

# Turnaround at NetApp U

BY MIKE PROKOPEAK

In just over a year on the job, Sundar Nagarathnam has turned NetApp University from an afterthought into a valued, integrated asset to the global data storage and management company.

Sundar Nagarathnam has carved out a niche for himself as something of a turnaround artist. Since joining NetApp in 2008, Nagarathnam has steered the company's education arm, NetApp University, from an organizational afterthought into a strategic asset that business leaders have learned to value.

"They used to try to avoid NetApp University, or they said 'NetApp Who?' instead of 'NetApp U,'" Nagarathnam said. "Now we're integral to the business."

Nagarathnam said the company's learning organization was in disarray when he joined, with bits and pieces of training here and there and a lack of clear direction and focus. Company revenues had been growing steadily from \$1.17 billion in 2001 to a reported \$3.4 billion in fiscal year 2009, and NetApp's global workforce had hit 8,000 employees, but NetApp University had simply failed to keep the pace.

"They had too many pockets of training within NetApp because the learning organization really hadn't stepped up to meet the requirements of the company," he said. "The systems, processes and consistency of offerings were completely missing."

In his year and a half on the job, Nagarathnam focused on building a solid foundation for enterprise-wide training that delivers education opportunities to NetApp's internal employees, external partners and customers. It didn't take long to see results.

NetApp University recently received the Total Customer Experience award — the top award within the company.

"It typically goes out to sales organizations," Nagarathnam said. "It's very, very rare for an accomplishment of this kind to be recognized for the award. It speaks volumes to the impact we have made. As our COO announced at our all-hands [meeting], we are now giving a competitive edge to our company with the way the training organization is supporting the readiness and the development of the employees."

## An Accidental Education

While this accomplishment is significant, the challenge was one that Nagarathnam has been preparing for his entire career. An engineer by training, he might never have found his way into enterprise education if not for a fortuitous incident that led him out of technical support and software development.

When an instructor fell ill for a key five-day training course, Nagarathnam was asked to fill in. After an enlightening five days in the classroom, Nagarathnam knew the path he wanted to take.

"I said, 'I don't want to be in support anymore — I want to be an instructor,'" he said. "The rush, the response and the impact I felt I was making in the classroom over those five days stretched my mind into saying, 'I know this is what I want to do.'"

Before joining NetApp, Nagarathnam led similar enterprise-wide learning initiatives at Cognos, a maker of business intelligence and performance management software, and at Hyperion Solutions, where he created and oversaw an education organization that incorporated customer, partner and internal employee training.

Nagarathnam has also held education positions with a number of tech companies, including Oracle and Sun Microsystems, and has served as chief operating officer for Medsn Inc., a start-up medical education and marketing company. He holds a master's degree in computer engineering from Syracuse University and a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras.

While at Sun, Nagarathnam served as a program manager, rolled out the company's operating system and built the learning partner program. Then he moved to Oracle, where he managed the company's global curriculum for its core Internet platform.

"I got my footing in education in a very, very solid way at Oracle," Nagarathnam said.

In addition to rolling out certifications at Oracle, Nagarathnam also worked in operations and prod-



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– Sundar Nagarathnam, Vice President, NetApp University

uct management, heading up the company’s market launch of the Oracle learning management system. After Oracle, he joined Medsn, where he oversaw education initiatives as COO.

### Engineering Success at NetApp

This broad range of experience came in handy when Nagarathnam took over education for NetApp.

Chodi McReynolds, NetApp University director of sales education and marketing, joined Nagarathnam in late 2008 and helped transform NetApp’s learning function from a lackluster organization into one that is mainstreamed into the rest of the business.

“It isn’t just the training organization, it’s the organizational change that occurred,” she said. “Now training is considered part of all strategic initiatives that are rolled out. There’s been a real shift at NetApp on training. It isn’t just something you do your first week and then you never do it again. It’s now part of the strate-

gic alignment to any initiative that we roll out. That’s basically happened in about 12, 15 months.”

Nagarathnam said the key to their rapid success has been a focus on stakeholder needs and delivering easy-to-use learning that directly aligns with those needs.

“We have focused on making it incredibly easy to do business with us,” Nagarathnam said. “The complexity of our organization is hidden from them. Within our organization, we have built out incredible workflow and awareness of [what] work each group is doing and how the handoffs occur. That process automation [and] streamlining, from a repeatability point of view, has been great.”

It sounds simple in theory, but it can easily be derailed. To ensure the success of those business relationships, NetApp University provides an educational liaison to its business partners in the product groups and business units to make sure there is someone who understands their needs and makes it easy to work with NetApp U.

Once those relationships have been built, NetApp University focuses on effectively executing learning solutions. Given Nagarathnam's engineering background, it's not surprising that process automation and execution is a hallmark of the new NetApp University.

"One of the things people forget about learning is the process," Nagarathnam said. "It can be very complex to build something, to get requirements, to execute on these, to communicate, to make sure the effectiveness is defined, etc."

As an example of the strength of their development infrastructure, he pointed to NetApp University's roll-out of 115 Web-based courses in 2008. Without an efficient, repeatable process, Nagarathnam said that rollout would never have been possible, especially given the complexity of the courses, many of which include interactive components and built-in assessments.

### Delivery to Disparate Audiences

Nagarathnam estimates that about 40 percent of NetApp University's training is focused on internal employees, 40 percent on partners and the remaining 20 percent on customers. What and how they deliver is based on the audience. The company's engineers, for example, have a specific set of learning needs and wants.

"Engineers tend to like a non-social learning environment for learning," Nagarathnam said. "They also prefer to learn from people they respect, which implies there needs to be either a geek factor or peer-to-peer learning."

NetApp University provides engineers with templates to build their own learning solutions, allowing them to record their own training and then convert it to video, transcribe it into PowerPoint, stream it online and make it keyword searchable. They are also allowed to rate each other's courses.

While it may sound chaotic to turn over learning development completely to the audience, NetApp University ensures it fits into a cohesive whole.

"It's not haphazardly created," Nagarathnam said. "There's a structure to the content that we defined. In a typical quarter, we may roll out 50 to 60 videos of this kind. This reaches about 2,500 of our employees."

In sales education, much of the prerequisite foundational training is Web-based, but the University also builds out custom classroom-based solutions for each of the different districts in the company. These include courses around both products and skills, such as negotiation skills and effective presentation delivery. NetApp's technical support employees receive mostly online training in product administration and troubleshooting.

"There's a lot of incremental and baseline technical training that is made available online because it's very hard to reach out to this big an audience on an ongoing basis," Nagarathnam said.

The retooled education function resulted in a spike in

the use of NetApp University courses. Across the board, Nagarathnam estimates that employees have accessed courses within the LMS 20,000 times in the last two and a half months, which does not include video-based content and books online. The usage of books online has also grown, and Nagarathnam said the university has 3,000 licenses to meet this growing need.

Management and professional audiences typically receive structured, classroom-based programs. NetApp University takes a similar approach for new hires, hosting one-day sessions for approximately 150 new employees that are facilitated by the CEO and other senior executives, including the CFO and COO.

"[It] gives employees an incredible feeling about their belonging and how the executives are welcoming them into the company," Nagarathnam said. "It's a phenomenal on-boarding experience."

Training for partners, typically accredited and certified resellers and implementation specialists, is similar to employee training. Nagarathnam said the university offers all Web-based training opportunities for free and offers discounts of up to 75 percent on classroom training.

"We want to treat partners as much as possible as if they are employees," he said. "Everything that we do for our employees we mimic for our partners."

The reason, he said, is straightforward.

"We need to make our customers successful. [And] to make our customers successful, it's about the accelerated adoption of our company's products and solutions in that ecosystem," he said. "[This] requires investment in the employees for their timely effective training readiness and then getting into the partners and customers so that they then become satisfied repeat, happy customers of our company."

NetApp University has also expanded learning opportunities beyond Web-based, virtual and in-person courses. The University has created learning communities tied to specific learning programs, such as its new-hire college graduate program, to allow learners to collaborate and learn in a semiformal environment.

"We also are using a community to provide a venue for instructors to exchange best practices and information," McReynolds said.

Echoing their keep-it-simple methodology, NetApp University uses externally available tools to develop and moderate learning communities, rather than building a proprietary in-house tool.

"We don't want to become a technology organization," Nagarathnam said of the university. "We are a training organization. We are an enabler."

### Achieving Results

While all of these new and redesigned initiatives added up to newfound credibility for NetApp University, that only

tells part of the story. Building out the enterprise learning management system was paired with the development of a sophisticated business intelligence capability.

“Our CEO has a dashboard now of training in our company, of what partners have been trained, of what customers have been trained in a given quarter,” Nagarathnam said. This data allows the CEO and other business executives to track usage, identify the top five programs or break down training by organization or region.

“We are able to provide that kind of information with the click of a button,” Nagarathnam said.

The retooled and reorganized NetApp University is all part of the company’s overall people strategy, which led to its selection by *Fortune* magazine as No. 1 on its list of great places to work in 2008.

“That implies that we invest in the development of our employees in a very significant manner and the company values the importance of that,” Nagarathnam said. “But it’s our job to do this in a pragmatic, impactful way to their business and show the value.”

Nagarathnam and McReynolds said the key to

their success has been a focus on making learning as simple, straightforward and painless as possible. Business tools, competencies and maps should feed seamlessly into a learning program that is aligned with business needs, instead of being a grab bag of programs to be sorted through.

“The impact starts out with the vision of what you should or can be doing,” McReynolds said. “From a bottom-up [perspective], you don’t always have that vision of how the organization can connect with stakeholders. You have to have a vision for that and then rigor around executing to that vision to get everybody aligned.”

While Nagarathnam found himself in learning and development almost by accident, he’s found a mission that he can believe in.

“Training is an incredibly strategic component of a company’s success,” he said. “It is our job to elevate our importance. There are a lot of training organizations that want to stay low. We need to be talking about what we are doing. We need to talk about how we are impacting other organizations. That is going to get you the investment any time you ask for it.” **CLO**



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