

Culture of Learning Starts With Staff

ACDI/VOCA Offers Online Learning to Staff Worldwide

By John Leary

Access to information is one of the key benefits we bring to our program beneficiaries—and to our own staff around the world.

Through our development programs, we teach farmers, entrepreneurs, parents, citizens and others new skills to improve their yields, profits and lives. But we also recognize that to do this well, we need strong support systems, careful stewardship of our funds, accurate monitoring and evaluation, and expert, up-to-date technical knowledge. All of which means maintaining a high level of skills among our employees.

ACDI/VOCA provides its staff worldwide with access to learning resources through a learning management system called ASPIRE Online. ASPIRE has 700 e-learning courses on management, leadership and communication skills, Microsoft Office applications, technical topics and best practices.

Time and Space No Obstacles to Online Learning

“Online courses are accessible on my schedule, and I can access them anytime from any location, as long as I have an internet connection,” says ACDI/VOCA’s human resources manager in Afghanistan. “Sometimes I download course materials, print them and read them while traveling in a car or on a plane.”

There are many advantages to learning online, the most obvious being convenience. Learners can take a course when and where it suits them, as long as they have access to the internet. They can focus on the information they need by jumping to specific modules of an e-learning tutorial instead of sitting through an entire class waiting for a particular piece of information. They can view a course repeatedly, if necessary. Because staff can access information when they need it, e-learning has become part of everyday working.

“ASPIRE Online’s e-learning tutorials have helped me to better understand the job description of a human-resources manager and how to relate with employees. With this, I have used new job skills and built better relationships with staff and volunteers,” says Ghana staff member Adam Suale. “It’s like having your own trainer on hand. You simply log in and start learning.”

With internet capacity expanding around the world, geography, time and transportation costs no longer pose hurdles to designing or taking courses. When a learning need is identified, ACDI/VOCA can create interactive tutorials and make them immediately available through ASPIRE Online.

Online Courses Keep Skills Fresh

“The most widely used courses are our ACDI/VOCA tutorials, which introduce staff to our administrative procedures, as well as technical interventions, like our Farming as a Business or value chain approaches,” says Maura Bookter, director of employee development. “They were created in-house by our small team of developers in collaboration with technical experts throughout the company.”

Online courses may be self-paced or facilitated by an instructor. They guide the learner through a topic and reinforce learning through quizzes, games and clickable audio and video features. Each tutorial provides downloadable documents and handouts, and learners can revisit the tutorial later if they need a refresher.

There are also hundreds of other non-ACDI/VOCA courses available through ASPIRE Online provided by e-learning companies like Harvard Manage Mentor, Ninth House and MindLeaders. More than 60 courses in 12 languages were donated by CEGOS, Europe’s leading e-learning training provider on topics such as management and leadership, sales and marketing, individual and collective effectiveness, finance and more.

Top-notch Educators Within Reach

ACDI/VOCA employees also have access to online classes through Cornell University. “eCornell is becoming increasingly popular with our field staff,” Bookter says. “These courses give professionals abroad the opportunity to earn professional certificates from a prestigious American university

and interact online with other professionals around the world. We have staff working in countries where this is their only option to achieve this kind of high-level instruction.”

The practical subject matter, taught by Cornell University professors, ultimately provides ACDI/VOCA’s learners with critical skill development in the certificate subjects. The courses involve groups of individuals spread around the world who engage in interactive learning modules. They view videos and listen to recordings, participate in interactive exercises, analyze scenarios and participate online with an instructor and other students. Participation can take place at any time, in any time zone, because learners’ reactions and course work are gathered through the course discussion boards.

ACDI/VOCA is constantly adding new tutorials to ASPIRE. Many come through our membership in LINGOS – Learning for International NGOs, a consortium of over 60 international humanitarian relief, development, conservation and health organizations. LINGOS provides the latest learning technologies and courses to its members so nonprofits like ACDI/VOCA can improve the skills of their employees, thereby increasing the impact of their programs.

Thirst for Knowledge

While more than 700 ACDI/VOCA employees in 31 countries use this e-learning system, field staff in Iraq leads the organization in usage: 78 employees in Iraq are currently enrolled in ASPIRE Online, with many earning certificates.

One Iraq staff member says her favorite aspect of ASPIRE is the e-Cornell classes. “It is a great opportunity for me to be in Iraq and still get valuable information and experience from Cornell university lecturers and experts from all over the world,” she says.

John Leary is ACDI/VOCA’s director of training.