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Programmed for change

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Convincing Cobol programmers, who are used to a procedural programming environment, to use object-orientated languages such as Microsoft's .NET and Sun Microsystems' J2EE can be difficult. Nonetheless, it was vital for IT services giant EDS to get 150 of its developers reskilled in these technologies so it could complete a number of key projects that were coming up. The company realised it needed outside help for the project. The contract was won by IT professional training specialist Xpertise, but before the training could begin, EDS had to persuade its Cobol developers that it was worth learning to use the new technologies.

Full Text (1573 words)

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[Headnote]

Programmers can get set in their ways, so how did IT services company EDS teach 150 of its developers to learn the latest languages needed for key future projects? Tom Lloyd finds out

Convincing Cobol programmers, who are used to a procedural programming environment, to use object-orientated languages such as Microsoft's .NET and Sun Microsystems' J2EE can be difficult. Nonetheless, it was vital for IT services giant EDS to get 150 of its developers reskilled in these technologies so it could complete a number of key projects that were coming up.

'Most of our developers were working on legacy systems,' says Ian Smith, a training specialist at EDS Europe, Middle East and Africa North-West Solution Centre, 'but we had a customer who needed a developer with Java and .NET. We just didn't have that capability within our staff.'

The company realised it needed outside help for the project. 'We weren't in a position to do it in-house', says Smith. 'For Cobol and other legacy skills, we do have in-house trainers, but not for Java, so we went out to tender.'

The contract was won by IT professional training specialist Xpertise, but before the training could begin, EDS had to persuade its Cobol developers that it was worth learning to use the new technologies. 'It's a hearts and minds issue, really,' says Steve Brennan, enterprise account director at Xpertise. 'Some developers have been in that mindset for a long time.'

Steve Eadie, an information engineer at EDS who took the .NET training course says there was a 'certain amount of trepidation' about learning to programme in a new way. 'It's totally different', he says. 'Going back to Cobol now is like steppingback in time.'

Xpertise and EDS ran joint seminars to convince the developers of the value of the skills. 'EDS was positioning it as the business, and we were promoting it from a training and skills perspectives,' says Brennan. 'EDS has a very wide population of existing developers, and not all of them needed J2EE or .NET skills, so EDS wanted people to put themselves forward for career progression, rather than it being mandatory.'

Once the developers had been convinced of the value of the skills they were to be taught, the programme could begin in earnest. What needed to be learnt was defined by the requirements of EDS's customers. 'There was a lot of work due, and obviously we would need to meet that demand', says Smith.

The other aspect, however, was more complicated. EDS has a range of development staff, working on different aspects of the development life cycle, and with differing backgrounds and skills. Before getting involved in this project Xpertise had been doing some work with Microsoft for EDS, mapping job roles and competencies around the .NET framework. It now applied the same principles to Java to work out exactly who needed to know what.

'EDS worked with us to say who would be more suitable for which technology,' says Brennan. Once we'd got that split we were ready to go deeper, tracing individual learning paths, fasttracking some people through, and developing a blended learning solution.' Of the 150 trainees, around a third took .NET and two-thirds learnt J2EE.

One of the key requirements Xpertise had been given was to use as much of the content from EDS' in-house university as possible. The company has a library of thousands of e-learning courses, from suppliers such as Thomson NETg, Books 24/7, and DigitalThink, so it made sense to use these.

Essential homework

Typically an individual would be given some e-learning material to study before the first classroom session. These were all delivered by Xpertise trainers at the company's Altrincham site, near Manchester, and lasted no more than five days. After the first classroom session, attendees would be given more e-learning courses, which would have to be completed in their own time before the next classroom session.

'They knew exactly what stage they would need to be at by the time they moved to the next classroom-based course', explains Smith. 'The e-learning would have to be done in that time or, to put it bluntly, they would be found out.' He added that the total amount of training was between 18 and 20 days in the classroom, depending on the course and the experience of the learner, backed up by e-learning.

Eadie says the trainees found the blended nature of the course helpful: 'We weren't just dumped on a training course for five days and then expected to go out [and use the knowledge], you did one training course, then you did some homework, a couple of weeks later you'd do another training course, so you'd get this constant flow of information rather than just an overload.'

Eadie insists that people didn't mind doing extra work in their own time. 'To get the most out of it, a lot of us did our own background work', he says. 'As soon as we got access to software we'd do as much as we could out of hours. It's one of those things where you get as much out as you are prepared to put in.'

Xpertise ran mentoring sessions to make sure the trainees were coping with the courses, and to resolve any problems. As well as providing support during the training this was also designed to identify key people who could help after the training finished.

'When we did the overall project plan we realised that these guys were going through a very fast and steep learning curve, so we wanted to work with EDS to develop people within the organisation that could act as mentors once the programme had finished.' says Brennan.

Eadie was chosen as one of the internal mentors. He says the sessions were vital because they put the skills being learnt in a business context. 'We actually spent a good two or three days completely away from computers, discussing how we would approach a typical system... and all of a sudden your classwork fits into place, you can

see where it sits because of that mentoring session,' he adds.

Xpertise ran two sets of mentoring sessions. The first block consisted of one-to-one sessions with individuals during the course, the second was group sessions after it had finished. As well as identifying problems these sessions allowed Xpertise and EDS to assess how the training was going. 'We relied on staff to come forward and admit they are struggling, which is sometimes difficult', recalls Smith.

Xpertise also carried out ongoing assessment through questionnaires. Trainers were also asked to create a report after each course, and these were then used to guide and structure the mentoring sessions.

Additional incentives

The final method of assessment was a voluntary exam, in either technology, funded by EDS. 'Although the certification wasn't the primary reason for the training it would stand the individual, and the company, in good stead', says Smith. 'It's a flag-waving exercise, we can say we've got this number of people who are certified.'

The projects EDS's developers will need Java and .NET skills for haven't begun yet, so Xpertise is still providing an email support service. EDS is also running study groups to make sure people don't forget what they have learnt. 'We got people to set up dummy projects for themselves', says Smith. 'They meet every fortnight and discuss any problems they have.' These sessions are led by the in-house mentors that were identified during the training.

Overall, Smith says the project has been a huge success. Eadie agrees: 'We've had training for things like Java before and it never worked, but this seems to have found the right balance.'

[Sidebar]

We relied on staff to come forward and admit they are struggling, which can be difficult
Ian Smith, regional training specialist, EDS (pictured left, with Steve Brennan, far left)

HOW IT WORKS

Programme structure

- * Joint EDS/Xpertise presentation to learning community
- * Individual skills assessment
- * Confirmation of core skills: OO (object-oriented design), UML (unified modeling language), utilising WebSphere IDE (integrated drive electronics)
- * Streaming of individuals on to core competencies training
- * Aligning Java/.NET exercises for classroom-based part of the course to business needs
- * Streaming of individuals onto appropriate J2EE/.NET curriculum
- * Design and development of mentoring component

Sample Java training path

The training path for an individual without skills in object-oriented design would be as follows:

- * E-learning-EDS University pre-learning course: Introduction to OO design
- * Classroom - Xpertise 5-day course: Core competencies; Xpertise course: Programming in Java
- * E-learning-optional EDS University courses in the basics of Java 2 and Java 2 certification for programmers
- * On-site mentoring and performance support as necessary
- * Optional exam - Sun-certified programmer for the Java2 platform
- * Classroom-Xpertise 5-day course: Building web applications in Java
- * E-learning-pre-/post-EDS University course: Enterprise JavaBeans
- * On-site mentoring and performance support as necessary
- * Optional exam - Sun-certified web-component developer
- * Classroom course-Xpertise 5-day course: Designing and building enterprise applications using J2EE
- * E-learning-pre-/post-EDS University course: Java 2 Enterprise connectivity
- * On-site mentoring and performance support as necessary
- * Optional exam - Sun-certified enterprise architect exams

[Sidebar]

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Number of trainees: 150

Subject covered: J2EE and .NET

Timescale: August 2003 to April 2004

Problems: Staff resistance, complex subjects, different levels of experience

Techniques used: Blend of classroom training and e-learning, backed up by mentoring sessions

[Sidebar]

It's one of those things where you get as much out as you are prepared to put in
Steve Eadie, information engineer, EDS

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