

GETTING AN EDUCATION:

The State of Lean Six Sigma Training in 2011

The experience of five companies displays the current trends in teaching Belts. **BY KATHERINE BONTRAGER**

Italian writer and statesman Niccolo Machiavelli once said, “Whosoever desires constant success must change his conduct with the times.”

It’s a particularly salient description of what must happen in business training, especially as the world struggles to recover from the economic crisis, adapt to a changing workforce and adopt an increasingly global outlook.

In this investigative report, *iSixSigma Magazine* examined how five diverse organizations have altered their training strategies to fit each company’s changing needs. Although a number of the companies are following a similar trend – using blended learning to educate Belts – each has put its own spin on its training program to take into consideration cost, location and other factors. Their experiences offer a picture of the state of Lean Six Sigma training in 2011.

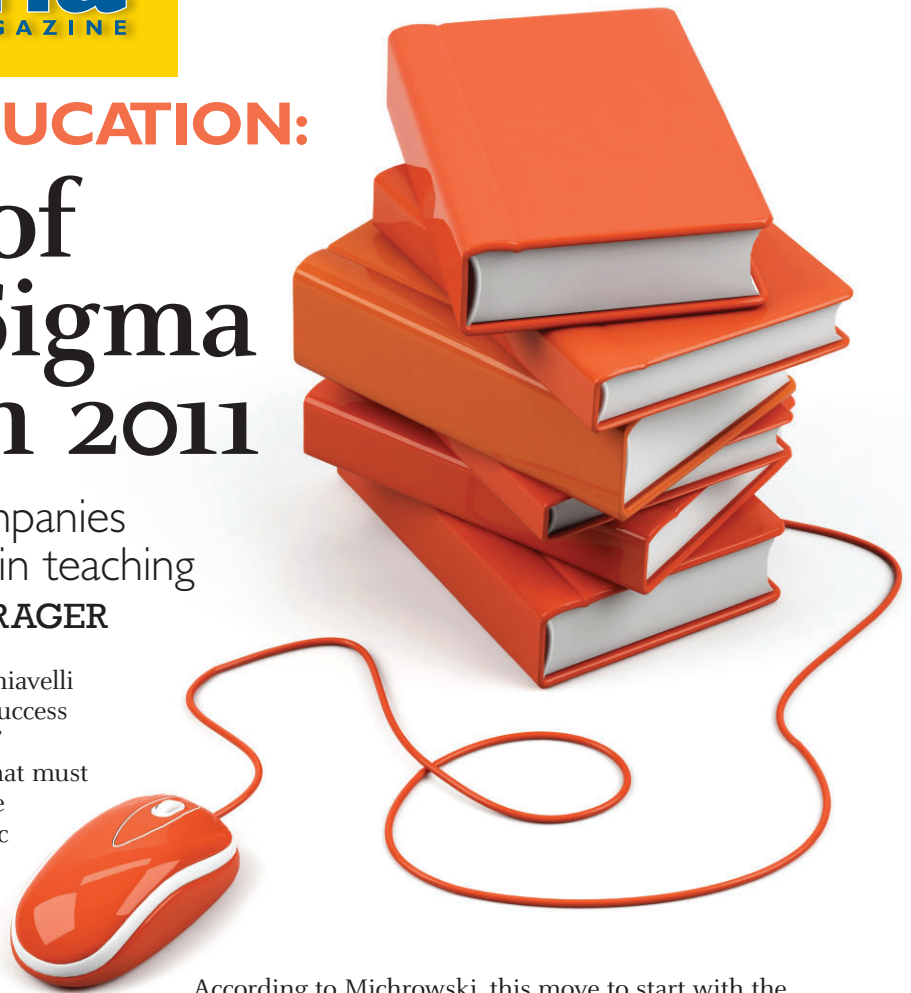
TELUS Corp.

- Canadian telecommunications service provider
- More than 36,000 employees



With its sights set on improving the learning experience of its employees while also enhancing its ability to handle a growing number of trainees, TELUS is weighing the benefits of blended learning (a combination of classroom sessions and online training) in 2011, said Eric Michrowski, a Master Black Belt and the company’s Lean Six Sigma deployment leader.

The telecommunications firm currently provides basic Lean Six Sigma training over two weeks, ensuring that new Belts get a chance to apply what they’ve learned immediately on smaller projects and prove that they have comprehended simpler tools before more training is provided.



According to Michrowski, this move to start with the basics and then work up to covering more tools in future training sessions has helped to improve both the ease of learning and the retention of knowledge.

“When I was originally trained, I was bombarded with hundreds of tools and was easily lost in what tools I really needed,” he said “In truth, I only needed a few tools in my first projects. This way, Black Belts can get comfortable, use the tools confidently and not get scared by a huge arsenal of tools that aren’t needed at the time.”

TELUS’ training was originally four one-week modules with six weeks in between each module. The company now has two one-week modules, still with six weeks in between, and then offers the remaining two weeks of training in an upgraded format twice per year.

“The content remains the same,” said Michrowski, “but the improvements are really in the delivery method, which creates efficiencies for us [and] increases initial team member success on projects.”

Michrowski added that this restructuring of the Black Belt training also offers a cost savings.

“We’re able to run the same number of [training] waves but bring more people together and work with better efficiency,” he said. “It gives us the ability to comfortably kick off smaller classes, more just-in-time training, in a very small interval. It’s a more scalable model for us.”

Another change was to create a shorter three-day pro-

gram – essentially an introduction to Lean Six Sigma – with a focus on simple tools for a larger audience.

“We don’t want to create bad processes when we create new systems. We want people to think about what a good process looks like from the very beginning,” said Michrowski.

Instead of assigning a Black Belt for every project, key process owners are offered this basic three-day session, which TELUS calls Purple Belt training.

Michrowski is the first to admit that TELUS’ training is unique. “I’ve been in process improvement since the late ’90s, and part of what makes our deployment different is that we never brought an external consultant in to do our training,” he said. “From day one, we built the right training curriculum, emphasizing the TELUS culture, its values and how we live those values in the organization.”

The Lean Six Sigma training has a substantial focus on change leadership and providing capabilities to lead through change. The company made sure its materials – and even some of its tools – were adapted to fit its values.

“While it was a huge undertaking, and a big lift on the front end, it was well worth it,” Michrowski said.

More changes are on the horizon as TELUS implements the blended learning approach in the first quarter of 2011 under the banner of their corporate philosophy, known as Learning 2.0.

“Among the challenges we’re facing is marrying e-learning with the classroom,” Michrowski said. “It’s challenging – you lose certain elements when you go to e-learning, so you need to supplement with the right classroom training. Online, informal and social learning should become an enhancement to the learning experience, not just a cost reduction. ... If you scrimp on training and are not executing results, you’re going to kill your program.”

Catholic Health Partners

- The largest health system in Ohio; one of the largest non-profit health systems in the United States
- More than 38,000 employees



For Catholic Health Partners, success was found in the special training that identifies and meets the unique needs of the various

regions within its 34-hospital healthcare system.

“Our company has focused on regional- or facility-based training to pinpoint the needs of the specific demographic makeup,” said Gerard Pappa, Master Black Belt and clinical quality improvement manager.

During the past two years, training for Belts at each facility did not begin until a Lean Six Sigma infrastructure was in place at that location.

“Lean Six Sigma success is based on management support from all levels,” Pappa said. “Therefore, we spent a considerable amount of time setting up the infrastructure, which included a steering committee [made up of senior executives], project Champions and project sponsors.”

In fact, no training took place without a formal readi-

ness assessment, Pappa explained. But that’s not the only careful step the company took before starting training. It also strove to understand the dynamics of the hospital cultures it would be entering.

“Individually, my team and I have worked extremely hard to establish relationships with the regions and facilities,” Pappa said. “These relationships have been the catalyst for our culture improvement and change. The facilities have grown to see us as part of their family, and this has led to breaking down the barriers between corporate and regional entities.”

According to Pappa, developing these relationships goes a long way toward understanding the challenges each facility faces on a daily basis.

“With this knowledge, we’ve been able to tailor our training to address any gaps that existed at the beginning. We’re keen to the fact that continuous feedback will only make our training and culture better,” he said.

All of Catholic Health Partners’ training is conducted on-site and in-person. No portion of the training is available online, simply because of the nature of the material, Pappa said. There are no current plans to offer online courses, either. However, prerequisites to the training, such as software program introductions, are available online.

“At first, our training was contracted from outside the system,” Pappa said. “Over the past two years, we’ve created our own curriculum to cut down costs and to have more control over material and content. We decided early on that combining Lean and Six Sigma would give us the best chance to change the culture for the future. Six Sigma provides the formal structure for the organization, including steering committees, project Champions, sponsors, Black Belts, Green Belts and Lean Leaders, while Lean provides the tools that can be applied in any environment.”

Bridgestone Americas Inc.

- World’s largest tire and rubber company
- More than 50,000 employees



Focused on doing more with less, Bridgestone Americas Inc. moved to a blended model for training in 2008. Previously, the company had conducted the traditional four-week classroom training for Black Belts and two weeks for Green Belts.

“When we implemented the blended model, we designed the Black Belt training to include e-learning, virtual touch-points and study halls, and two weeks of classroom training,” said Debbie Detwiler, Master Black Belt and manager of the company’s Integrated Quality Strategy.

The company opted for a blended learning route for a number of reasons, one of which is a substantial reduction in both time and cost: Well over \$100,000 has been saved in travel expenses in 2010 alone, according to Detwiler, while the out-of-office training sessions for Black Belts has dropped from four weeks to two.

“We’ve also saved time for the trainers, and they can actually train more with the same resources,” she added.

“Also, this has helped avoid instructor burnout. This method of training enables us to utilize e-learning to teach simple tools and utilize the instructors to teach the more complex subjects, with focus on project application.”

What’s more, the blended learning program has allowed for significant growth in the number of Green Belts trained. Eighty Green Belts completed training in 2009, a jump from just 30 trainees the previous year.

The key to adapting to a blended learning model for Bridgestone, Detwiler explained, was partnering with a good e-learning firm.

“We relied on an e-learning provider and couldn’t be happier,” she said. “The company worked with us to develop a model that suited us. We actually did some customization using some of our own tire examples and training material. In addition, the company conducts annual best-practice sharing conferences, which we attended. This enabled us to speak with many of their clients and learn what had worked for them and what hadn’t.”

However, unlike other companies that are molding their training to match the culture of their organizations, Detwiler said that Bridgestone set out to accomplish another cultural objective. “Back in 2004, when we began implementing Six Sigma, we slowly started to emphasize the importance of becoming a more data-driven organization,” she said. “As a result, the culture of our organization has changed, and we see more and more teammates using Six Sigma tool application, even among teammates who aren’t certified Belts.”

Detwiler said Bridgestone has consciously made the decision to not do mass training of all employees at once. Because of the importance the deployment places on the application of the tools, the company wanted to give employees enough time to master the skill sets.

“We don’t want to train just to say how many people we’ve trained,” she said. “We need to see results from the people we’ve trained. That goes a long way toward the maturation of the Integrated Quality Strategy and vision that we have.”

Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co.

- One of the largest insurance and financial services companies in the world
- 33,000 employees



Nationwide®
On Your Side

Nationwide’s Lean Six Sigma deployment has always utilized a blended learning model, said Rachel Lane, Master Black Belt and associate vice president for business excellence. “It would not have been cost effective for us to deploy any other model, nor would it have been a good fit for our culture.”

The company is in its first year of its “On Your Side” Continuous Improvement deployment, which aims to institutionalize efforts across the organization. In February, Nationwide was named Most Successful Lean Six Sigma Start-up Program at the iSixSigma Live! Summit & Awards.

“Our deployment utilizes an integrated Lean and Six Sigma methodology with a DMAIC framework,” Lane

e-Learning: Here to Stay

The increased emphasis on different models of learning – especially with elements of e-learning – is being felt throughout continuing education, said Dr. Curtis Bonk, a professor of instructional systems technology and an e-learning expert at Indiana University.

“We’ve gone through 15 years of experimentation, and the jury is still out on e-learning and its end impact on learning,” Bonk said. “We will continue to have face-to-face classroom experiences, and many will benefit from them. But most definitely, since 1995, the awareness of the online realm and its potential has grown substantially. Blended learning simply adds to the assortment of options for continuing education.”

According to Bonk, the demand for e-learning fluctuates: When gas prices go up, people are eager to take an online class; if they’re unemployed, they jump at the chance to get re-educated through electronic courses.

“Blended learning and online learning offer convenience, flexibility, cross-effectiveness, cost savings, easier access – and there’s a plethora of courses to choose from,” he said. “It’s timely and offers exactly what you want, in the amount you want, where you want it.”

This e-learning trend has been monitored by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), which recently released its “2010 State of the Industry Report” that looked at all aspects of the U.S. corporate training market. The report estimates that total expenditure on training in 2009 was \$125.88 billion, down 6.1 percent from \$134.07 billion in 2008.

The report also found that 27.7 percent of all formal learning hours available in 2009 were online, up from 23 percent in 2008. Thirty-seven percent of all training hours involved some form of electronic technology in 2009, the highest level since the ASTD began collecting such data 14 years ago. In direct correlation with this trend, the report noted a 59 percent reduction in face-to-face interaction.

“A tough economic climate tends to favor the use of e-learning to improve efficiency,” the report stated. “Technology-based learning content can be centralized and easily accessed by learners anytime, regardless of schedule or geographic location.”

Between 35 and 40 percent of all training hours are now done electronically, according to Josh Bersin, president and CEO of Bersin & Associates, a consulting firm specializing in best-practices research.

The company’s research estimates that, in both 2008 and 2009, training expenditures dropped 11 percent in each year – much of that coming from ceasing instructor-led training, canceling travel and a general shift to technology-based training.

“While it may seem like it at the time, we’re not turning entirely away from traditional classes,” cautioned Bonk. “Face-to-face education remains the largest percentage of all training, though the difference is narrowing. By the year 2060, I think we’ll reflect back on this time as the Learning Age, in which we have so many options to learn presented to us.”

explained. “We selected a blended learning model with a tiered curriculum for each audience. Our model provides Black Belt and Green Belt training for existing continuous improvement teams, and provides simple toolsets for grass-roots teams doing White Belt training and sponsor training for managers.”

The blended learning model incorporates several core components, including an online curriculum, study halls, technical hotline support, one-on-one coaching, hands-on simulations and project work. Nationwide chose this particular method for several reasons.

“Not everyone learns the same way,” Lane said. “Our blended learning model offers associates multiple ways to learn, as opposed to a traditional classroom environment.”

Another added benefit, said Lane, is that the model provides for additional one-on-one time with each associate when compared to a traditional classroom environment. It also allows for immediate application of learning through the trainee’s project efforts.

“The model provides associates with opportunities to apply what they’ve learned in a simulated environment, where they’re comfortable applying new tools and techniques for the first time,” said Lane.


In regard to training its multi-location workforce, the blended model requires minimal classroom time, so it is ideal for reaching out to all of the company’s associates, regardless of location and time zone.

The training model was specifically developed for Nationwide based on its culture and employee needs.

“We kept our approach simple and highly collaborative,” Lane said. “We began our deployment by building a small Center of Excellence with a decentralized deployment model and strategy. We led with a non-mandatory deployment [pull vs. push], targeting our existing 30 Continuous Improvement teams across the company.”

The Hertz Corp.

- The largest car rental brand in the world
- More than 25,000 employees in 8,500 locations

 Andrea L. Church, senior director of organizational excellence at the Hertz Global Talent Management Center of Excellence, describes the evolution of her company’s Lean Six Sigma training as an ongoing journey.

The deployment initially utilized a classroom approach for Belt training, but made a change to a blended learning approach in 2006, said Church, a Master Black Belt.

“With more than 8,500 locations, classroom training was too expensive and difficult to coordinate,” Church said. “In addi-

tion, the traditional classroom environment didn’t provide enough practice for people to actually master the skills, and assumed everyone learns at the same rate and by listening and taking notes, rather than by doing.”

Given the company’s global workforce, a successful program needed to address the complexities of providing technical training to those for whom English is a second language and also address statistical software language limitations – not to mention the issues of multiple time zones and differing work rules. In light of all these concerns, Church said there really was no good alternative to a blended training model.

“We selected an e-learning provider for both Green and Black Belts in large part because of the program’s emphasis on ‘doing’ rather than reading,” she said.

In 2011, plans are in place to expand the offerings by including Yellow Belt and Lean training, using the same e-learning provider to ensure that the training is consistent.

The move to blended learning has been successful: Hertz has reduced its Lean Six Sigma training costs by more than 50 percent, Church said. What’s more, participants like the self-paced approach, in part because they can schedule their training around daily work responsibilities.

“Since we’re a 24/7 business, flexibility is essential,” Church continued. “Students like having the material available to them after training to use as a reference when they need a refresher.”

Because of business pressures, Church said, students feel that the classroom practice sessions are essential to their success in the program. In these sessions, they can learn from each other and take advantage of best practices identified in other projects.

Yet another benefit is that Master Black Belts are able to devote most of their time coaching students on tool application in their projects rather than teaching in a classroom. With less time in class, students receive more frequent feedback and coaching, and Master Black Belts still have time to take on large, high-impact global projects.

Church said what began with a decision to move to a blended learning platform is now becoming a continuous improvement culture, with people having enough confidence to use the tools to solve everyday problems.

“Our performance management process is now more reliant on facts and data and is driven by solid metrics. Whether you’re a new manager or a seasoned VP, you are able to understand how using the Lean Six Sigma toolset contributes to your individual success and to the overall health of the company.” ●

Katherine Bontrager is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to *iSixSigma Magazine*.



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