E-learning is more than a way of education at The Priory Group; it’s a way of life. Owen Rose describes how learning technology is a platform for competitive advantage in the healthcare business.

The Independent mental health care specialist, The Priory Group, provides professional education, specialist care, neuro-rehabilitation and psychiatric services for people with addictions, eating disorders, depressive illnesses and psychoses. The Group also operates a national network of residential care for older people including nursing or specialist dementia care.

The enterprise has adopted learning technologies to the extent that e-learning is embedded into every aspect of the business. Its award-winning corporate blended learning programme, called Foundations for Growth (FFG), has now been in operation for five years and has e-learning at its heart.

After a successful pilot, FFG was launched to 5000 staff across over fifty sites. The programme delivered eighteen structured e-learning modules, each with linked offline learning activities. Over 33,000 module...
completions were recorded within the first six months, and extensive evaluations showed exceptionally high approval ratings from learners and managers.

There are thirty-nine bespoke modules currently in use. They are testament to how learning technologies can evolve from an L&D tool to a value-add business partner.

Priory’s leadership team wanted to harness the power of e-learning to create a scalable and accessible platform for learning. However, the team was aware of the significant barriers to implementing learning technologies in an working environment focussed on people, with low levels of PC literacy, and limited technical infrastructure.

The Group appointed us to create a solution that would overcome these barriers. We are known for our ability to work with complex businesses, to produce bespoke learning solutions, and for results through stake-holder engagement.

The success of the project was rooted in four key interventions. Firstly, extensive consultation with stakeholders across the business, from housekeeper to the CEO. This led to an understanding of business needs, learner needs and working environment. Secondly, a twenty-strong working party of staff from across Priory was appointed to guide all aspects of the development. Thirdly, key training needs were identified, in both mandatory and specialist training areas. Lastly, a strong and memorable identity was created (Foundations for Growth), to spearhead extensive communication and change management activity.

This initial success was recognised by the industry when The Priory Group’s Foundation for Growth programme won the 2006 E-learning Award for the best e-learning project securing widespread adoption.

Since then, the story has been one of ongoing enhancement and development which has made e-learning an essential business partner.

EXTENDING AND ENHANCING ONLINE CONTENT

Over the past four years, there has been continuous development of new e-learning content to meet changing business needs. As a result, more content requests now originate from business managers than from L&D. This demonstrates that the learning culture created is closely integrated with the needs of the business.

The Group has not relied on one format however, and increasingly lets the training need determine the delivery choice. For example, podcasts were created to educate staff on patient experiences and Learning and Development staff are trained to record and produce their own podcasts in-house. Compliance modules were re-fitted with a pre-test to allow staff to demonstrate their knowledge of compliance without having to regularly complete the same learning module.

The FFG learning management platform is now an essential business system at Priory, supporting operational activity across the organisation. The initial creation and subsequent enhancements have been guided by the needs of L&D. Significant development of the learning management system however, has been driven by specific business units such as finance, regulatory and operations as well as the senior management team.

A networked corporate service has been launched, which has opened up an important channel of communication. All staff are engaged and use the service as part of their everyday work.

Consequently, when Priory sought to re-vamp its corporate intranet, FFG was integrated into the interface. This helped
E-learning is used to complement or replace classroom training which has reduced the cost of training by five million pounds since its launch in 2005. And this estimate is on the conservative side.

**CLINICAL RISK ASSESSMENT**

In the demanding and potentially dangerous environment of mental healthcare, effective clinical risk management is critical. Poorly managed risk has serious implications: suicide, self-harm, aggression and danger for other patients, staff or visitors.

A business benefit that has resulted from FFG is exemplified by the e-learning module Clinical Risk Assessment (CRA) E-learning is used to deliver a corporate CRA training programme. It provides a consistent and comprehensive introduction to the subject across all healthcare sites. The course is bespoke, and capitalises on the knowledge and experience of subject matter experts (SMEs), and uses a blend of e-learning with linked observation exercises.

The CRA e-learning was audited through patient-observation practice and record-keeping at Priory’s clinical sites. In all cases, improved practice was demonstrated following the launch of the e-learning. Approval ratings from learners were high and a telephone survey of managers revealed widespread positive impact of the new training. The success of the CRA course was recognised through a National Training Award for the South East Region in 2007. All of the e-learning modules capture best practice from Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), and other key opinion leaders, and embeds it into a consistent and accessible training platform. The programme has had a huge impact on staff performance and service quality says head of HR, Jaclyn Ferguson: “FFG has helped ensure stability in the business by promoting staff development which has improved our services to our clients, pupils and residents. We are meeting the training needs of the business and we are setting higher standards of care for the healthcare and education sectors.”

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Pre FFG, the ‘standard model’ for training at Priory was half-day classroom-based training sessions, delivered by external providers, or Priory SMEs. Added to the cost of trainer, venue and travel, the most significant outlay by far was for backfill (cover) for delegates. Post-FFG, backfill costs have been largely eliminated, as staff complete e-learning modules during quiet periods on shift. The e-learning is carefully blended with other training channels, and in many cases provides brand new opportunities, in addition to existing formats.

**FFG IS A USP**

Whilst FFG has revolutionised training and saved a fortune in the process, its value and influence extends beyond these benefits. The quality, flexibility and scalability of e-learning supports the existing business model and drives business growth.

A critical component of Priory’s business development is the acquisition of contracts to provide specialist healthcare and education services for Primary Care Trusts and local authorities. Contracts are awarded through competitive tender and FFG provides Priory with a unique selling point in the bid process says commercial development manager, Sarah Keeton: “Foundations for Growth is always an integral element of the bids that we submit to public sector organisations to secure new business.

“Clients require us to demonstrate our approach to learning and development and how we use it to ensure service quality, as well as personal and professional development for our employees. FFG gives us an edge as it proves our commitment to quality and innovation.”

The Group is currently expanding into the elderly care sector through an ambitious nine-month programme. It intends to open nine purpose-built seventy-bed care homes, each employing up to one hundred staff. Ensuring that new staff receive the required mandatory and specialist training is key to effective expansion, and vital for the new units to operate safely and effectively from day one.

Bhavna Jones, managing director of Priory’s Care Homes Division: “When we open a new unit we have a huge training load to ensure that all staff have appropriate capabilities and comply with regulatory requirements. Only then can the home can be registered by the Care Quality Commission. FFG provides an incredibly flexible and straightforward means of delivering this core training. It’s intuitive and easy to use for new staff, and allows us to certify key training in the shortest possible time.”
LESS RISK
A key driver for implementing FFG was to reduce corporate risk by enhancing the consistency and availability of mandatory training as well as the timeliness and accuracy of compliance reporting to inspecting bodies.

FFG has reduced L&D actions following inspection to virtually zero, and has won praise from the regulators. Its impact is captured by Sally Carmody, director of operations: “Monitoring compliance at all sites is easier, faster and more accurate. Before, all information was held locally, which increased the likelihood of disorganisation and mistakes. FFG has reduced this risk and improved how the quality and compliance team operate.”

The widespread adoption of FFG has driven the use of online technology across the business. This has allowed the corporate culture to be embedded across a widely distributed and rapidly expanding organisation.

The vision and values of the organisation are literally written into the bespoke learning content, and best practice is shared consistently.

It is this penetration of Priory’s corporate culture that really signifies its success. In a people- and care-based environment, the sensitive use of learning technologies has transformed the business.