

Spurring **Innovation**
and
Engaging the **Learners**
of the 2011 Workplace
By Ann Pace



ASTD's professional partners share strategies for reaching Generation Y and driving innovation.





Millennials, Generation Y, Gen Y or whatever you call them—there is no doubt you’re quite familiar with them and their stereotypes. The following ASTD professional partners most certainly are, and they have designed products and services with this specific audience and their unique preferences in mind. Read on to learn how these companies are actively innovating today, for the leaders of tomorrow.

Blackboard

Learner engagement is no secret to Blackboard, a company that for more than a decade has developed learning technology solutions for people aged five to 65. Blackboard continues to design new products and services for its student and adult audiences, including one of the largest generations of learners in the workplace—the Millennials.

“To cater to Gen Y’s method of learning, training programs need to focus on a continuous, real-time learning environment—synchronous and asynchronous—so that learners have constant access to content and expertise,” says Tim Hill, president, professional education division. “We developed Blackboard Learn so that companies can deliver this continuous environment through the use of powerful collaboration tools used to enhance both formal and informal learning programs.”

According to Blackboard, innovation is a result of effective collaboration and teamwork. To understand how users define technology and what product and service features they seek, Blackboard values the interaction that takes place at its annual user conference, *BbWorld*, where Blackboard executives have the chance to engage with the user community and users can network with each another. “Through more than 150 client-led sessions, *BbWorld* offers opportunities for users to share their unique experiences, innovations, and successes,” Hill says. “By highlighting individuals and organizations, our community is able to define best practices that help address important challenges in education today and guide us in building targeted and innovative educational solutions.”

MHS

Emotional intelligence (EI) assessment provider MHS recently released its latest EI tool, EQ-i 2.0. The EQ-i 2.0 experience merges technology and community engagement to examine social and emotional competencies in areas including leadership development with a new model, new reports, and a new online delivery platform. The product is a revision of EQ-i, MHS’s original Emotional Quotient Inventory, the first scientifically validated emotional intelligence assessment tool based on 20 years of global research.

“The new and improved EQ-i 2.0 portal gives certified administrators access to invaluable resources, information, and learners with greater accessibility and ease of use,” says Judy Lee, marketing specialist. This information-rich site will be continuously and frequently updated to provide the latest resources and information, as well as the newest tools to connect with other emotional intelligence experts.

Millennial users who are avid social networkers will enjoy collaborating, connecting, and communicating with other users inside the portal—comparable to a LinkedIn network experience. Additionally, MHS engages its global audience about the latest on EI using the following social platforms:

- Twitter: *@eiconnection*
- LinkedIn: *The Emotional Intelligence Connection*
- Facebook: *The Emotional Intelligence Connection*
- The EI Insider blog: *eiinsider.wordpress.com*.

“Aside from technological advances, the EQ-i 2.0 team is a cross-functional one with skill sets that are continuously pushed to achieve the very best in customer service, research, and product development for predicting and improving human performance,” Lee adds.



SVI

At organizational development company SVI, Millennials represent nearly half (43 percent) of the workforce. SVI recognizes that the key to engaging members of this growing generation is to play to their strengths and empower them to contribute to the organization's culture.

"We encourage employees to tweet, Facebook, and blog throughout the day—about their passions, frustrations, and experiences," says Stephen Caldwell, director of learning experiences at SVI. "Not surprisingly, their contributions to the social media conversation often overlap with the needs and concerns of others in our industry."

Additionally, the company values creativity and collaboration and works hard to develop a culture where innovation can thrive. "We have a huge glass blackboard that covers a wall so people can draw out their ideas with multi-colored markers," notes Caldwell. "There's an energy that comes from an open-door, open-floor office layout and an open-to-input approach to business."

SVI leverages its products to engage the learner first, so that the learner will embrace the content. Caldwell explains that doing what works for the learner is as important, and sometimes more important, than staying ahead of emerging technologies. "We're always assessing, evaluating, piloting, and reviewing everything we do in light of the way audiences think, feel, and learn," he says. "We have to show no fear when it's time to change directions and create something different that will capture the attention of the audience."

Learning Tree

Learning Tree International employs classroom, live online, and on-site training solutions that resonate with Gen Y learners because of their interactive features; hands-on exercises; and live, online experiences coined "classrooms without borders." The company's latest product, Learning Tree AnyWare, delivers instructor-led classroom training via an online platform. This integration of formal and virtual training serves to meet the diverse preferences of multiple generations represented in the workforce.

"New technologies such as AnyWare enable attendees to participate in real time—interacting with their peers and the instructor—just as if they were in the actual classroom," says Don Berbari, president and general manager. "Technology enables our expert instructors to transfer the most applicable knowledge and skills across all generational and geographic boundaries."

Beyond innovative learning technologies, Learning Tree works to create dozens of new courses each year on the latest trends, and update content to comply with current professional certifications. "New course topics are identified through research, instructor recommendations, student surveys, strategic partnerships, and industry standards," explains Berbari. "Learning Tree's innovative course development process is tightly synced with product launches and updates, so [our] customers can be the first to learn new technologies that spark their own innovation."

In 2011 the product development team will work to expand Learning Tree's cloud computing curriculum, develop mobile offerings, and collaborate with organizations such as Cisco and the Disney Institute.

Ashford University

Founded in 1918 and located in Clifton, Iowa, Ashford University offers both campus and online degree programs for its adult learners. Academic programs include business, behavioral sciences, communications, criminal justice, education, healthcare, IT, liberal arts, and political science. The mission of the liberal arts college is to "provide accessible, affordable, innovative, high-quality learning opportunities and degree programs that meet the diverse needs of individuals pursuing integrity in their lives, professions, and communities."

According to Ashford, to meet student needs—particularly those of tech-savvy Generation Y—the university recently launched iPhone and Android applications that allow students to log into their classrooms from their smartphones to check course assignments and participate in classroom discussions. Outside of the classroom, Ashford continues to foster a sense of community for campus and online students through its networks on Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

The university's online learning programs provide the flexibility many adult learners require when balancing their jobs with coursework. Students can earn Associate's, Bachelor's, or Master's degrees at their convenience through Ashford's online asynchronous courses offered 24 hours a day. For undergraduate students with their sights fixed on a Master's degree, Ashford offers a Smart Track; students can earn up to nine graduate level credits that also apply as elective credits for their Bachelor's degree.

Knoodle

Knoodle infuses presentations with rich media and audience interactivity by providing a cloud-based social presentation, training, and learning management system in a single platform. Young in its own right, the company, founded in 2009, creates products that are easily aligned with Generation Y's preferred work style.

"Generation Y essentially grew up in the digital age that allowed them to communicate and collaborate using technologies that were not yet matured or developed, and thus unavailable to previous generations when they were in the same age range," notes Tony Yang, director of marketing. "What this means for us as a technology provider is that our product is built from the ground up on functions and capabilities that align with how Gen Y is used to working—including social media-rich features such as chat, discussion boards, built-in email engine, user rating system, user-generated content, and so forth."

More importantly, Yang adds, is the reality that many members of Gen Y *expect* to use technology in every aspect of their work and personal lives, including learning and training. By listening to their customers, gauging general market trends, and valuing idea sharing, Knoodle continues to develop its solutions to better support its clients. "We talk about being social and collaborative in learning with our customers, but we also practice it within our company to come up with innovative ideas," says Yang.

Personal Strengths

Personal Strengths specializes in conflict-management and relationship-building tools such as its Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI). The company believes the brilliant hearts and minds of people are catalysts for innovation. "People are more likely to be innovative and creative when they are feeling good about themselves and are recognized for their core values," says Tina Mertel, senior associate, Personal Strengths USA.

Stuart Jackson, vice president of human resources at clothing company Diesel USA, also sees innovation as a competency that can thrive within a trusting workplace, and used the SDI to help create that atmosphere in his company. "At Diesel, we focus on getting to know co-workers and what is important to them," he says. "The SDI helps them to determine the values that individuals hold and keeps employees out of conflict and feeling good about themselves."

Together, Personal Strengths and Diesel implemented high engagement and experiential learning methods to train the predominantly Gen Y workforce in relationship and project management skills. The training program incorporated auditory, visual, and kinesthetic components that were relevant to the young audience. It leveraged popular music, video clips, animation, and small, ad-like booklets to deliver training, and the employees participated in several interactive team-building exercises.

"Participants felt like they were in a reality TV show," Jackson notes. "It was fast moving, just-in-time learning where making a mistake was rewarded and moving on was key."

Blueline Simulations

With its global reputation for delivering "everything simulation," Blueline Simulations builds custom learning visuals, classroom simulations and games, e-learning, e-simulations, mobile learning, virtual worlds, and social media solutions.

Blueline's Blueprint Learning Visuals have been proven effective for engaging Generation Y learners through their use of dramatic artwork to depict client challenges metaphorically, as well as their ability to engage multiple learning styles simultaneously.

"The true power of Blueline's signature, table-sized discovery learning visuals lies in the learning experience itself," says David Milliken, founder and CEO. "As learners engage with the Blueprint visual, they drive a generative dialogue that produces new knowledge, new mental models, and new opportunities for change."

Part of Blueline Simulations's success has been its ability to stay on the cutting edge of e-learning innovation. The company's Level 4 immersive simulations create interactive virtual worlds that reflect reality by responding to learner input and simulating complex processes that incorporate software systems, expensive machinery, and interpersonal interactions.

"Imagine an onscreen character or system that responds 'naturally' and differently to each learner's decisions, with unpredictable ripple effects to other parts of the simulation—just like the real world," describes Milliken. "Many [users] are surprised to find that these gains in robustness come with increased flexibility. Because events and activities are modular, content is easy to add and delete, update, and maintain."

The National Conference Center

Located outside of Washington, D.C., in Leesburg, Virginia, the National Conference Center (NCC) is one of the largest conference centers in the nation. The 110-acre campus hosts training and professional development events such as conferences, meetings, planning sessions, and executive education.

In a time when many learning experiences are moving to online and mobile platforms, NCC keeps its in-person edge through new innovations that cater to audience preferences. “Many of our recent innovations have been driven by our interest in engaging Gen Y,” says Eric Whitson, director of sales and marketing. “We are constantly soliciting and analyzing feedback from our trainees to understand how to create an even better learning environment.”

Some of these recent innovations include NCC’s QR Code Green, a self-guided tour by which guests can learn about the campus’s latest environmentally friendly features by following QR codes on their smartphones. Additionally, NCC’s Farm to Table program, a result of the company’s relationships with local farmers, provides produce, meat, and dairy for the dining room. NCC has also added several new onsite activities to engage Millennial guests, such as wine and scotch tastings and Rock, Paper, Scissor tournaments.

“Our 2010 social media launch was designed to directly engage Gen Y with a daily blog that feeds to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube on such topics as local food, meeting and event trends, the environment, and technology in meetings,” Whitson adds.

Center for Creative Leadership

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) offers education and research that equips people around the world to use creative leadership to solve organizational challenges.

To target Millennial leaders, in March CCL launched a new open-enrollment program called Leadership Fundamentals. “Young and emerging leaders are often overlooked in executive education, with most opportunities going to the middle manager level and higher,” says Stephen Martin, manager, global public relations. “[The program] introduces members of Gen Y to the basics of effective leadership, including building strong networks and relationships, influencing colleagues and thinking creatively, and helping organizations bolster their talent pipelines.”

In the past two years CCL has developed several new product offerings to better meet clients’ changing needs. “Innovation starts with listening closely to clients, so CCL continually solicits feedback from individuals and organizations about their leadership challenges and the tools they need to solve them,” Martin says. “That information informs a product development process that is grounded in extensive research and accelerated by rapid prototyping.” The Innovation Leadership program, which helps organizations reframe and tackle business problems, is one outcome of this process.

Additionally, CCL recently launched its WorkStyle Profile, a self-assessment that empowers individuals to better manage the boundaries between their work and personal lives. The 2010 title *Boundary Spanning Leadership* is based on a decade of CCL’s global research and describes how leaders can create direction, alignment, and commitment that span the boundaries of the 2011 workplace.

DDI

Generational stereotypes abound—especially when describing age groups in the workplace—but Development Dimensions International (DDI), “the talent management expert,” believes that every generation wants to be inspired through interactive learning. “The most important principle is that every learner should be treated as an individual,” says Rich Wellins, senior vice president. “Everyone has his own learning styles, abilities, and motivations, and it is important to match training and development opportunities to those.”

For more than 40 years DDI has been helping corporations around the world to close the gap between where their businesses need to go and the talent required to take them there. DDI practices the values it teaches: The company provides its associates with a unique development plan to ensure they’re pursuing challenging opportunities for their personal career advancement and the organization’s overall development.

Beyond individual employee evolution, DDI promotes organizational growth through a culture of innovation that begins at the top. DDI’s approach empowers its leaders to be ambassadors of innovation for their teams.

“An innovation mandate is not met by teaching creativity to leaders—instead, leaders need to set and model ideal conditions for innovation,” Wellins notes. “They must also support, promote, and maintain a workplace culture that inspires and rewards teams for creating and implementing new and innovative solutions.”



Kenexa

Kenexa partners with organizations' human resources and learning and development functions to deliver business solutions in recruitment, employment branding, employee assessments, talent management, compensation, employee engagement, and leadership.

Part of Kenexa's mission is to improve companies by enriching lives and to enrich lives by improving companies. With this personal approach to employee and organizational development, Kenexa focuses on engaging its clients at their point of need.

For example, Kenexa designed a two-hour Spotlight on Generations course for a global pharmaceutical client to address the needs of its Millennial employees, as well as those of the remaining four generations in the workplace. "In this fast-paced and highly rated course, often delivered at national sales meetings and the corporation's headquarters, generational cohort groups brainstorm the challenges they bump into while working with other generations," says Scott Horton, principle consultant, D&I.

These challenges often include communication, protocols, career pathways, multitasking, and respect. The participants then form intergenerational working groups, discuss their lists of challenges, and work together to resolve one. The diverse groups learn how to merge their strengths to solve real workplace issues.

"This approach has proved to be a highly productive and effective method to get people talking, solve problems, and meet the needs of Gen Y—and all other generational groups," Horton says.

Inscape Publishing

Inscape Publishing has been providing assessment-based learning products for more than 30 years. During that time, the company has developed an extensive product beta testing methodology to determine what end users want and expect in their training products. "In response, we've made products with seamless delivery systems, integrated technology, highly personalized profiles, experiential group activities, and contemporary video that use humor and real-world scenarios," says Jeffrey Sugerma, president and CEO.

"We question everything," Sugerma adds. "We're constantly looking for better ways to do things, and whether it's a common sense solution or an off-the-wall, adventurous idea, we evaluate every option and choose the path that leads to success."

Inscape involves its target audience in this innovative approach to product development. Client organizations help to test new products in their beta versions throughout the product development lifecycle. Inscape then applies qualitative and quantitative user feedback to inform design improvements.

Allowing clients to guide product development requires a healthy dose of courage and flexibility. "Based on the feedback we've received, we've re-envisioned, re-tooled, and in several cases, thrown out the whole thing and started over," says Sugerma. "It's a lot of work, and it's not for the faint of heart, but if you want to understand whether your product works, you have to continuously ask questions—and then listen to the answers."

Pfeiffer/Wiley

Pfeiffer publishes resources that serve the professional development needs of training and human resources practitioners, from new entrants into the field to seasoned practitioners. The company is familiar with emerging industry trends and hot topics for all generations—the latest being mobile and social learning in the workplace.

"We recently released two books that explore these topics, *Designing mLearning* by Clark Quinn and *Social Media for Trainers* by Jane Bozarth," says Lisa Shannon, associate publisher. "We are also excited about learning and performance support mobile apps and the ways these new tools will influence how leaders and managers integrate practice into their daily routines like never before."

Pfeiffer recently launched PfeifferCustom, a web-based application developed as a result of customers' requests. "At Pfeiffer we innovate by listening closely to our customers and understanding their pain points," explains Shannon. "When we are able to create a product or service that significantly reduces some of that pain embedded in the trainer's workflow, we have created a true innovation."

PfeifferCustom allows users to create custom training facilitator guides, participant workbooks, and presentation slides by combining Pfeiffer's most popular training packages and activities with their own. "When we demonstrate the website to trainers and consultants, a typical response is, 'Wow! This is so easy...and it's going to make me look brilliant,'" notes Shannon. "That kind of praise is very motivating to our team."

Ann Pace is a writer/editor for ASTD;
apace@astd.org

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