



Visa Business School Goes Online With NetDimensions

Visa Business School's e-learning system serves over 600 member institutions in 14 Asia Pacific countries. Pauline Sahetapy, director of Visa Business School Asia Pacific, tells Patrick Lambe about the lessons that Visa learned along the way in implementing the e-learning program.

Pauline Sahetapy had a problem. She had spent six months on a project to implement an e-learning system and had got burned by her software provider. While the project was going forward, the software had gone through two revisions. By version four, the system no longer matched her original specifications. The salesman didn't understand the product's functionality, so the mismatch didn't become apparent until late in the game. She had to start again from scratch, and this time she wanted a stronger system to rely on.



Pauline Sahetapy, director of Visa Business School Asia Pacific

Pauline's needs were also quite specific, blending the corporate training environment with the flexibility of a service provider to external parties. Visa Business School provides learning and training opportunities to over 100,000 employees in its 687 member institutions across 14 Asia Pacific countries. Member institutions issue Visa cards, which are accepted by over 27 million worldwide locations.

Visa Business School provides all the necessary training for issuing and managing the member institutions' card programs. As a membership corporation serving these institutions, Visa's own branding is very important.

She had also been experimenting with course provision via Visa's communication channel, Visa Online. "It's very good for most of our member communications and services but the security levels on some of these services make it unsuitable for training," says Pauline. "We knew we wanted a learning management system so that we could do more learner tracking and not just deliver programs and registration functionality. And we wanted it to be more user-friendly and accessible for our members, while retaining a level of security appropriate to the finance industry."

After her previous experience, Pauline made two decisions. First, she hired an e-learning specialist to manage the implementation. "We were just users, we didn't really understand the technical side of it. We needed to have somebody running the project who knew what to look for." Second, she went to U.S. e-learning research firm brandon-hall.com for their learning management system (LMS) research reports.

"We first saw NetDimensions reviewed there, so we knew it was a strong system. And I liked the fact that they were based in Asia. At least we could talk directly to them about our needs."

Having lost six months, Pauline was raring to go. She had two contenders: one was NetDimensions, the second a major U.S.-based provider with a growing presence in Asia Pacific. She had her teams go through both products.



The Visa Business School implementation

VISA International

27 million merchant locations • 1.1 billion cards • US\$2 trillion in annual volumes

"We immediately preferred the Enterprise Knowledge Platform. It was so much more intuitive to use, and user-friendly. We loved the way you could change the skin, to give it your own look and feel. That was important for our branding to members. And being in Asia, the ability to easily present in different Asian languages like Japanese and Korean was also a key benefit."



E-learning in action

System flexibility also turned out to be an advantage. Unlike a normal corporate training environment, the first phase of the Visa system would be designed for members paying on a per-use basis. The investment costs needed to be realistic. "The other system was a little bit stiff and inflexible from the

usability point of view, but it had all the functionality we wanted. Only, to get that functionality we needed to have bought their top-end enterprise version and we're not ready for that now. With NetDimensions, we were able to get the functionality we needed at an affordable price. And it's very easy to upgrade EKP, or to add customized features, when we need to. However it should be noted that for each customization effort, there is a cost to be considered."

It wasn't all going to be plain sailing, partly because of the fast-paced approach. Documentation and specifications were light, and communication issues surfaced.

In the end, Pauline got a bit more than user-friendliness, customizability and affordable functionality. "Visa Business School had lost a lot of time, and they needed to get their implementation started quickly," says Jay Shaw, NetDimensions' managing director. "We had them up and running in seven weeks. It's not something we'd like to do with every engagement, because you have to cut corners, but the client needed it, so we pulled out the stops."

"It took us a while to realize that we sometimes understood different things by the same words," says Pauline. "For example, what NetDimensions meant by a classroom is not what we meant. So we'd agree on a feature, and it wouldn't turn out like we expected. Neither of us checked that what we'd agreed was the same thing. And because we're a business school serving third parties, we'd need layers of approval in the system that NetDimensions hadn't anticipated. We'd assume that it would be very easy to add functions or change the system, but it would have a lot of implications for the back-end programming. We often didn't realize that until quite late. Between different vocabularies and different expectations of a system, we had a number of problems to overcome."

Jay Shaw agrees. "A project of this nature really brings home the importance of good communication and clear documentation of promises and expectations. We were running so fast we didn't control the customization work as tightly as we would do normally. Visa didn't always understand the implications of what they were asking for, and our people were just trying to get the job done for the client within the project timeframe. In the end, Pauline and I just had to sit down, agree all the parameters, and draw a line for what was achievable within the scope of the project."

The ability to tackle communication issues and "project drift" is critical in e-learning implementations, where there are many complexities, and no clear paradigms to refer to. "In our first e-learning project we got into trouble because the sales guy kept telling us the system could perform to our needs, but without a thorough understanding of the system." With NetDimensions, Pauline realized how easy it is for assurances to be given without a clear mutual understanding of what was expected. "Our first supplier kept saying it could be done, so we thought it was all right. The problems only surfaced later. But with NetDimensions, once the problems became obvious, we were able to have some straight talk to sort the problems out. The problems got dealt with."



Pauline Sahetapy and her team

Pauline Sahetapy is now letting the system settle in with her members. "We're very happy with it, and the members like it a lot. Of course, it doesn't do everything we'd like, no system is perfect. When we get the budget, we'd like to customize it further, and extend its use to our internal staff. As a business school serving members, some of our needs differ from a normal corporate training environment. But we know that with NetDimensions we are going to get serious attention. If we have an issue, it gets addressed. We've come a long way from that first system we looked at. EKP was a good decision."

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