

Lessons Learned: Successfully Implementing eLearning in a Senior Care Environment

By Mike Benzian

eLearning in senior care facilities is growing as more providers enter the landscape. Silverchair has researched and implemented eLearning programs for more than 175,000 caregivers in the United States. Through this research, course development, and interactions with customers, we know that eLearning is a viable method for effectively training senior care staff. Although the senior care community has traditionally been cautious about adopting new technology, we have developed best practices that can help any organization be successful with an eLearning program for its employees.

The Right Start

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Have the Right Team in Place

From the start, we learned the importance of having a dedicated Service Delivery Team for the start-up phase—a proactive team that seeks out client challenges and develops solutions, not just a reactive customer service department that responds to problems after they occur. A Service Delivery team is responsible for a client's success beginning on day one and continues to work with a client for the duration of the client relationship. The Service Delivery team is a critical element in launching and maintaining an eLearning program.

Make it Simple

The right start has to be quick and, most importantly, easy. Clients need to see immediate results and instant use of the eLearning system in order to continue to invest time and effort into making the program work. We learned to eliminate the massive amount of time and effort involved in setup and launch referenced in the 2005 case study. The following lessons learned highlight the importance of simplicity in start-up.

As an example of what *not* to do, in late 2004 we contracted with an eleven-facility non-profit health services organization. During the start-up phase we provided highly detailed GANNT charts, long task lists to be completed by the customer, numerous open-ended questions, and a request for the client to create a training calendar from scratch. As the launch process continued, we could see that the customer was not going to complete the numerous steps we had laid out in the process—they simply did not have the time. It was time to address our information needs in a new, simpler way.

We developed tools and gave them a few key questions, allowing them to make fast, effective decisions about their training system. The result was that they did not have to invest extra time gathering resources and composing solutions from scratch.

Another client, a twelve-facility assisted living chain operating in multiple states with multiple regulatory requirements, needed to determine which

courses met which training requirements in each of the states in which they operated. Requiring the client to manage this process slowed start-up. Realizing that we needed to get them launched, we took the lead and created a database detailing each state's regulatory requirements and how each course matched those requirements. Once we completed the work, we were able to get the client up and running with great success.

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These two scenarios describe the big lesson we learned, that one cannot expect a senior care client to have the time and resources to do a lot of research and information gathering. The burden is on the solution provider to make the process work.

"Make it simple" should be the motto for any eLearning program. You will want the right tools available to determine the course load, training calendar, tracking, and how the system should run. Any potential client should make sure its prospective eLearning provider can provide the needed assistance to launch quickly and easily.

Settle Technology Fears

Senior care facilities are wary of implementing new technologies, fearing that new technologies will not succeed or provide tangible benefits, or will be time-consuming during implementation and maintenance. Through our research, we have learned that if the technology is easy to use and understand (and we offer support to ensure success), the eLearning program stands a greater chance of adoption and use in the future.

The greatest lesson we have learned when dealing with technology fears - have credible, proven answers for every doubt or worry. As ambassadors for eLearning in Senior Care, we consistently prove that eLearning can be fast and easy to start-up and maintain, easy to understand for all learning levels, and easy to use for all employees. Start-up needs to be a streamlined process that requires little effort on the client's part. Courses must have been designed for all learning and language levels. The eLearning system is required to be easy to use.

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To reduce the technology fears for one client—a 70-facility chain that employed a number of people who were intimidated by the prospect of using a computer—we found a course covering mouse-control basics that we incorporated into the staff's first course assignment during the launch process. The simplicity of starting with the basics and building their confidence allowed the adoption process to continue smoothly and quickly. The usability of the technology gave them the confidence to believe they could learn in an online environment.

We found ways to prove that employees of all educational backgrounds and all levels of technology knowledge can use the system. We use that proof as a powerful tool in calming technology fears. Organizations see that eLearning can be beneficial without being intimidating.

Address Technology Constraints

As we researched and designed our eLearning system, we learned that the majority of senior care organizations utilized older technology and rarely had the technology resources to run a complex system. Our lesson learned: address existing technology constraints to ensure our eLearning

system could work within *any* technology framework (no matter how closed and proprietary).

Our system has to stay simple to make certain it is available to all.

We use this basic tenet as we continue to modify our offering. We have changed the audio file size of online courses to accommodate low-bandwidth networks. As we updated our authoring tool, we were forced to make trade-off decisions between ease of use and beneficial features (with loads of complexity). Knowing our users and market allowed us to make the right decisions and go with “ease of use.” We enhanced the features, but did not add anything that would be confusing or ineffective. Our system has to stay simple to make certain it is available to all.

Successful eLearning is Truly Accessible to All

Make sure that any doubts are answered with simple solutions that empower the user to manage the system and learn.

These are just some of the lessons we have learned as we have helped senior care facilities across the country adopt eLearning programs. These are universal lessons that can apply to adopting any new eLearning program. Ensure that the eLearning provider has the resources to guide an organization through the start-up process. Make certain an easy and fast launch of the program to encourage early adoption and use of the system. Make sure that any doubts are answered with simple solutions that empower the user to manage the system and learn. Evaluate technology constraints early and ensure that your provider is flexible in working with your current system. Following these simple steps will help create the right environment for launching the best eLearning program for your senior care staff.

About the Author

Mike Benzian is the President of Silverchair Learning Systems (Silverchair) an eLearning company focused exclusively on providing online training systems for all caregivers working in a senior care setting. Silverchair serves skilled nursing, assisted living and home health companies. Mike has been working more than 10 years in software and 'software as a service' ventures, with specific expertise in making software products work in “low-tech quotient” industries. He received his BA from the University of Virginia and his MBA from the University of Virginia Darden School of Business.