



Microsoft Finance Pioneers Entirely Virtual Online Distance Learning to Build Global Business Skills

Overview

Country or Region: Worldwide
Industry: Software

Customer Profile

Microsoft is the worldwide leader in software, services and solutions that help people and businesses realize their full potential.

Business Situation

Microsoft Finance wanted its worldwide team to grow beyond being Finance professionals to become value-added Business Partners. The challenge was to design and extend top-quality learning to all Finance professionals worldwide.

Solution

Microsoft partnered with TRI Corporation to create the **Microsoft Finance Virtual Business Simulation**, an entirely virtual learning environment that integrates business insight, business excellence and personal leadership.

Benefits

- ▶ Broad organizational impact
- ▶ Deep, applicable learning
- ▶ Quick transfer of learning to work
- ▶ Collaborative relationships with executives and peers worldwide
- ▶ Cross-functional expertise and leadership
- ▶ Cost & time efficiency

“People have talked about true online distance learning forever but don’t realize that so much of what is needed to give it life is available today. For less money, we are making a broader impact with learning that is deeper and more applicable.”

Michelle M. Young
Finance Learning & Development Consultant



Since 1975, Microsoft has revolutionized the way people communicate, share ideas and manage their businesses. As computing becomes more powerful, portable and affordable, information and communications are going entirely digital. Against this backdrop and today’s complex business environment, Microsoft Finance sought to transform its worldwide team into value-added Business Partners. Michelle Young, Finance Learning & Development Consultant, set out to break new ground and find an experienced learning solution provider not afraid to innovate with technology. With TRI Corporation, Young piloted an entirely virtual global learning experience that is now the model for scalable online distance learning across Microsoft.

Situation

With the increasing complexity of its businesses, Microsoft Finance wanted its worldwide professionals to engage differently with their internal business partners.

“Finance shouldn’t just be another pair of hands,” Michelle Young says. “If you know the business of your business partner, you can add value.”

Young’s mission was to develop trusted advisors who could

- Create a vision, set a strategy and communicate effectively
- Take decisive actions to execute a business plan
- Act under pressure
- Develop, coach and motivate team members
- Grow and accelerate business through team creativity and collaboration
- Make decisions with incomplete or uncertain information
- Understand the business impact of their decisions
- Have a responsible mindset to meet commitments

Young also recognized that this transformation of individuals into business leaders had to be highly efficient. Professional development classes had long been available to Finance employees on the main

corporate campus in Redmond, Washington, but the challenge was to extend top-quality learning to all Finance professionals worldwide.

Most importantly, for the learning to be authentic and relevant, Young knew she needed to replicate the virtual, global environment that is now the norm for Microsoft Finance professionals. The pros needed the skills and confidence to be trusted advisors to their business partners anywhere in the world.

Young sought out a learning solution provider to bring to life true online distance learning. She found that the experiential learning specialists at TRI Corporation were experienced in virtual solutions and understood the complex design and orchestration required.

“Other vendors said they could do it, but I saw the fear in their eyes,” Young says. “TRI said ‘We can do this’ and showed me how.”

For More Information

To learn more about how TRI Corporation experiential learning services can benefit your organization, visit www.tri-simulation.com, email TRIContact@tri-simulation.com or call 408-656-2895.

For more information about Microsoft businesses, visit www.microsoft.com.

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Consultant

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Finance Manager & Team Mentor

“Communications tools really aided our virtual team. Listening to and evaluating everyone’s thoughts and ideas before coming to a conclusion is a skill I wish to further.”

Finance Professional Participant

Solution

Michelle Young and TRI Corporation transformed a three-day in-residence class into the **Microsoft Finance Virtual Business Simulation**. This unique program integrates business insight, business excellence and personal leadership.

Over an intense six weeks, participants, mentors and staff are always separated by time and space but continually in two-way communication. Technology tools carry the course content and enable participants to control the pace of their learning.

Three teams of five to six participants compete to take a struggling company to profitability in six weekly “quarters.” Success is based on quantitative and qualitative factors that balance short- and long-term decision making.

Since the ability to field a winning team is key to leadership at Microsoft, business leads determine their own teams, including those outside Finance who could make unique contributions to their success. Always working virtually, teams develop their structure, decision-making process, strategy and business objectives. Each individual completes a self-directed 360 to identify issues to work on during the experience.

Interacting completely virtually, simulation teams submit decisions and assumptions for pricing, production, sourcing, research and development, marketing and selling. The simulation staff determines actual results based on the decisions of all companies in the marketplace. Teams analyze their results and make adjustments for the next period.

This decision-results-review process repeats with interjections of real-world business issues to challenge the teams’ creativity and innovation. Comprehensive operational reviews and risk assessments with Microsoft Finance leaders occur after the second quarter and at the end.

Benefits

In 10 years, 480 teams across TRI’s worldwide clients, including Microsoft, have completed the in-residence version. In the first Microsoft Virtual Business Simulation, all three teams outperformed any traditional team in sales and actual net income.

“The virtual teams could synthesize information and learnings at their own pace to make better decisions,” Young says. “They had continuous access to tools and information.”

One Finance leader who was a mentor for the simulation reported, “The dedication this group showed was amazing. We had conference calls where team members were calling in from vacations, airports, rough time zones -- they all stepped up and delivered.”

Another participant commented on his team’s excellent spirit and said, “Communications tools really aided our virtual team. Listening to and evaluating everyone’s thoughts and ideas before coming to a conclusion is a skill I wish to further.”

The entire simulation is run in a virtual environment. With this flexibility, participants can keep their regular work schedules with three to four hours a week devoted to the simulation

Virtual presentation tools, web-based collaboration tools, e-mail and conference calls enable communications. Teams use the corporate intranet, e-mail and Microsoft SharePoint Workspace to access, view and edit files. Microsoft LiveMeeting and web cams enable real-time collaboration. Teams use a Microsoft Excel-based planning model to input decisions and assumptions, analyze variances and perform sensitivity analysis.

“Microsoft brought strong technology tools to the party,” says Young. “We pushed them well beyond their intended uses, and they performed beautifully.”

Role play is central to the simulation. Using the wide range of web-based communication technologies, teams communicate and negotiate with internal and external customers, such as suppliers, functional leaders, customers and industry experts -- all played by TRI staff. Threaded discussions and chat tools enable teams to review and verify conversations.

Unlike the in-residence course, senior Microsoft leaders now regularly engage with teams in the virtual workspace throughout the simulation experience. They are encouraged to be mentors, operations reviewers and even conduct role plays.

“It is remarkable that we could take all this historically in-residence complexity to a virtual environment with a virtual team and facilitate deep and rich learning,” A.J. O’Brien, Vice President, TRI Corporation, says.

Three teams from the Americas made up the first pilot in Fall 2009, followed by teams in Europe, Middle East and Africa in Winter 2010. Asia Pacific teams will participate next then teams across worldwide time zones.

The virtual simulation achieved its goal to transform Finance professionals into trusted advisors. Two Microsoft CFOs reported that their finance pros helped find innovative solutions to tough business issues since the experience.

The program also is more cost efficient, with substantial savings in travel and living expenses as well as not taking participants away from their day-to-day work.

“People have talked about true online distance learning forever but don’t realize that so much of what is needed to give it life is available today,” Young says. “For less money, we are making a broader impact with learning that is deeper and more applicable.”

With this success, Finance is leading the way for authentic online distance learning across Microsoft. On boarding new employees and helping virtual engineering teams work together are just two initiatives that have grown out of this innovation.