Virtual Business Learning Center

Background for Virtual Business Learning Center

In 1996, I founded Success Coach where I provide coaching services for professionals and business owners. With the completion of the ILT program, I'll have more areas of expertise to support other entrepreneurs to improve their instructional products. I am also a strategic partner of Entrepreneur Strategies. Entrepreneur Strategies is a business visioning, brainstorming and business development consulting company. Both businesses are resource based, providing knowledge, service and resources to clients in a variety of capacities. Our goal is to improve the dissemination of information to our clients, making our resources more accessible to current and prospective clients. Our businesses thrive when we are more efficient in sharing the resources and information with our clients.

For the past six years there has been a tremendous accumulation of data and resources to use with clients. The volume of information will continue to grow with adding ILT as an additional service. I have also noticed that the trends and business environments continue to change, such that the resources tend to grow, not diminish. In the past few years it has been more and more difficult to distribute information efficiently to clients in a real-time need-to-know basis. Some of the information we resource for our clients is specific to their coaching situation, and is not something that is referenced for every client in all situations. With the Internet it is easier to disseminate information, to share PDFs, learning resources and learning for specific niche areas or provide pay-per-use services. Since our need to communicate and share resources effectively needs a sustainable solution, I

decided to research creating a virtual business learning center for Entrepreneur Strategies.

Need for Improved Information Sharing

Entrepreneur Strategies has challenges in getting timely information to our customers. Many of the traditional ways we provide information to our clients includes: sending links, digging through files of information and mailing copies, faxing or in some cases referring clients to other professionals. These systems of providing information to our clientele are outdated and inadequate. Our clients are not able to access any of our customer tools without us personally servicing each individual request. Our ability to provide real-time access to information and service is often hindered by our geography (we may be traveling) or availability (we may be servicing other client or business requests). Since our business is a service entity our customers value our ability to provide prompt access to information, resources, or business tools.

We anticipate that with the growing number of clients our challenge to provide excellent customer service will expand our current problem. As a service provider we feel our current systems are inefficient for disseminating information and lacks the technology to provide real-time business resources to our clients. Since our need to communicate and share resources effectively needs a sustainable solution, I researched creating a virtual learning center for the Entrepreneur Strategies website to disseminate and share information with clients. The choice to research a learning center leaves many unanswered questions for resolution. While I have conceptually some ideas about implementing a learning center, we have not

previously conducted surveys with our clients and prospects to ascertain their needs. I have not formally conducted interviews or research of existing models for a virtual business learning center to determine form, fit, or functions to implement. By conducting the action research I expected to gain knowledge I could use to determine how to organize and develop a virtual learning center. I was also hoping to discover preliminary ideas around how a learning center will work for our business.

Background Research

Previous to the formal action research I conducted cursory research on learning portals, portlets, learning management systems and virtual learning communities. All of these systems for management of learners and learning content are much larger in scope and resources/system requirements than what Entrepreneur Strategies would like to implement. According to the E-Learning Advisor, "e-learning portals are a place where the organization's Web channels come together to combine the cumulative information, knowledge and data that will enable greater business efficiencies" (Brockbank, 2002). The learning center could be a mini-portal that services our clients on a scaleable level under the label of a virtual business learning center (VBLC). We feel the virtual business learning center needs to be a place where our clients and potential clients can locate learning materials, articles, forms, assessments, schedules/calendars, and templates. Additionally, we have considered adding interactive tools like chat, instant messaging, e-newsletters, bulletin board/threaded messaging. We are interested in providing synchronous and asynchronous events like on-demand coaching, seminars, and ask

the consultant chat sessions. The following will provide a broad-scope overview of goals for the learning center:

1. A virtual business learning center is self-sufficient. It should not require monitoring or intervention from the consultant. The clientele should be able to navigate effortlessly, access resources, and gain value from their experience.
2. By the time the client uses the learning center, s/he should know something new or use old knowledge in a new way.
3. The language should be appropriate for the learning adult.
4. The center should be visually attractive and appropriate for small businesses.
5. The center should be inherently interesting to the clients for whom it is planned.

Focus for Action Research

The action research explored what currently exists as models for Internet learning centers. By using site exploration, lurking and site review I expected to gain some idea of what currently exists and the potential of using some of these websites as models to conduct further research. With some of the premier model websites I planned on conducting phone interviews to determine how the organization designed and developed their model and possible reasons why their model does or does not work. I wanted to find out whether their VLC is meeting the needs of the user and some of the opportunities or challenges they have discovered in the process of operating their own learning centers.

For this action research there are five primary areas for research: (one) a delivery system of information to clients, (two) a resource center for clientele (three) a system scalable to small business, (four) technologies to create a learning

center for Entrepreneur Strategies, and (five) marketing and business requirements.

Focus Questions

The following questions guided the inquiry:

- What does a learning center for a small business (consulting) look like?
- What are the existing technologies used in learning centers?
  - What does the technology cost?
  - Is the technology scaleable?
  - What is needed to implement the technology?
  - What are the security and user access points?
  - How are pay-for-services, student registration, student management and Web tutorials implemented?
- How is the learning center organized?
  - Is the content dynamically driven or static?
  - What formats is the content presented to the user?
  - How can we focus content into coaching/consulting content specific areas?
  - How do we distinguish hierarchy?
  - Do we create a map or index for the site?
  - Do we need to include a search engine?
  - What will help to organize the content for the user to increase usability?
- What services should we include in our learning center?
  - What about including interactive experiences? (Chat, Threaded Messaging, Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning, On-Line Tutorials, On-Line Help, Group Sessions, Web – Based Learning Communities)
  - What about including static resources? (Libraries, Ezines, Tool Box, Café, Town Hall?
- What do clients expect in a learning center?
  - Do clients expect to pay for services at the learning center?
  - Do clients expect to have all services for free at the learning center?
  - What services will clients use in a learning center
  - Does a learning center add value for the client?
  - Does the client perceive a value-add for their relationship with Entrepreneur Strategies?
- What business considerations do we need to consider?
  - Do we need to include a business or strategic action plan?
  - How do we effectively market our new learning center?
  - How do we enlist new members to join our learning center?
  - What kind of market testing or beta testing do we need to conduct?

Methods, Activities & Action Research Management

The action research employed a combination of literature and website reviews, questionnaires and interviews. The Internet was used to review current research on learning communities and virtual learning centers. The scope broadened to include more terms, as virtual learning communities and virtual learning centers use a variety of names to identify themselves to their audience (Brockbank, 2002).

The Internet was used to review existing models and answer questions related to technology, business development, and learning center models. By conducting a review of literature, journals and websites, I gained experience with what is available on the Web to answer research questions related to technology, services and the business of a virtual learning center. With regard to the Internet searches, I expected to find several learning related service centers or business learning centers that are models for what Entrepreneur Strategies might like to create. I collected the data into a database I constructed to manage this project. The use of a database allowed me to conduct searches, queries and quick reporting for the evaluation of the data for the website model review.

The Internet research was started after determining a project scope in late September. A priority in the Internet research was to begin to establish models for virtual business learning centers to interview. After conducting the initial website review, contact with the learning center was established and the phone interview was scheduled and conducted in approximately one hour. The interviews were completed late October and early November. Four of the five interview requests

were granted. One learning center declined the request for an interview stating personnel resources as the reason for not conducting an interview.

During the Internet research I found five virtual learning centers to interview to answer business, technology, organization and service questions for the research project. The phone interviews used the survey located in Appendix 2 as a guideline. Four Interviews were conducted over the phone, providing opportunities to explore additional information to expand on the basic questions. The goals of the interviews were to identify key business implementation strategies, technologies, and user activity opportunities. The interviews with the model learning centers confirmed the data collected on the website review and provided additional knowledge related to the learning centers development and management strategies.

I conducted a user survey with a questionnaire (Appendix 1). The questionnaire was focused on user-related topics with a few business questions intertwined into the survey. The questionnaire was conducted with existing clients, prospects and individuals who represent our market. With this survey I was able to get information on the user expectations and services. I conducted the survey through Web Monkey, an Internet survey service. The survey was reviewed with the Subject Matter Expert and was presented to three test users prior to being sent as a formal request to respondents. The on-line survey was conducted from late October to mid – November. The survey was sent to over 200 possible respondents in by email and 46 people chose to complete the on-line survey. The target for the survey was the Alliance of Professional Consultants, Boulder Writer's Alliance and current clients. The target audience of the survey represents small business, sole-

proprietor and entrepreneurs, which is the appropriate audience for the Entrepreneur Strategies VBLC. The survey results are covered in the learner survey section of the action research results.

The remaining research and data collection was completed between October and November, with the final results and data compilation commencing in mid-November for presentation to the Action Research Class on November 20th. The data and resources were available to conduct all of the research according to the initial schedule forecast. The only significant change to the original plan was the number of phone interviews conducted. After conducting the initial learning center site reviews it was possible to glean most of the information to assess the site. The interviews were reduced to five from an original estimate of ten.

As a component of the action research, I looked for possible technologies and resources for implementing the learning center. The interviews and the Internet research provided some knowledge around the technologies available and strategies learning centers have used to implement their programs. Many of the technologies discovered will take more time to investigate, test and determine whether these tools are the right solution(s) for the virtual learning center. At this time it is not evident what the commitment is required for programming, resources, management and system implementation might be for these products. The results for technologies and software applications are inconclusive at this time.

Research Results – Learning About Learner Supports & VLBC Models

After spending several weeks of accessing the Internet to find models for virtual learning centers I determined that I needed to narrow my requirements to

specific criteria and attributes for reviewing websites. I established the following criteria for evaluation of websites:

- The Virtual Learning Center (VLC) must be Internet based. Many learning centers are based on delivery of services using traditional school (face–to–face) or ground learning centers and are not offered on the Internet.
- The VLC must contain learner supports. The websites needed basic attributes to be considered for the review: a contact us link, a web site index or map and one other form of learner support. Learner supports are listed in Figure 1.
- The VLC targeted a learning audience by calling themselves a learning center or a similar label. Research Centers were included as they often represented the core learning objectives of a learning center. The background of instructional learning technologies provided a bias in selecting sites that were more learner focused instead of providing business or marketing content to sell the user vs instruct or teach the learner.

If the website did not have the above criteria I did not include them in my data compilation. I did extend the searches to include broader terminology to try to capture more websites, but many of these searches just added to the volume and did not contribute a lot of useful models. By broadening my search I was able to find and include E-Business Research Centers in my website review, which proved to be a helpful group of websites for conducting the model review. Through the extended search I found the E-Business Research Center at Virginia Electronic

Commerce Technology Center (VECTC – Christopher Newport University.) Michelle Carpenter, the Director of VECTC extended me an interview and afterwards provided a national list of e-Business Research Centers for me to use in my research. This list provided an additional 50+ centers to review for my website model review. The Research Centers did not always provide e-learning, but they did provide a diverse group of learner supports and models to review for consideration of virtual learning centers with an e-commerce business focus.

Development of Learner Supports for website review:

To aid in the website review it was important to establish a focus for identifying learner supports. The development of this list was twofold. First, the research and literature review provided some background and frameworks for establishing this list. Second, the initial surfing of the Internet and my instructional learning technology foundation provided a knowledge base of what learner supports are available and how these tools contribute to supporting learning on the Internet. During the research I found knowledge that contributed to the identification of learner supports.

Virtual learning communities provide a variety of learner supports to provide information to learners. Providing tools and learning resources are essential to support the self-directed nature of virtual learning. Some of these resources should include: communications mechanisms, content management, community and learning hubs, search engines, frequently asked questions, personalized tools, and customization (Dunlap & Ludwig-Hardman, 2002). Technologies can contribute to building virtual learning communities. In the virtual environment technology has

the capacity to provide connections between people in the community or support learning. These technologies can include: teleconferencing, chat, list-serves, websites and e-mail (Kowch & Schwier, 1997). Technologies provide learner support activities that support cognitive processes and active engagement. These technologies include dynamic web pages, peer tutoring and coaching, online communication and chatting to create learning environments. These networked learning environments can provide a strong support for learners (Oliver, Omari, Ring, 1998).

The master list of learner supports was compiled and was used in both the learner survey and the website review as a complimentary cross-survey review. More details about how these learner supports were used are available under the learner survey and the website review. See Figure 1. Some technologies and tools that were left out were things like site and content management, navigation, and appropriateness of content for the learning audience, usability and design strategies. These technologies are important for the overall effectiveness of learning, but are harder to survey. Many of these learning strategies for web-based environments would be included in the design of the virtual learning center.

Website Model Reviews & Data Results

After extensive Internet searches I found 19 websites that I could use for evaluating for virtual learning center models. Each of the nineteen websites were reviewed and evaluated for learning supports. The data for the learner supports for these 19 websites is available in Figure 2. The biggest challenge in the Internet review for learning center models was to find websites that would work with the

criteria. Many websites are marketing tools instead of learner tools. The absence of basic learner supports disqualified many websites that I felt had good design, navigation and focused content. I book-marked some of these websites for design strategies and may consider them in the planning and implementation stage instead of the action research stage of this project.

Likewise, the data could easily be skewed if virtual universities were evaluated as a virtual learning center. The focus helped to sort through programs that are virtual, but are too large to provide a scaleable model for the VBLC. Many of university programs are based on using large Learning Management Systems or Content Management Systems. The VBLC model is meant to be a smaller enterprise model, rather than trying to compete with institutional standards of learning.

While the intention was to find websites with a business focus, I quickly discovered many business websites did not have learner supports, even when they self-identify themselves as a learning center. Many business websites are established to sell or market their products and services. Even in the virtual learning center environment it was difficult to find the learner supports in these websites and therefore many of these websites did not qualify for the review. The final review by learner supports, i.e. a list of the learner support and the number of websites included in the final survey is listed in Figure 2.

The 19 websites reviewed represent the following characteristics:

Business Type	Sites	Percent
Profit	5	26
Non-Profit	5	26
Education	9	47
Fee Type		
Fee	1	5
Tuition/Other	7	36
No Fee	11	57
E Learning: Courseware		
Ask The Expert	2	10
E-Courses	7	36
Forum	4	21
Teleclass-TV	1	5
Seminar	3	16
Webinar	1	5
No Courseware	6	32
Usability - Navigation		
Contact Us	19	100
Index/Site Map	6	32
Search	12	63
Faculty List	1	5

This list provides specific knowledge about the websites that were chosen for the review. Of these characteristics two details are of financial importance to the decision to implement a VBLC. The fact that only five of these sites are for-profit provides the opportunity to ask why? The fact that most centers are funded through tuition is a compelling reason to provide courseware as a way to fund the learning center. Also, the question around funding is raised when only one site is funded through a fee. This data indicates that this business approach is either a ripe opportunity or a poor business model. While conducting the Internet research I did

find websites that did not match the VLC criteria to make it in this data, and who did charge a fee for use of the Web resources. Likewise, the learner survey indicates learners do expect to pay for some services either as a consulting fee or as a pay per service. For the VBLC to have a for-profit model it appears a combination of tuition and pay for services would be complimentary ways to deliver services and create income for the VBLC.

Learner Survey – Learning about Learners & Learning Supports

The learner survey was one of the more interesting parts of this research project. I learned a great deal from the respondents that I could not have captured without personally interviewing each respondent in person. The on-line survey I created using Web Monkey's survey tools on the Web made the delivery and use of this survey easy to administer. Web Monkey's tools for assessing the survey results created the data compilation. Since the survey was available on-line the respondents were anonymous, making it fun and interesting, as I did not know which answers came from which respondents. The survey results have been compiled into a viewable format and are available in PDF online at: http://www.entrepreneurstrategies.com/portfolio/artifacts/VBLC_surveyresults.pdf

The survey provided valuable feedback from potential users. The survey provided a variety of information about the user's Internet access, use of the Internet for learning and expectations around learning center resources and fees. The comments and survey results provided good information for determining resources and learner expectations for a VBLC. This survey also provided

confirmation about what learners want. This data can provide a baseline for creating a VBLC for Entrepreneur Strategies.

Comparing the Results – What Learners Want vs What VLC Create.

Instead of treating the Learner Survey and the website model reviews as separate entities I decided to compare these two surveys and see how they measured up. I was able to make some clear determinations by placing the data side by side. In this case it was as if the learners wanted one thing and the websites delivered something different. See Figure 3 for the side-by-side results of these two surveys. (Remember these 19 websites represented the best cases I could find conducting a pretty strenuous search on the Internet). Even after finding the best website models to conduct the review, the learner survey reveals a gap between what the learners want and what websites provide. In only a few cases are the learners close to getting what they say they would want from a virtual learning center.

In reviewing the data I found some compelling discrepancies that can help us to make a better model. For instance, the data shows us very clearly what the learners would expect in a learning center. By having this knowledge available we will be able to make some business decisions about what we can provide as learner supports in our VLBC. The discrepancies in the data can also be based on different opinions about learner supports. I did not try to measure every learner support, but tried to capture familiar and known learner supports that I identified as common to most learner-based websites. In the survey I even created some learner supports that might be considered redundant. For instance a library would

have learner resources, tools, and articles. In the survey I queried the respondents as if these were separate items, when in fact I would probably include these in the library. The reference materials and articles could be considered the same thing, but may be viewed differently depending on the perception of the learner. In a traditional on-line library, the reference materials can include both published journals and the separate articles. In this survey I did not attempt to make a distinction between these kinds of resources and left the redundancy for the respondent to answer for us.

I also did not measure links as a learner support in the survey. This action was both deliberate and unconscious. The assumption was: of course I would have links to information, doesn't every website have those? Actually, a lot of websites don't see the value in sharing their favorite links and do not include these for their users. Likewise, the assumption to include links in the survey was not something I felt I needed to measure, as most websites that contribute to learning have links, whether these are internal or external. I included links in our list of learner supports, but did not evaluate this in our data collection. In hind site it would be interesting to go back and see which of our 19 websites failed to include additional links for their users.

Virtual Learning Center Interviews

The phone interviews provided a good opportunity to query first-hand the knowledge of the people who run and operate the learning centers. The four interviews were with centers that represented a cross-section of the sites reviewed. The interviews covered four business models: Accredited Virtual University, Virtual

Educational Technology Center, E-Learning Provider & Training Vendor. Three of these models are for-profit. They earn their income from tuition or sales. The technologies for delivering services varied as each business operates from a different business model. Two businesses were resellers of learning technologies or courseware. Two models were higher education or adult learning and provided services through tuition or foundation funding. Since these models are so diverse it is impossible to use them comparatively. Each model has strengths and weaknesses depending on what set of measurements are applied to the situation.

The virtual university had a strong sense of learner supports and conducted a learner survey prior to implementing the VLC. Likewise, the Research Center conducted an extensive survey of other centers to determine a sound model for implementing their program. Both of these university models have business-based governing boards that help to direct the management and goals for the center and provide evaluation and feedback to improve their services to users. The strongest suggestion offered in the four interviews was to ask the learners what they would like and implement this model. Based on what I learned from the learner survey, this advice appears to be a valid suggestion for determining how to develop the learning center for the learners.

The interviews were helpful to the research process for two reasons. The immediate contact with the people involved in these centers helped to uncover some of the details about the center I would not have revealed by the website review alone. The personal interviews provided a layer of knowledge about the business, the management, the technology and the understanding of supporting learners. The interviews also provided a chance to obtain more in-depth knowledge

about the technology and the marketing efforts of the center. The interviews provided me the opportunity to ask personal questions about website traffic, and management, income and background implementation strategies. These interviews were conducted using a basic survey – Appendix 2, but was loose and consequently there is not any comparative data because the business models are so different and because the same data was already collected for these centers in the original data under the website model review portion of the research. The website reviews and interviews confirmed that technology can deliver "Just-in-Time" supports for learners in the virtual learning center. The synchronous and asynchronous events include chat brainstorming, real-time design conferencing, interactive webinars and virtual data sharing (Hoyt, 1999).

I was hoping that an additional outcome of the interviews would be to create some contacts that could guide and support the VBLC development. Since our business model is so different from the centers interviewed, these alliances are less likely, although I attained some very helpful resources and knowledge that will contribute to this outcome in a slightly different manner.

Literature Review

The literature on the Internet and through collegiate resources on virtual learning, e-learning, virtual learning communities and related issues is vast. Some of the key topics that contributed to my research are: interactivity, building a virtual community, engaged learning, technology and virtual learning. The article: Learner Support Services for Online Students by Joni Dunlap and Stacey Ludwig-Hardman provides the best coverage of literature and details on building learner

supports for virtual learning environments. This document came to me late in my research process, but probably was the most comprehensive and useful analysis of learner supports. The literature available covered supporting learning, but not learners. The distinction is using the student services model for providing learning supports in a distance educational framework. I felt this paper tied together the whole idea of providing supports that are not dependent on instruction, but are available to learners. Virtual learners require as much support as a traditional learner, but the human interaction and support needs to be more deliberately offered to encourage engagement and reduce isolation and contribute to learner retention.

There is a growing collection of literature in the area of community building and web based learning environments (WBLE). Best practices for building community in WBLEs includes establishing a well-organized structure to facilitate efficient interaction and establishing a "failure safe" space in which to work and communicate (Hill, 2001). Janette Hill provides strategies to engage learners and help retention. These strategies include: interactive, learner supportive and encourages a friendly learning environment.

Many of the articles discussed technology as a tool that can be used for collaboration and entertainment. In the virtual learning community the technology is essential, but can hinder the learning and learner. Providing learner supports in the use and management of technology can help to create a positive learning experience. And removing the technology barriers can help learners' stay engaged and active in their learning environment (Peters, 2001). In the VLC, having the experience be fun and entertaining is just as important as the actual learning.

Media needs to provide interactivity that enhances human-computer communications (Sims, 1997). Pam Northrup suggests keeping the interactivity appropriate to the course objectives and the instruction that is being conducted. She suggests using collaboration, interaction and personal support as a few ways to encourage the virtual support of WBL (Northrup, 2001). Considering the audience in the program design can save time and resources long-term. By including the learners in the user interface design and construction of resources the design can be implemented with their preferences and needs in mind, making the instruction more relevant and useful (Frye, 1999).

The various articles and research papers on web-based learning address many of the same principles. Use interaction including threaded discussion, chat, and learner-to-learner communication (Horton, 2000). Make the learning personally relevant to the learner and make it relevant to their life, whether this is personally or professionally. Learning is more interesting and engaging when it is directly applicable. Learners want to have a say, whether it is providing feedback on the courseware or learning community, they all have a need to be involved in their learning environment and influence the way the design works for their learning (Boehle, 2002). Building a learning community takes effort, but it also takes interactive strategies to empower the learners to collaborate and create the community. Perhaps beyond the offering of identified learner supports one of the best services a virtual learning center can provide is a self-assessment for the learner to determine their learning style. Many websites provide self-directed assessments as a precursor to taking on-line courses. Helping the learner to self-

select themselves for learning in a virtual community can help them to be a more satisfied learner if there is a natural fit.

The resources I reviewed for the literature review provided a good overview of e learning and strategies to consider in designing a virtual learning environment. The focus I believe falls within the foundation of providing a learner focused center with learner supports that will create a friendly virtual learning environment. The learner supports need to be appropriate for the audience as evidenced by the results of our learner survey. And certainly it is possible to review the literature, learner surveys and website reviews and make the observation that what learners want is a connection, whether that is with the learners in the environment or with the service providers. The use of dynamic technologies to deliver virtual learning is useful as it delivers learning interactivity. The key is to create meaningful collaborative experience to engage the learning and keep them interested in the VBLC.

Action Component for the Project

Through the action research project it has become apparent that an essential component of the virtual business learning center is the value of the learner's experience. There are many tools and suggestions on learning communities and creating interactivity for learning. These are not functions of technology; rather they are instructional design strategies that apply to learning in the virtual environment. According to Elliott Masie improving the learner experience includes: learner engagement, curiosity, simulation and practice, remediation, coaching, peer learning, action learning, performance support, intensity, assessment and feedback and teaching culture. The benefit of conducting this action research project reveals

that essential learner experiences also use good virtual instructional design strategies. One of the outcomes of the action research is that Entrepreneur Strategies will be able to adopt good design strategies for the virtual center based on the value of knowledge contributed to this project by the research (Massie, 1999).

Many of the action research questions were answered and provide Entrepreneur Strategies with some conclusive data on the viability of designing and implementing a VBLC. The learner survey provides guidance for learner expectations and strategies we would like to consider employing when implementing a VBLC. Likewise, the feedback on using a VBLC is encouraging and gives us enough information to feel confident that our audience would be receptive and interactive with a VBLC.

The business model websites provided a good review for what the competition would be if we entered the VBLC marketplace. There are enough compelling reasons to provide a model VBLC as a tool for our business and our clients. There are great websites with very few of the characteristics learners desire or indicated through our survey they would utilize. This knowledge provides us with a great opportunity to enter the VBLC with a new delivery model. This model could provide both learner supports and income, depending on how it is organized and ultimately developed. We see this business model as providing a good opportunity to provide Entrepreneur Strategies with the needed organization and structure to manage providing resources to clients, while providing learning technologies for clients and Web learners.

After reviewing the data and the research, Entrepreneur Strategies feels confident to develop a business and marketing plan to include a virtual business learning center. This planning will be conducted between December, 2002 and January, 2003. The business planning stage will be completed prior to the start of the Design Studio Course in January, where we intend to use the project management support of the class to build the VBLC. We will be able to identify the technologies and resources required through the business planning stage, to provide the project management team the adequate support to fund create the project. After the completion of the project, there will be a follow-up evaluation to review any outstanding project developments and to complete a formative evaluation. This product will be updated to include any additional developments required to improve the VBLC.

Environmental Impact:

We believe the implementation of a VBLC will be a useful solution to our primary issue and help our business efficiency and delivery of services to clients. The VBLC has the potential to be an additional income stream and we will consider this as we conduct our formal business and marketing plan. We feel our business and our community of learners will benefit from the addition of a VBLC. In our research we have been able to directly assess the competition and the opportunity.

The business environment will benefit from adding the resources of a strong instructional environment for learning. The action research has provided us with a good balance of information, research and knowledge to consider implementing a center that is Internet based, but provides strong learner supports. We also realize

the addition of these services will challenge our existing resources for managing the VBLC. This consideration will need to be part of the business and development plan for creating a VBLC. We feel the action research reveals the learning center will benefit users and will enhance the business.

There may be some reconditioning of users to locate client information on the website. At times I may still need to provide individual support for our users, but in many cases the learning center will empower learning and access to resources. The short–term impact will require additional resources, learning curve(s) on implementing additional user technologies and building the resources to be on-line, this is a short-term impact on the business.

Final Project Reflections

The action research project provided a unique opportunity to conduct a preliminary research for implementing a VBLC. The academic experience of conducting an action research project had many new learning experiences including formal surveys, interviews and Internet research. I feel that this particular project was useful in providing additional background and foundation for e learning and virtual learning communities. The content and data will be useful for determining product scope and ways to encourage use and participation of the product once it is implemented. I feel this project has been successful in providing essential knowledge for the next step in our business planning and strategies. I look forward to seeing the fully implemented virtual business learning center.

Figure 1: Learner Supports

Articles	**E-Courses**	**Library**	**Software**
Ask Expert	**EZINE**	**Live Help**	**Teleclass**
Assessments	**Faculty List**	**Mtg. Place**	**Templates**
BLOG	**FAQ**	**Nuggets**	**Threaded Discussion**
Calendar	**Form/Survey**	**Orientation**	**Tools**
Case Studies	**Forum**	**PDF, PPT**	**Tutorial**
Chat	**Glossary**	**Publication**	**Tutoring**
Contact Us	**Guest Book**	**Research**	**Webinar**
Custom Interface	**Index/Map**	**Search**	**White Papers**
Data/Stats	**Learner Contribution**	**Seminar**	
Designs	**Links**	**Showcase**	

Figure 2 – Web Site Review - Learner Supports

Learner Support	No Web Sites	Percent
Contact Us	19	100
Resource Library	14	74
Links	13	68
Articles	12	63
Search	12	63
Calendar of Events	11	57
EZINE	10	53
Tools	8	42
Forum	8	42
FAQ	7	36
Forms/Surveys	7	36
E-Courses	7	36
Learner Contributions	6	32
Index/Site Map	6	32
No Courseware	6	32
Reports/Research	5	26
Forum	4	21
Chat	4	21
Tutorial	4	21
Live Help	3	16
Threaded Discussion	3	16
Publications	3	16
Seminar	3	16
Orientation	2	11
PDF, PPT Downloads	2	11
Customized User Defined Interface	2	11
Data/Stats	2	11
Ask The Expert	2	10
Other	1	5
Glossary	1	5

Learner Support	No Web Sites	Percent
Project Designs	1	5
Teleclass-TV	1	5
Tutoring	1	5
Webinar	1	5
Downloads: Software	1	5
Assessments	1	5
Case Studies	1	5
Guest Book	1	5
Faculty List	1	5
Templates	1	5
Community Meeting Place	1	5
Project Showcase	1	5
White Papers	1	5
Nuggets	1	5
BLOG	0	0

Figure 3: Comparing Surveys: Business & Learners

Dynamic Data Learner Supports

Learner Survey statistics are based on the number of respondents indicating they would expect to have this learner support available.
Business Site Survey statistics are based on 19 sites reviewed and the number of sites that actually contained this learner support.

Learner Support	Learner Survey	Business Site Survey
Web / Seminar	43.2%	21%
Chat	36.4%	21%
Discussion	65.9%	16%
Tutorial	86.4%	21%
Forms/Surveys	70.7%	36%

Dynamic Data can be synchronous or asynchronous and are considered to be more interactive.

Figure 3: Comparing Surveys: Business & Learners

Static Learner Supports

Learner Survey statistics are based on the number of respondents indicating they would expect to have this learner support available.
Business Site Survey statistics are based on 19 sites reviewed and the number of sites that actually contained this learner support.

Learner Support	Learner Survey	Business Site Survey
Ezine-	34.1%	53%
Events Calendar	68.2%	57%
Reference Mtls	93.2%	36%
Library	81.8%	74%
Articles	90.2%	63%
FAQ	82.9%	36%
Tips	82.9%	5%
Assessments	51.2%	5%
Business Tools	70.7%	42%

Static learner supports are less interactive and are delivered asynchronous.

Client Survey – Appendix 1

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=56625139710

On-Line Learning Center Survey

This survey is for a graduate action research project for CU-Denver Instructional Learning Technology Program. Graduate student, Becky Haugen, is researching interest in services provided by an on-line learning center.

Your assistance with this project is appreciated. Please begin the survey.

1. How much do you interact with the Internet for learning or accessing resources?

- Never
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly

2. How do you access the Internet?

- Modem
- DSL
- Cable
- T-1
- Satellite

3. Have you previously used or experienced an on-line learning center?

- Yes
- Not Sure
- No experience

4. If you were to access an online learning center, what services would you expect to have available for your use? Select all that apply:

- [ ] Library
- [ ] Real-time conversations (chat)
- [ ] Posted messages (threaded conversations)
- [ ] Calendar of events
- [ ] Reference materials
- [ ] Ezine/Newsletter
- [ ] Web tutorials
- [ ] Webinars or on-line seminars
- [ ] Other (please specify)

5. If you were to use an online learning center for a business consulting service provider, what services would you expect to have available to you? Check all answers that apply.

- [ ] FAQ
- [ ] Tips
- [ ] Assessments
- [ ] Articles
- [ ] Business Tools
- [ ] Business templates or forms

6. If you were enlisting the services of the business consultant, how much would you expect to pay for access to the learning center?

- ( ) A member fee of less than $100/year
- ( ) A monthly fee of less than $25/month
- ( ) No fee, it should be a part of the consulting fee
- ( ) A fee for use above and beyond the consulting contractual agreement

7. Should webinars, live chat, and email consulting be a fee-based service of the learning center?

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

8. As a prospective learning center user, how much would you use a learning center that provided a variety of professional consultants and services?

- ( ) More than 2 hours a week
- ( ) At least weekly

- [ ] Once or twice a month
- [ ] Several times a quarter

9. Would an on-line learning center add value to your experiences with a consultant?

- Yes
- Some value would be added
- I'm not sure if it would add value
- No

10. Please provide any additional information or comments that would be helpful for creating an on-line learning center.

- See below
- No comment
- Sign me up
- Other (please specify)

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Action Research
12/02

Learning Center Survey Business Phone Interviews– Appendix 2

Entrepreneur Strategies is considering developing an on-line learning center for our Web users/prospects and clients. As a professional Internet-based learning center, please answer the following questions:

When did you implement your learning center (lc)?

What kind of planning did you complete prior to development and implementing your lc?

Do your users find the information….
• Helpful • Answers their learning questions • I haven't interviewed the user
Did you have previous experience with developing and implementing a lc?
• Yes • Not Sure • I don't have any previous experience with a learning center.

What technologies and services do you provide to your users? Check all that would apply to you:
• Library • Chat • Threaded messages/ bulletin board • Calendar of Events • Reference materials • Learning community • Synchronous / Asynchronous consulting • Ezine / Newsletter • Web Tutorials / Seminars • Resource Lists • FAQ • Tips • Assessments • Articles • Tools • Articles • Favorite links •
Other:_____
_____

What are the technologies you use to build and distribute your lc tools & technologies? _____
_____

What are some of your "lessons-learned" in developing a learning center?
_____

As a provider how do your clients perceive the value of having access to your learning center? _____
How much traffic does your learning center add for your Website?
• I don't measure traffic • Over 1000 hits monthly • Over 5000 hits monthly • Over 10,000 hits monthly

Did you base your design and development on sound models for a learning center?
• Yes • No • I did the research • I developed a plan • I hired experts

How much money do you invest (approx) in your learning center monthly or annually?
Monthly_____Annually_____

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