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LMS e-Learning Implementation Podcast Transcript #8 *Interview with Andrew Merz*

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Mary Kay Lofurno: Welcome to the next edition of the SyberWorks LMS e-Learning Implementation Podcast Series where we look at actual learning management system implementations and e-Learning program roll-outs. My name is Mary Kay Lofurno, the Marketing Director here at SyberWorks, and your host today.

In this edition we are talking with Andrew Merz, Senior Educational Services Manager for Cedar Point Communications Inc. about their use of the SyberWorks Hosted LMS solution to provide online customer and vendor support training.

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Mary Kay: And now let's talk with Andrew Merz, Senior Educational Services Manager for Cedar Point Communications. Good afternoon, Andrew. Thanks for coming to talk with us today.

Andrew Merz: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Mary Kay: Sure. Andrew, tell me about yourself and what you do for Cedar Point Communications.

Andrew: I've been involved in various roles within customer support and products marketing for cable and telecom companies for about the past ten years.

Mary Kay: OK.

Andrew: The last five years I've been working here at Cedar Point managing the educational services group and in that group we deliver technical training to customers and internal departments on our products, as well as create customer-facing technical documentation.

Mary Kay: Now I understand Cedar Point Communications makes Voice-over-IP telephony software. I know you gave us some information. Can you give me a little bit more about your company and your products? Voice-over-IP is pretty interesting stuff, as far as I am concerned.

Andrew: It's a big area, too. There's a lot of different companies in that space. Cedar Point was founded about six years ago and we were targeting a market need for a simple, integrated Voice-over-IP telephony solution for the cable communications market.

But as you probably know, cable companies have expanded their own offerings from basic television service to high-speed Internet, and now also voice services.

So Cedar Point's flagship product, which is the Safari C3, is a carrier-class Voice-over-IP solution which enables these cable operators to provide telephony services to their customers. The advantage with Cedar Point products is that we're doing it in a way that is significantly less complex than competitive solutions that are on the market today and we can deliver these with reducing costs for actually delivering services to the end customer, which is folks like you and me.

So the good news is that for the consumer, this means more features and more capabilities for less, and for the cable operator it means more simplified solutions and better reliability than alternatives on the market.

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We've recently expanded our product offerings into other regions of the world and in other markets as well, so now enterprise customers, educational institutions, and companies in other regions of the world can use these services.

Mary Kay: Super. So what are some of the business factors that led you and your group to evaluate web-based learning management systems?

Andrew: Our biggest need was to scale, we really needed to scale our services to reach more of our customers more economically and more often than we had using just the traditional instructor-led training model. The core of our training is always hands-on, but a web-based learning model allows us to integrate and blend our instructor-led training with web-based learning.

Just as an example of how this can help us to scale our services, our new customers always need to receive initial hands-on training to learn and understand fundamental tasks to perform on our switches, as well as any role or job task. As you know, people learn by doing things.

Mary Kay: That's true.

Andrew: But after they take this training, web-based learning provides an easy and tailorable solution for what we call update training, delta training, which covers the new or changed information that is available, any new software or hardware released for the Safari C3. Students can purchase this training online at any time and take it at their leisure.

So the web-based platform allows us to prepare and deliver the training material essentially one time. We upload the training material onto our Learning Center and then it can be taken whenever and however often customers require it.

Mary Kay: Well, that sounds great. Now, your organization eventually selected a SyberWorks Hosted LMS solution. Who is using your system, just so I can understand? I know it's customers and vendors and anybody else who's using it?

Andrew: Yeah, the system which we call our Cedar Point Online Learning Center is used by all of our customers as well as internal staff.

Mary Kay: OK.

Andrew: One of the real benefits of the system is that it allows our Field Service Team to live and work all over the world supporting our customers and clients to be able to get recent product training at the drop of a hat, and therefore stay current with any and all of our ongoing products features, and enhancements prior to the Online Learning Centers, this was much more difficult and costly for us.
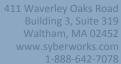
We have customers for all over the world also that are accessing our Online Learning Centers. This Online Learning Center supports a customer base which requires multiple languages and today we currently provide our web-based training to both English and Spanish speaking customers.

Mary Kay: Oh.

Andrew: That's...that's a tremendous benefit.

Mary Kay: OK. Now I know you mentioned delta training. Can you tell me a little bit more about the online courses that you offer?

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Andrew: Sure. I would say that the update training, or delta training represents a big part of our Online Learning Center, but in addition we offer advanced product configuration topics.

Mary Kay: Oh.

Andrew: These are things that we really don't have a home for in any of our instructor-led training classes. We also have a number of classes covering background industry information, which is not core to our product training but is required pre-requisite knowledge for all customers launching voice services.

Mary Kay: OK.

Andrew: These are going to be fundamental technology training topics in areas like data and telecom. Additionally, we've further blended our classroom-based instructor-led training classes with the web learning, so for example, our core introductory engineering class is a five-day class.

First day is generally all theory introducing product concepts and architecture. That type of content is very well suited for an online learning center since its mostly lecture and what we've recently done is to move the first day of content from our instructor led course to place it on the online leaning center. Now when students register for the class they can receive login information for the overview content which they complete prior to attending that class. By doing that, we've free up a day of instructor led training time for this course which now has been replaced by more hands on training topics. Many of these topics are ones in which we've struggled to incorporate in the past. Now when a student arrives to the instructor led class they can dig right into the meat and potatoes of the class instead of spending there first day in overview lecture.

Mary Kay: That sounds good, can you tell me a little bit about the instructional design and planning process you went through to develop these courses online.

Andrew: Sure, you know our development process for the online learning classes is very similar for what we do for our instructor led classes which is very nice since it has blended well into our ongoing development cycles and process here. As the learning curve for whatever new tools that we've needed to use to create the online learning classes has been short and fairly painless. I'd say that the biggest planning piece of the development of the online content has really been the initial selection and then prioritization of the existing courses that we have to convert to an online format. From those existing courses, we've selected the conversion process to an online format was fairly simple and short. The biggest time for any of these projects has been writing voice scripts. Although all the courses have fairly extensive note sections for students creating this content for an online community requires voiceovers for each slide. Then we need to write scripts for someone to do the voiceovers to each slide. Of course online courses need to be user tested and they need to make sure that they are working correctly which is a little bit different from how we our instructor led courses.

Mary Kay: Yeah that makes a lot of sense. What type of course development tools are you using to instruct your online learning? Are you using flash?

Andrew: Yeah, we're not really using a lot of whiz bang tools out there. The good news for us as far as the learning time for us there's not a whole lot of software tools that needed to be added to go from where we were to where we are today.

Mary Kay: That's good.

Andrew: It is. Each of the courses that we have was initially created in Microsoft PowerPoint, that doesn't change anything from what we doing before. We use a program called Articulate to convert these PowerPoints to a SCORM

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format online course. We've also added some dynamic elements t course which help chunk some information better in certain parts of our courses especially configuration sequences and procedures. We purchased some high fidelity audio recording equipment voiceovers. I think that's essential for a high quality training product. When you add those together we've got high quality training for a cost that's been very modest. Were very pleased with the results.

Mary Kay: Why did you organization select the SyberWorks Hosted LMS solution for your customer support training solution? What were some of the factors that lead to you choosing a SyberWorks Hosted LMS solution?

Andrew: Yeah, so when we started doing this looking at vendors we knew that we needed a full service learning management system, something that would be able to both of our current instructor-lead classes as well as future online learning programs, and then all of the management support for tracking these customers. So as you know there's a lot of choices out there for learning management or LMS software.

Mary Kay: There certainly is.

Andrew: For our selection process we narrowed things down initially to one e-Learning vendor that was ranked very high on training and development, the ASTD monthly magazine. There was another vendor who was recommended to us from a partner and then a third, which was from a member of our group who had worked with SyberWorks in a previous company. We developed a pretty rigorous requirement in comparison process for all these vendors. We looked at things from training delivery, administration, analytics, reports and a number of categories. It was pretty clear to us that SyberWorks had all the tools and features we were looking for. This is a very mature online learning system which you can tell has been developed out of real world features and thing that weren't developed in a vacuum or a room of engineers talking about what feature to add.

The biggest thing that we were left with was a sense of there many features presented with this solution as compared to the other solution. We're saying, "wow, we hadn't even thought about his a possibility." It was clear that SyberWorks was ahead of what we needed and were we are today. For me that was very comforting because I knew when get to the point that we need to do this and SyberWorks already has those features in place in the product we can take advantage of those. We have taken advantage of some features that we weren't even thinking about but it became clear that this would be a big benefit to us.

Mary Kay: That sounds great, can you tell us about your experience as a SyberWorks customer.

Andrew: It's been great. One of the nice things about SyberWorks is that you all treat us like we're important and that's the thing I need, certainly coming from support background, I understand every customer needs to feel like they are the vendors' number one customer and SyberWorks has been very responsive to all my questions, changes, and different types of customization that we needed on our LMS platform. We have been very impressed.

Mary Kay: Thank you, you know this has all been really great Andrew I know you have to fly so thanks for joining us today.

Andrew: Thank you Mary Kay.

Mary Kay: This is Mary Kay Lofurno, Marketing Director of SyberWorks, Thanks for listening to our interview with Andrew Merz, Senior Educational Services Manager for Cedar Point Communications, Inc. on our SyberWorks LMS e-Learning Implementation Podcast Series... Talk with you next month.

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