

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

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Elearn.WA delivers for the blind and visually impaired through flexible learning

Background

Established in 2001, Elearn.WA is a registered training organisation based in Perth, Western Australia (WA) specialising in e-learning and educational design. Its mission is to implement high quality flexible learning solutions in partnership with niche communities and industries. Elearn.WA achieves this objective through dynamic partnerships that build appropriate flexible learning solutions.

Elearn.WA has developed a reputation as a cutting-edge training provider in the development of accessible online learning options for its disadvantaged clients. For example in 2002 Elearn.WA was the lead agent in developing *Truvision (Flexible Learning Toolbox)* an online learning environment designed to enable blind and vision impaired learners to develop skills and expertise in elementary and advanced information processing strategies. Truvision supports competencies in the Certificate I in Information Technology.

How collaboration produced a flexible training tool

In 2002 they joined forces with the Royal Automobile Club of Australia (RAC) and the Association for the Blind of WA to develop a recognised, voice-activated online training program for call centre operators – the *Virtual Call Centre*.

“The prototype we’ve developed is exciting for a number of reasons, but primarily because it has potential for placing people who are blind or vision impaired into sustainable employment,” said Elearn.WA director Frank Bate.

“Technology is a major barrier that currently inhibits people blind or vision impaired from entering call centre occupations, he said. “This system opens up unparalleled occupational opportunities in the call centre industry for people blind or vision impaired.

“The development of flexible learning solutions using leading-edge technologies can be complex and expensive. Collaborative arrangements like the one we’ve established to work on this project can save time, effort and avoid duplication.”

RAC is the largest call centre operator in WA with three call centres employing 150 operators. After exploring the training and employment options with the Association for the Blind of WA and Elearn.WA, RAC decided to adopt a proactive approach that was committed to delivering nationally recognised training and placing people who are blind or vision impaired in the workforce. Call centres are a rapidly expanding industry nationally and internationally.

The Association for the Blind of WA is involved in policy development and advocates for government and non-government bodies to provide quality services, including education and training with facilities to meet the needs of people who are blind and vision impaired.

The development of the prototype was supported by individuals and the project team taking up nationally funded professional development opportunities (*LearnScope* and

Flexible Learning Leaders). “The networking that was a valuable part of these professional development experiences really got this idea off the ground. The collective knowledge that is built up through networking, ongoing learning, reflection and trust is how people get enthused and make an idea become a reality,” said Frank.

“The other thing that really motivated us to pursue our ideas was our participation in flexible learning conferences (*NET*Working Conferences*). This was another valuable opportunity to engage in a dialogue with their peers and consolidate our thinking,” Frank said.

“Taking time to invest in professional development provided a valuable commodity – time - for all of the project participants to research, apply and reflect upon their practices.”

Frank said it was important to be open-minded when developing and implementing flexible learning solutions. “Successful solutions rely on people working together to build a flexible learning culture based upon the needs and preferences of the end-user. There is no point in applying technology to learning just for the sake of it.”

The development team referred to a range of guidelines and checklists available online to ensure the *Virtual Call Centre* could be accessed effectively by learners with a range of needs including those who are blind or vision impaired (*Access and Equity Online Learning*).

This process also ensured the prototype design considered best practice in teaching and learning; provided learning opportunities for those who may previously have had difficulty accessing online learning and met Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) requirements. “The resources reaffirmed our orientation towards universal design,” said Frank.

RAC Training Manager Jacqui Jones said the *Virtual Call Centre* has the potential to bring more consistency to RAC training programs. “There are many variables to consider when training people in a role that is very hands-on. The voice-activated product brings greater consistency and quality to every trainee's learning experience.”

It will also be useful for RAC's training assessment purposes. The trainer can pre-select a call scenario and control the level of stress experienced by the trainee.

“The development of this product has been in line with the RAC corporate values and represents an exciting opportunity to bring together innovative technology, business efficiencies and maximise employment opportunities for all members of the community,” said Jacqui.

How the *Virtual Call Centre* works

The *Virtual Call Centre* prototype combines voice recognition computer software with wireless headsets. It is a unique, fully simulated flexible learning product designed to support people who are blind or visually impaired learn the skills needed to respond to call centre clients.

Frank said the product used complex voice-activated technology and as an e-Learning product to the best of his knowledge is the only one of its kind worldwide. “I believe it will become a benchmark-learning product.”

How they got there – The Australian Flexible Learning Framework

The Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework) was established in 2000 to support the vocational education and training (VET) system to meet the rapidly increasing demand for flexible learning and e-learning from industry, enterprise and clients. The Framework is a five-year national strategy collaboratively funded by the Australian Government and all States and Territories to achieve a shared vision of a skilled Australian workforce.

Elearn.WA used a range of Framework products and services that assisted them make inroads into flexible learning including:

LearnScope is a professional development opportunity that registered training organisations can access. It offers funding and mentor support to teams in developing skills and knowledge about how to apply technology and e-learning products in the flexible delivery of training

For more about *LearnScope* visit:

<http://learnscope.flexiblelearning.net.au/LearnScope/projects.asp>

Flexible Learning Leaders is a professional development opportunity that registered training organisations can access. It offers funding and mentor support to individuals in developing their skills and knowledge about how to apply technology and e-learning products in the flexible delivery of training

For more about *Flexible Learning Leaders* visit:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/projects/leaders.htm>

Flexible Learning Toolboxes are web-based learning materials that support the online delivery of qualifications from nationally recognised training packages. 74 *Toolboxes* have been developed to date.

For more about *Flexible Learning Toolboxes* visit:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/toolbox>

Access and Equity Online Learning identifies the needs of target equity groups in elearning. It also focuses on guiding the equitable design and delivery of elearning for all learners. It is designed to assist registered training organisations to address the needs of target equity groups. Access this free product at:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/productsandservices/accessandequity.htm>

NET*Working Conferences recognised as the premier national event for the application and use of learning technology and flexible learning professional development in Australian education and training. NET*Working conferences alternate annually between being a physical and an online event.

<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/productsandservices/conferences.htm>

Flex e-News

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<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/newsandevents/flexenews.htm>