Known for its acumen at processing information about other companies’ employees, Automatic Data Processing proves it also knows a thing or two about processing the needs of its own workforce.

BY MARGERY WEINSTEIN

When your company’s core competence is processing data, it’s sometimes easy to lose sight of the obvious—the information right under your nose. In the case of Automatic Data Processing, Inc. (ADP), a business outsourcing company specializing in human resources, payroll, tax, and benefits administrations solutions, that isn’t a problem. Through innovative training solutions that boosted employee knowledge and on-the-job ability, the company demonstrated it has no problem keeping its eyes on the development of its employees. Programs geared toward supporting career growth and enhanced customer service paved the way for a good year in training for ADP in 2009—resulting in the company’s double-digit move to No. 2 on the Training Top 125 list.

ONBOARD, ON TARGET
ADP knows it’s important to get new associates (ADP’s term for employees) and new managers off to the right start, so one of the programs it’s most proud of from the last year is its bolstered onboarding
regimen. “With a goal of accelerating new hire performance while decreasing training expenses, we addressed the need for more effectively onboarding new associates in multiple ways,” says Vice President of Learning and Talent Management Karen Kichline-Ruef. “We implemented blended learning approaches that leverage an online classroom management system, richly varied media content, and social networking. Action learning, reinforced by peer mentoring and extensive management engagement, cements the connection between learning and application.”

Kichline-Ruef says the learning teams partnered closely with subject matter experts from their lines of business to create training content that aligns with on-the-job activities new associates are required to perform. The company’s onboarding program is carefully tailored to the new roles associates will take on. Its Rapid Assimilation for Managers Process (RAMPup), for example, “is a comprehensive process designed to support new leaders as they take charge of a new role and establish leadership of the strategy and operations,” Kichline-Ruef explains. RAMPup includes guidelines for ADP’s HR Business Partners to support new leaders by conducting a half-day new leader assimilation meeting; appointing a peer mentor; laying out a 90-day road map with a stakeholder management plan; and publishing a manager’s assimilation guide.

“Another new program for managers that will cultivate stronger future leaders is our Management Development Program for first-time managers,” explains Senior Director of ADP University Karen Petersack. The updated curriculum marked an improvement, she notes. “We had current management development programs, but no consistent, company-wide approach to those programs,” says Petersack. To remedy that, in December 2008, the learning group brought a cross business unit team together to determine what the company needed in a first-time manager program. The team reviewed what was already in place and used best practices to develop what was needed that hadn’t been done before. “The result has been a successful, consistent 12-month virtual program our new managers attend,” says Petersack.

company’s tradition of delivering face-to-face learning events. “We knew the key to bringing this new learning model to our associates would require programs that not only focused on real business needs but also had a high level of interaction, support, and immediate application,” says Kichline-Ruef.

Since a majority of these blended programs needed to be delivered virtually over a long period of time, the company began examining different learning technologies for added support. The learning teams implemented combinations of self-directed learning assets, including e-learning modules, e-books, white papers, and podcasts, using the expertise of subject matter experts across the organization to help create knowledge chunks or live Web sessions. “We created numerous ways to have our associates demonstrate their skills development—either through individual or team activities,” says Petersack. “The key to making this all work was implementing new blended learning elements in pilots, gathering feedback, and making appropriate adjustments. Because we were confident in the new models we were implementing, and initiated changes based on associates’ input, we knew it was only a matter of time before our associates would begin to embrace and expect this new way of learning.”

The company’s second significant training challenge of 2009 involved its international learning and development teams. Much of ADP’s growth is occurring in international markets, where it’s building an associate infrastructure to support those markets, Kichline-Ruef explains. Since the learning teams in those areas are relatively small, it was important for them to leverage the company’s training resources and subject matter experts. The international learning teams constructed regional learning plans to identify what training was required, by whom, when, and who outside the training team might be able to deliver it. “By going through this detailed process, they were able to improve the utilization of their trainers by reducing duplication and increasing effectiveness by focusing on those topics identified as the highest priority,” says Kichline-Ruef. “The end result,” she says, “was bringing focused learning to new [regional] associates in a timely manner by leveraging the available expertise across ADP.”
ADP ADVICE
For Automatic Data Processing, Inc. (ADP), training excellence is based on a mix of cost-effective strategies and innovative programming. Here are ADP’s tips for creating a top-performing training organization:

- Implement blended learning approaches that leverage an online classroom management system, varied media content, and social networking.
- Use action learning, reinforced by peer mentoring and management engagement to cement the connection between learning and application.
- Carefully tailor your onboarding program to the new roles employees will be taking on.
- Support new leaders with tools such as new leader assimilation meetings, a peer mentor, a 90-day road map with stakeholder management plan, and a manager’s assimilation guide.
- Bring a cross business unit team together to determine what the company needs in a first-time manager program, and review what already existed, to build a program that utilizes current best practices while also creating something new.
- If the majority of your blended programs need to be delivered virtually over a period of time, examine learning technologies that include self-directed learning assets such as e-learning modules, e-books, white papers, and podcasts. Use the expertise of subject matter experts to provide content.
- Utilize simulations such as a sales lab that puts sales associates in a “mock” prospect office, including furniture and office set-up. Ask participants to run through a sales call applying their new skills on an account from their territory. Capture the practice session in a live Web streaming session for participants’ supervisors to view and provide real-time feedback and coaching.
- Create knowledge bytes, or small learning chunks, to provide quick knowledge and job aids for rapid delivery. The “bytes” can be used as stand-alone support or incorporated into larger learning programs.
- Implement avatars on your learning portal to answer questions about topics such as new products and selling best practices.
- Try social networking to optimize your learning program with wikis, communities of interest, blogs, team huddles, and roundtable discussions.

ADP’s trainers also introduced the concept of “knowledge bytes,” small learning chunks intended to provide quick knowledge and job aids for rapid delivery. The knowledge bytes can be used as stand-alone support or incorporated into larger learning programs. “This methodology,” Petersack says, “allows greater flexibility and improves the speed of content development.”

In addition, the company is exploring ways to utilize avatars that use artificial intelligence in its training programs. These avatars are available through ADP’s learning portal and answer a variety of learning topics, from product knowledge to selling skills. “The use of avatars began within our sales learning organizations,” says Kichline-Ruef, “and now is becoming a best practice other learning groups are applying for their specific associate audiences.”

Besides investigating new ways of imparting information, the company’s learning professionals had to improvise on the fly, sometimes in the middle of rolling out a training program. “When we began to design our new first-time manager program, we included a live learning lab where they would practice the various skills they were developing throughout the program,” Petersack explains. “Like most companies during the economic downturn, we were asked to evaluate our costs. We decided quickly to switch gears and develop more interactive, team activities that tested our associates’ skill development throughout the program. This was accomplished using our virtual learning tools, great virtual facilitation skills, and some creatively designed exercises.”

INNOVATION IN ’10
There are no plans to curb that innovative spirit in 2010. ADP has begun rolling out the recently developed Certified Sales Professional, a comprehensive blended learning experience that utilizes a four-phase approach: virtual knowledge transfer (utilizing a mix of Web-based content through ADP’s learning management system and group coaching via live learning sessions); one-day experiential learning (including a paper simulation, learning map modality, and a Web-based account planning tool); reinforcement and certification (in which employees get certified through an exam, Web-based simulation, and sales leader observation); and sales leader participation (in which sales leaders play a role in the live learning sessions, the one-day onsite training, and the certification process).

The company also is in the process of incorporating more social networking, utilizing technologies such as wikis, communities of interest, blogs, team huddles, and roundtable discussions. “We are expanding how and when we use the vast experience that ADP associates have,” says Kichline-Ruef. “The more we can gain access to best practices without requiring large time commitments, the more likely we are able to expand our subject matter pools and increase our sharing capacity.”

CREATIVITY CRITERION
Along with enhancements to cost effectiveness and efficiency, training achievement at ADP last year depended on the trainers’ ability to innovate. A program Kichline-Ruef points to as the epitome of their creative approach is a Sales Lab that puts sales associates in a “mock” prospect office, including furniture and office set-up. Participants are asked to run through a sales call applying their new skills on an account from their territory. The practice session is captured in a live Web streaming session on the company’s newly deployed learning portal. The Sales Lab allows leaders to view and provide real-time feedback and coaching. During their time in the “Sales Lab,” the sales associates also are asked to make outbound prospect calls into their territory, while a learning consultant provides real-time coaching through phone monitoring software. “This approach provides comprehensive and practical coaching for the most difficult skill a new sales associate must learn,” says Kichline-Ruef.