

Sun Microsystems – the SunTAN Story

by Jay Cross, Internet Time Group 12/2000

Appropriately enough for a company whose motto is “The network is the computer,” Sun Microsystems started using eLearning to train newly hired sales people long before the term *eLearning* was invented.

In early '96, Sun sales executives were becoming alarmed. Their one-week of on-site sales training for new hires was not doing the job. (Competitors IBM and HP were giving new hires *six* weeks of training up front.) A proposal to expand the workshops to two weeks was booed down by sales managers. They didn't feel that could afford to take people out of the field for that long. Not only that, but product development cycles were shortening, and this mandated more training for sales reps and systems engineers in the field.

With Sun adding eighty to a hundred new sales people every month, travel expenses alone added up to adult money. Travel, food, and lodging for an additional week on the Sun campus, at \$2,125 per person, would cost \$2,125,000. Avoiding travel costs was sufficient justification to develop an e-Learning alternative. Thus was born SunTAN, Sun's “Training Access Network.”

Jerry Neece, then sales training program manager at SunU (Sun's internal university), helped create SunTAN as an alternative to the traditional workshops. Among the changes he described to SRI's Learning on Demand consultants¹ at the time were:

- from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centric learning
- from a single-discipline that focuses on one body of information to an interdisciplinary approach that relates various bodies of information to each other
- from an emphasis on problems and drills toward an emphasis on authentic learning problems that build critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- from a focus on the individual as the primary locus of learning to a focus on collaboration and learning groups
- from learning classrooms to learning communities that form around interests and/or skills rather than geography or time
- from learning during a prescribed time to continual learning
- from clearly defined teaching and learning roles to blurred lines between teachers, learners, providers, and coordinators

¹ Eilif Trondsen *et alia*, *The New World of Technology-Based Learning*, SRI Learning on Demand project. URL: <http://future.sri.com/LOD/LoD.index.shtml>. Reproduced with permission.

Neece and his team created a multi-faceted eLearning solution, a precursor to the enterprise eLearning architectures only now beginning to appear on the open market.

Drawing again from the report from SRI's Learning on Demand consultants, SunTAN "is an interactive, network-based, World Wide Web-managed, knowledge management and learning-support system" which incorporates:

- Profiling of individual learners
- Delivery of custom learning paths
- Registration and tracking
- Adaptive assessment and feedback
- Sales performance support system
- Competency management
- Reporting at all levels

SunTAN not only reduced the overall amount of instructor-led workshop time; it also made better use of that time. Preparation and pre-reading was delivered online before the workshop; assessment of mastery and follow-up were available online after the workshop. This freed time to provide more motivational exercises, meetings with executives, and case studies.

The cases, based on actual sales situations, focused on particular vertical markets. For realism, the cases name names. Groups work together for two days to come up with the ideal sales approaches. Because the groups are heterogeneous, individual learners typically learn numerous ways of looking at situations. Neece recounts the story of a veteran IBM salesman being astounded as a former Shanghai shoe store manager related that IT contracts in China mandate that a single supplier meet the needs of any given installation, leading the former IBMer to revise his approach to global accounts operating in China.

SunTAN goes far beyond new-hire training. Modules are multi-layered. There's the usual in-depth learning experience. But there's also a highlights section for just-in-time preparation for sales calls. And there's an executive summary to simplify finding the right content rapidly. 42% of SunTAN graduates continue to log in for information, but this understates the amount of access; frequently a single systems engineer will be scanning SunTAN in order to keep an entire team up to date.

The SunTAN competency management component improves the way sales managers are perceived by their subordinates. Prior to six-month performance reviews, managers can view a learning report that details past learning and prescribes next steps. During the interview, the manager and subordinate rapidly cut to the chase.

Learning and Training Content²

Although SunTAN does feature rich-media elements, such as audio, video, and system simulations, each “learning object,” or chunk of content, aims to balance budget, bandwidth, and learning benefit. In many cases, rich media, which result in a high budget and very long download times, may not be the best solution to meet the performance need. Thus, whereas SunTAN in its early days emphasized delivery of video to the user’s desktop, this requirement now has much lower priority because of the systems and cost implications of such video delivery.

SunTAN uses learning objects to organize content into three views: a prescribed curriculum, just-in-time support for sales tasks, and free search. Within each curriculum, courses align with sales tasks. Thus, course planners can arrange a set of objects in varying combinations—to create a prescribed course of study, for example, and another to provide support for a sales representative’s current sales task. At Sun, as in other organizations that use these types of learning objects, the size of the objects is gradually shrinking. According to one training manager in an insurance company that is moving toward Web-based learning and training, his agents prefer chunks of 3 to 5 minutes, which are considerably shorter than those in the CBT model, which typically uses units 30 to 90 minutes long.

Though Sun developed SunTAN for its direct-sales representatives and sales engineers, it soon extended it to the company’s more than 20,000 resellers, who account for more than 60% of worldwide sales, and then to independent software vendors and commercial system integrators such as EDS, Andersen, Perot Systems, Oracle, and SAP.

What’s it worth?

Many of the benefits of SunTAN are beyond measurement. It’s impossible to pin a value on increased self-confidence among the sales force or having a 24/7 channel to the very latest sales information and techniques. But some aspects *are* measurable.

The time for sales people to achieve quota dropped from 15 months to 6 months. What’s the value of 9 months of additional sales time for 1,440 people? Given that these people have a quota of \$5 million, that’s in the neighborhood of \$5 billion. Calculating back from total Sun revenue instead of quotas puts the gain at \$3.7 billion.

Picture this. Jerry Neece spies Ed Zander, then recently named president of Sun Microsystems, crossing the parking lot. “Hey, Ed, SunTAN has made Sun three-and-a-half billion dollars!” Zander replied that they were hiring more experienced applicants. Neece said he’d take credit for half the increase. Zander replied that

² This section is reproduced in its entirety from Trondsen, et alia.

Sun's products were superior and competition was faltering. Neece said, "Okay, give us credit for 1% of the increase." Zander replied that it must be more than that. Let's settle on 3%, for assuredly SunTAN is responsible for at least that much.

That 3% adds up to more than \$100 million in incremental revenue. Executive support has never been a problem since that afternoon.

Neece talked with Sun chairman Scott McNealy about supporting SunTAN more directly. Why? Well, a hundred people bringing in \$5 million apiece is \$500 million in revenue. Isn't that worth an hour of Scott's time? Neece recounts SunTAN workshops where Scott McNealy and Ed Zander each spent an hour with the new hires. Sometimes Zander brings along *all* of his direct reports!

Those with experience in eLearning can appreciate the pioneering nature of SunTAN. Four years ago, object-oriented learning architecture was largely unheard of. Even among technology leaders, integration of competency management, learning delivery, curriculum maps, and on-going sales support was a pipedream.

Jerry Neece and his team created a structure and philosophy of eLearning that foreshadowed the direction of eLearning and knowledge management today.

About SRI's Learning on Demand program

SRI's Learning on Demand (LoD) program analyzes, evaluates, and explores current and future eLearning developments, issues and implications.

The excerpts quoted here come from LoD's first major report, *New World of Technology-Based Training*. More recent reports cover topics such as *eLearning Along the Value Chain*, *The Future of eLearning Content*, and *The Emerging eLearning Industry*.

LoD provides sponsoring organizations with the business and technology intelligence and knowledge base that managers and executives find useful when facing difficult strategic and tactical issues and investment decisions in areas of learning technologies. LoD is also building a global community of interest for ongoing dialogue and discussions on eLearning issues and developments. See www.elearningforum.com and <http://future.sri.com/LOD/>.

For information about participating in the Learning on Demand project, contact Eilif Trondsen (etrondsen@src.sri.com, 650 859 2665) or email info@future.sri.com for general information

Jay Cross has been passionate about harnessing technology to improve adult learning since the sixties. Fresh out of college, he sold mainframes the size of Chevy Suburbans. Later, he designed the University of Phoenix's first business degree program. He has managed several software startups and is the former president of MegaMedia WorldWide. Jay advised CBT Systems during its transition to [SmartForce](#), the eLearning Company, and helped [Cisco](#) e-Learning Partners plan, implement, and market their initial web-based certification programs. Jay serves as CEO of [eLearning Forum](#), a 450-member think tank and advocacy group in Silicon Valley. He is a graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Business School.

[Internet Time Group](#) provides hands-on advice on implementing eLearning, developing information architectures, advising management, and accelerating sales. Jay and his team also provide out-of-the-box, results-oriented marketing advice to eLearning companies. Five hundred people visit www.InternetTime.com for eLearning information every day.