UNHCR uses the latest learning technologies to train its staff and partners

By: Bob Little

In December 1950, the United Nations’ General Assembly established The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems around the world. As one of the world’s foremost humanitarian agencies, its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. It also has a mandate to help stateless people.

In more than six decades, the agency has helped tens of millions of people to restart their lives. Today, its staff continue to help some 33.9m people around the world.

In order to do this effectively, the UNHCR’s 8,000 or so staff need be equipped with the latest guidelines, best practices and skills - and one of the most effective and cost-efficient ways of making this training available to people who are widely dispersed around the globe is via the latest learning delivery technologies.

So, in 2009, the UNHCR began developing its learning platform - known as ‘Learn & Connect’ - by starting the selection process to find a suitable learning platform. At the time, it was beginning a structural transformation in its training activities which would see it open its Global Learning Center (GLC) in Budapest, Hungary, while keeping its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

As part of the transformation, the UNHCR recruited subject matter experts, along with other specialists in learning delivery technologies and instructional design, and organised its learning materials into those on:

- Protection of persons of concern (legal, physical and material)
- Programme and operations management
- Staff security
- Emergency - how to deploy UNHCR staff & resources rapidly in response to urgent needs
- Management and leadership - ‘soft skills’ including interpersonal, communication and presentation skills, effective writing, stress management, project management and people management
- Finance, supply, HR and administration
- ICT

In 2009/10, the UNHCR selected a learning management system (LMS), supplied by Cornerstone OnDemand, and a learning content management system (LCMS), supplied by eXact learning solutions. It selected eXact learning solutions’ digital repository and authoring tool to help it to continue to develop new learning content. After about two years, the UNHCR has developed around 30 learning modules in most subject areas listed above.

Since the launch of Learn & Connect, in 2010, over 6,000 of the UNHCR’s staff - based in 120
or so countries - have registered for over 30,000 online courses.

The GLC’s role is to provide learning resources not only to train the organisation’s staff but also those of its partners. Currently, the UNHCR has some 4,000 external learners - through the learning platform. These partners include non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UN volunteers. In addition, through an inter-agency collaboration initiative titled “UNeLearn”, the UNHCR has sourced e-learning content on various topics developed by the World Food Programme (WFP), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC). These learning materials are now available, via Learn & Connect, to all UNHCR staff and partners.

“Moreover, Learn & Connect has changed the traditional push model of training delivery, giving staff more control and ownership of their own learning paths,” said Atish Gonsalves, who is the UNHCR’s Head of the Technology & ICT Training Unit at the GLC, in Budapest.

“To evaluate both the learning materials and the learning experience, we’re using the standard Kirkpatrick model - at the reaction, learning and behaviour assessment levels,” he continued. “All the data we collect, via the LMS and LCMS, helps the UNHCR to identify any areas where further training is required. This means that we can target our training interventions more effectively.”

Atish continued: “Learning content development takes place with our subject matter experts around the world, instructional designers, content writers, graphic designers and developers - and we use the digital repository to provide the ‘space’ for this to take place. In addition, where we have external suppliers building learning content, we need to ensure that they use a standard authoring tool - which is provided by eXact learning solutions - so that the results of their efforts are standardised, reusable and UNHCR retains total ownership of the content.”

The e-learning authoring tools and the LCMS support the process of conceptualising, storyboarding and designing content. There are tools for project management, digital repositories for storing media assets and design tools to package all the assets into a structured course. Authoring tools make use of templates to reduce on-going design costs by creating a toolkit of standard e-learning interactions including page layouts, animations and assessments. LCMS tools also facilitate the reusability of learning assets from a digital repository - thus reducing costs for change management and localisation.

Using Software as a Service (SaaS), hosted in the Cloud, means that the UNHCR has not had to invest in hardware or software development but, rather, leases the services from the provider. Fine tuning of the platform is achieved through configuration (turning on
Using eXact LCMS - the UNHCR case study

options, adjusting parameters and entering content) rather than customising (changing the code). This model allows the UNHCR to always have the latest version of the software managed by an external provider, without the hassle involved in upgrading every time a new version of the software is released.

To engage learners where the human contact is lost in pure online learning, the UNHCR is using webinar tools, such as Webex, to stream content in real time and as recorded sessions. In addition, UNHCR is investigating delivering learning resources to staff and partners via mobile devices.

Today, the world’s media picks up on ‘humanitarian’ stories faster than ever before, thus putting humanitarian organisations - such as the UNHCR - and their response to each issue ‘under the spotlight’ instantly. So, it’s vitally important that these organisations make the fullest possible use of the available technology to keep their staff informed of best practice in such things as bringing effective relief quickly and safely and then being able to maintain that relief until it is no longer needed.

This is the rationale for the development of the UNHCR’s GLC and its Learn & Connect learning platform, since this Center seeks to develop mechanisms to train, inform and enable the organisation’s staff and partners to carry out their work effectively, guided by UNHCR’s protection mandate.

The international protection framework - which comprises an evolving set of legal frameworks and conventions - has to be translated into usable content that can be delivered easily and rapidly to staff, implementing partners and NGOs. This means that it’s important to have adequate systems and tools in place to make legally complex documents accessible to the staff who have to ensure their application correctly.

To meet these needs, Atish and his team have started to incorporate social networking tools, such as blogs, discussion forums and wikis, into the UNHCR courses to make the learning experience more interactive. This can also lead to developing links among UNHCR staff (both in the field and in headquarters) as well as with implementing partners. This is creating new online communities to enable the exchange of knowledge and best practices.

About the Author
For over 20 years, Bob Little has specialised in writing about, and commentating on, corporate learning - especially eLearning - and technology-related subjects. His work has been published in the UK, Continental Europe, the USA and Australia

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- Multi-language content production
- Learning Content Management System (LCMS) & Digital Repository platforms
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