and challenge of the program, so that people who are not highly committed would choose not to apply. (*Desire is as important as innate intelligence.*)
- The application assignments need to be scaled (core, stretch, advanced), so that people with more experience and / or who learn the material more quickly are challenged to excel. This impacts / improves productivity and engagement as they join their new teams.
- Select participants carefully. In an immersion training scenario, facilitators tend to teach to the pace of the least talented participant.
- Provide training and tools for technical coaches / SMEs on how to be effective coaches. People may be technical experts, but not strong coaches. Managers also need to release coaches from project responsibilities, so that they have time to coach effectively.



KEY POINT

Hiring managers indicated that the quality and speed of work improved when *Fast Track* grads moved into the positions. Estimated savings range from \$50,000 to \$80,000 annually per contractor replaced.

Best Practices

- Incorporate applications assignments that mirrored real-work tasks and the skills required for success immediately after each major classroom topic.
- Develop a program that enables long-term employees to transition to a totally different technology area rapidly.
- Engage SMEs in the initiative – this promoted transfer of knowledge to students, but also resulted in knowledge transfer between SMEs from various teams and multiple lines of business.
- Incorporate best practices and J2EE Center of Excellence standards – when graduates move to their new team, they help migrate teams to new platforms and model best practices.
- The use of application assignments is helping managers understand the impact of using on-the-job assignments partnered with coaching, as well as peer to peer relations and initial simulations with feedback. Future use of these types of learning opportunities will improve Nationwide's ability to learn and adapt quickly.

Conclusion

Bersin & Associates believes that we are entering a fourth era of corporate training¹³ – that of social, collaborative and talent-driven learning. Today's worker still needs formal training that is built around specific problems and talent needs; however, today's worker also needs the availability of a "learning environment" in which he / she can find information, collaborate and build his / her own learning plans. The learning organization must go beyond the disciplines of building content for use online. We must provide context and pathways for people to learn.

In addition, the disciplines of talent management have matured. Organizations, such as Nationwide, now have teams that manage learning, performance management, assessment, leadership development, succession management and career development in a single group. We no longer look at employees as "people to train" but, rather, as "talent to manage" – and want to align our L&D investments with the talent management strategies

¹³ For more information, *The Enterprise Learning Framework: A Modern Approach to Corporate Training*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin and David Mallon, May 2009.

needed to grow or improve the business. Addressing a clear talent need is a novel way and the *J2EE Fast Track* program is a perfect example of such a talent-driven learning initiative.

The *J2EE Fast Track* program is an effective example of what we believe is the next generation of blended-learning programs. Formal, structured learning opportunities are provided in order to build fundamental proficiencies. However, the bulk of learning happens through thoughtfully architected opportunities for informal learning, including on-demand, social and embedded learning. Nationwide has formalized these informal activities by establishing clear objectives for each and implementing a comprehensive strategy for evaluating the success of each. Results so far seem to be proving the wisdom of their efforts.

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About Us

Bersin & Associates is the only research and advisory consulting firm focused solely on *WhatWorks*® research in enterprise learning and talent management. With more than 25 years of experience in enterprise learning, technology and HR business processes, Bersin & Associates provides actionable, research-based services to help learning and HR managers and executives improve operational effectiveness and business impact.

Bersin & Associates research members gain access to a comprehensive library of best practices, case studies, benchmarks and in-depth market analyses designed to help executives and practitioners make fast, effective decisions. Member benefits include: in-depth advisory services, access to proprietary webcasts and industry user groups, strategic workshops, and strategic consulting to improve operational effectiveness and business alignment. More than 3,500 organizations in a wide range of industries benefit from Bersin & Associates research and services.

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