On the Road to Continuous Improvement

Learner feedback was positive. Survey results were good. General Motors turned to design thinking to discover how they could be even better.

BY KEITH KEATING

The Center of Learning (CoL) is the training organization within General Motors that focuses on supporting dealership and field personnel in achieving their sales and market share targets through training initiatives. CoL takes an evidence-based approach to building learning solutions, employing an overarching needs assessment and measurement strategy that data analysts and statisticians lead, which specifies the standard practices for all levels of measurement.

In 2018, CoL was receiving consistent positive feedback from learners and strong Kirkpatrick Level 1 survey results. Plus, its initiatives demonstrated positive business results in terms of increased vehicle sales. On the surface, the training team was performing successfully, and the learners were satisfied with training. Recognizing that the way learners learn has been evolving, CoL Senior Manager Sally Vlietstra asked her team, "How can we best support our learners in their professional development?" The team recognized this could be a great opportunity to use design thinking to further understand its learners.

©2019 Association for Talent Development

General Motors

Industry:
Automotive/
Manufacturing

Workforce Size:
About 200,000

HQ Location:
Detroit, Michigan

Founded:
1908

Nuts and bolts

Design thinking is a five-phased set of principles for problem finding and creative problem solving. It's a methodology that encourages a focus on people and leads to human-centered products, services, and internal processes. Design thinking helps to unlock users' needs and problems, even when the users may not know what the problem is or are unable to clearly articulate it. The five phases are empathy, define, ideate, prototype, and test.

The design thinking team comprised 10 individuals from CoL. The team identified five key dealership roles as the target roles for the initiative. Through data analysis on dealership performance level, technology usage, tenure in role, and dealership workforce size, a team member also identified an appropriate sample size. Next, the team divided into five pairs, matching the five GM regions across the United States, and began their journey.

Empathy: Understanding the learner

The design thinking team spent several days preparing for empathy interviews. This preparation included brainstorming interview questions, creating interview themes, refining questions after mock interviews, creating the interview script, and ensuring the team was comfortable with the questions and the anatomy of the interview process.

The team conducted 75 interviews across the United States. At the end of each interview day, each pair used design thinking tools, including an empathy map, to begin to analyze the information collected. After they completed interviews, the pairs returned and began their data synthesis.

Define: Developing the problem statement

During the debrief, each pair shared its empathy map, key findings, quotes, and recurring themes. They used whiteboards and sticky notes to capture key messages. Groupings of responses began to evolve. At the end of the debrief, recurring messages and themes from the learners filled the room.

Each pair synthesized its learner personas, creating five master personas—one per job role. The design thinking team spent several more hours reviewing previously captured notes, adding missed insights, and grouping the analysis and feedback into themes. Discussions continued throughout the day until the team members settled on the key themes they believed represented the learners' voice.

The team found that learners unanimously agreed that the current product training curriculum met their needs. That was great confirmation for CoL, given that product training had been its core focus. However, the team identified additional development needs during the synthesis process, resulting in six key themes:

- Learners want soft skills training—selling, negotiation, and relationship building.
- Learners need inspiration and motivation to gain competency.
- Learners desire training that is personalized based on their experience and interests.
- Learners want flexibility to learn what they want but with enough structure to understand where they are going.
- Learners prefer hands-on and interactive learning so they can apply as they learn.
- Learners recognize the need for learning but feel time spent training is time away from selling.

Stepping back to digest the themes unveiled to the team a significant call to action: Product training was great, but learners want additional support.

The design thinking team members determined it would be too lofty to address all six themes, or problem statements, at the same time. A separate initiative for soft skills was already forming, so the team shared the respective information with those working on skills training. Therefore, hands-on and interactive learning and the perception that time spent training is time away from selling became the two problem statements the design thinking team chose for its initial focus.

The next step in the define phase was to turn the two problem statements into "how might we" (HMW) questions to make them more actionable.

Problem statement: Learners need to learn from experience so they can apply it as they learn.

HMW questions:
- How might we give learners experiential ways to learn on their own?
- How might we enable people to learn from others on the job?

Problem statement: Time spent training is time away from selling.

HMW questions:
- How might we change the perception of what *training* means?
- How might we provide training in the moment of need that doesn't take them away from their job?

The team posted the HMW questions in the room; they became the directive for team members to solve.

Ideate: Brainstorming and creating solutions

To create a diverse, unbiased approach for brainstorming, the team invited eight new individuals to participate in the next phase: a two-day brainstorming session that included learners and trainers. The team chose a four-step brainstorming process:

1. idea share
2. sketch and storyboard
3. vote

4. plot an impact and feasibility prioritization matrix.

Participants divided into four groups, with each focused on an individual HMW question. Starting with an initial idea share and then "flaring" the ideas to make them even bigger, participants sketched key ideas into storyboards. Once completed, the groups reconvened to present their storyboards. After the presentations, everyone voted on the ideas or individual components within a storyboard based on three categories: doable, wild card (unknown if idea is possible but wanting to explore it regardless), and disruptive.

The voting results were plotted against an impact and feasibility prioritization matrix within four categories:
- high risk/high reward
- stars
- quick hits
- lower priority.

Recognizing not every idea could be prototyped at once, participants chose one idea within the stars category. "Mobile Molly" was an idea in response to the problem "How might we provide training in the moment of need that doesn't take the learner away from their job?" The idea was to create an SMS/text-based system that acts as a digital mentor that uses pull and push notifications that provide personalized training to learners by delivering answers to their questions, quizzing learners, and serving relevant content when needed.

Prototype: Create representations

Analyzing the technology that already existed within the market and identifying that chatbot functionality was necessary to fulfill the requirements, the design thinking team maximized its vendor-partner relationships to create a low-fidelity chatbot prototype within several days.

The prototype engagement would seek to uncover whether the learner population would adopt a chatbot as a training solution, whether chatbots were an effective technique to extend the learning and support of knowledge retention, and what type of spacing interval between chats worked best. The team used an upcoming vehicle launch as the content for the engagement. To ensure it identified a large enough test population, the team included learners from the initial empathy phase but also a significant additional population size, totaling 2,200 users.

Test: Test ideas and gain user feedback

The team identified two prototype test plans for learners:

Track A: shorter time period (12 days) with daily chats

Track B: longer time period (four weeks) with fewer chats (three per week).

The team crafted a measurement plan that included measuring the opt-in rate, ongoing engagement rate, pre- and post-quiz scores, and Net Promoter Score. While learners engaged with the chatbot during the prototype period, team members gathered feedback throughout the process from the trainers and learners on their experience. At the end of the testing phase, team members captured feedback through surveys and individual discussions with learners.

Results

Of the 2,200 targeted people for the initiative, only 399 signed up to participate, equating to an 18 percent opt-in rate. The team learned that how the initiative was introduced into dealerships significantly affected the opt-in rate. However, once learners opted in, up to 74 percent of participants stayed active through 75 percent of the chats (nine chats), which demonstrated that learners were engaged. High engagement continued for 10 days, with a significant portion of participants dropping off thereafter.

Through demonstration of a pre- and post-quiz on product content, the test supported the hypothesis that a chatbot promoted knowledge retention. After the four-week testing period, the team analyzed survey and feedback from learners and felt successful with an overall Net Promoter Score of 69. Learners preferred the shorter cycle, track A.

The text-based digital mentor idea proved to be a solid idea that met the needs of learners who participated, providing training in the moment of need. Although team members determined a chatbot is not a solution for every initiative, they have found specific initiatives to apply the solution and will continue to explore use case opportunities.

> **Once learners opted in, up to 74 percent of participants stayed active through 75 percent of the chats.**

Design thinking differs from other problem-solving methodologies by taking a step back before problem solving begins and starts with problem identification. CoL did not know whether a problem existed. Instead, it started with an idea to learn how it could be a better learning partner. What team members uncovered from learners was a resounding "Yes, I need support beyond required training courses."

CoL has redefined its learning strategy based on the six identified key themes. It also has continued to upskill the entire training team on the design thinking methodology, continuously looking for opportunities to apply the skills to solve business problems for learners and business partners. CoL continues to use empathy interviews as a means to stay connected, which ensures that learners stay at the forefront of everything it does.

Keith Keating is a senior director of GP Strategies supporting General Motors' Center of Learning; kkeating1@gpstrategies.com.

td
talent development

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

RATES

$150 Individual Domestic (United States)

$331 Institutional Domestic (United States)

$249 Individual International

$430 Institutional International

To subscribe, go to www.td.org/tdsub.

Get even more when you become a member of ATD!

All ATD memberships include a monthly subscription* to *TD* magazine, plus access to Watch & Learn webcasts, digital publications, research, discounts on conferences, and much more.

For details about ATD membership, visit www.td.org/members.

*International members outside the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico receive the digital *TD* magazine as part of their membership.

0316143.31610

atd
Association for Talent Development