

Innovative learning

Tata Interactive Systems enables executives to upgrade their skills and students to learn with joy, and empowers children with learning disabilities to succeed

When sales executives at Telus — a leading Canadian telecommunication company — found it difficult to sell high-value data products, they turned to Tata Interactive Systems (TIS) for a solution. TIS responded by designing an interactive training programme based on the simulation-based learning objects (SimBLs) platform. Through simulations of conversations between sales representatives and potential customers, the immersive programme helped Telus employees improve their selling skills in a non-threatening environment. The result: Telus's sales figures shot up and TIS's product was awarded the Gold at the 2009 Brandon Hall Excellence in Learning Awards, in the Best Custom Content category.

“The programme followed a simple instructional approach, despite the complexity of the multi-branching simulation, and it gave a clear feedback to the learner,” says Sanjaya Sharma, CEO, TIS, explaining the unique aspect of the product. SimBLs is just one of the many innovative products through which TIS, a global pioneer and leading developer of interactive learning solutions, has made learning interesting, entertaining and effective. The company has won over 40 awards globally in the last decade for its products.

TIS's learning solutions span the entire spectrum of client requirements. They include learning platforms (learning management systems, learning content management systems, learning portals, assessment engines, virtual worlds, etc) and learning content

(simulations, serious games, story-based learning and web-based training for leadership, process and skills training, orientation, etc). In addition, TIS also offers on-the-job training by way of electronic performance support systems.

What gives TIS its competitive edge is its width and depth of experience across eight verticals — education; government and defence; telecommunications and ICT; pharma and health care; banking, financial services and insurance; airlines, transportation, logistics and hospitality; packaged goods; and manufacturing, energy and construction. Its varied clientele includes more than 60 Fortune 500 companies, and government and educational institutions — Abbott Laboratories, Citibank, Boston University, Qantas, UNICEF, American Airlines, Unilever and British Airways, to name a few — spread across international geographies.

Tiding over the downturn

Like other IT companies, TIS too had its fair share of problems during the 2009 economic recession. “Training budgets, considered discretionary expenditure, are among the first things that are slashed during an economic slowdown,” explains Mr Sharma. “We were lucky in that we got a couple of big orders from Australia, Europe and the US in 2008, which saw us through the downturn of 2009,” he adds.

Additionally, TIS undertook cost-containment initiatives that brought down costs to what they were in 2006 and helped maintain double-digit profits. To drum up sales figures, several senior executives were moved from production to go-to-market roles within the business verticals globally. As the economy improves, TIS expects sales to go up.

A very successful and key branding initiative is the Tata Interactive Learning Forum (TLF). Held annually in North America, the UK, Australia and now India, the forum provides a platform for thought leaders to interact and share knowledge. It also helps TIS to acknowledge and update key customers, introduce potential customers to their products and capabilities, and understand customer requirements. Rather than speak about their products, TIS encourages customers to present case studies on the challenges they faced and how TIS's solutions helped them.



TIS uses interesting story-based learning platforms

Thrust areas

One-third of TIS's solutions cater to the education sector. The organisation works with publishers, educational institutes and international universities to create online content and learning solutions. Recently, they created a math curriculum for Bertelsmann, a European media giant. The company is increasingly exploring government and defence sectors, especially in the US, and also in the UK and Europe.

Mr Sharma anticipates growth from all three sectors — corporate, government and defence, and education. "When a recession gets over, the percentage of technology-based training increases; using IT is a more effective form of teaching people and so the proportionate spend on technology increases. We are hoping it will be the same this time." A key challenge is that of training budgets being generally small and for shorter durations in these sectors, unlike in the information technology sector.

"The answer is to identify value propositions and solutions which are critical to an organisation, understand their key organisational initiatives and then provide training solutions that help those initiatives succeed," explains Mr Sharma. This approach, in the last three years, has helped TIS triple the number of large orders.

In the last few years, technology has been a key driver in learning processes, and TIS has redefined its mission as to enable key organisational initiatives through effective learning solutions.

TIS has development centres in Germany, Switzerland and India, and sales and marketing operations in the US, Canada, the UK, mainland Europe, Australia, Middle East and India. The challenge is to create content for different cultures in different languages. Typically, companies prefer local players since they are able to understand the local nuances better.

What gives TIS an advantage over local players in the geographies they operate in is scale, along with its vast experience and exposure to a varied clientele. "We try to mitigate the competitive edge of local players by having local delivery through local offices. A local client interface and production in India gives us cost and process advantages," explains Mr Sharma.

A different approach

TIS's differentiator is the continuous investment in creating new product formats and solutions. Five years ago, there was no story format in e-learning; it mostly took the form of structured content. The organisation realised that some of the best teachers, authors and award-winning filmmakers used the medium of stories to convey their messages effectively. Subsequently, senior IT teams from TIS visited the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, Gujarat,



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for a workshop held by MIT on teaching through stories. It also invited Hollywood producer Rich Krevolin and author of several books, to share his perspective on storytelling with senior managers. Today, TIS's story-based learning solutions have become an exciting alternative to conventional learning.

TIS's customers also benefit from its interactive and immersive learning solutions which help to create a databank of stories, including those gathered from the experiential knowledge and expertise of senior employees on the verge of retiring, thus passing on their experiences to current and new employees.

Focus on learning disabilities

An active area for TIS has been its pioneering work in the area of learning disabilities (LD) in children. In 2002, as part of corporate sustainability, TIS partnered with the Lokmanya Tilak Municipal General Hospital, Mumbai, nasen and Maharashtra Dyslexia Association. A major initiative was its first global symposium — Tata Interactive Learning Disabilities Forum (TLDF) — held in Mumbai in 2006 to create awareness and promote remedial activities, best practices and knowledge-sharing. Over the last four years, TIS has worked for the early detection and remediation of LD among children, and thereby to empower such children to achieve their full potential. In 2008, it conducted the first-ever research on LD-affected students in India. Based on the findings, TIS selected 'early detection' as the key focus area in 2009. TIS's initiatives have also helped to include LD in the MBBS curriculum. "Our focus going forward will be to deepen the collaboration between different agencies and try to make changes at the planning and policy level," says Mr Sharma.

A proactive approach in meeting challenges has helped TIS tide through rough times. And its innovative learning solutions that help impact performance and productivity gains, streamline operations and financials, develop leadership and decision-making skills, and reduce time-to-market have stood the organisation in good stead and helped it emerge a winner. ●

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