

HowToMoodle

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Case Study: Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)



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VSO Background Summary

VSO is the world's leading independent international development organisation that works through volunteers to fight poverty. It works in over 30 developing countries around the world, along with its partners, to deliver innovative development programmes.

VSO at a glance:

- 800+ employees
- Between 1,000 and 2,000 international volunteers recruited each year
- 11 recruiting countries including UK, Ireland, Netherlands, Kenya, India and Philippines
- Programmes in 30+ countries

Long term review and refresh to extend and improve the VSO Moodle

Background

The organisation's learning needs are structured into two main groups of users – volunteers and employees.

The Moodle Journey at VSO – volunteer training

Volunteer training is one of VSO's strengths and differentiators. Pre-departure training is designed to challenge volunteers to think about the practicalities of volunteering (e.g. the local country context, security, corruption and building relationships). Moodle was chosen to facilitate the move to online training, reduce the cost of training whilst retaining the ability to have a social, interactive dialogue about these topics.

- **Prior to 2007:** Volunteer training was conducted face-to-face in the same country as the volunteer was recruited, over a number of weekends. Volunteer information, (e.g. the volunteer handbook and security and medical information) was published on a website.

- **2007:** Moodle was developed to enable a blended training approach for UK recruited volunteers, combining two face-to-face weekends with a social online training course. The online self-reading remained a feature, but this was now supplemented with self-moderated tasks and the opportunity to engage with other volunteers in online forums.

- **2009/10:** Moodle was enhanced to support Volunteer information as well as the online training course and was then known as Volzone.

The Moodle Journey at VSO – employee training

- **Prior to 2013:** Training was conducted face-to-face in UK with some support for local HR teams to run training courses in country offices. There was online self-reading and facilitator training materials/resources were made available via VSO's intranet.

Moving forward – Next Moodle stage

Issues prior to developing the platform

Despite the early success of using Moodle for pre-departure training for UK-recruited volunteers, over time the Moodle platform had fallen out of support and was degrading. VSO employees who had technical expertise in supporting Moodle left the organisation, leaving a knowledge gap. The installed version (1.9.7) was out of date and no longer supported by the Moodle community, so any issues that surfaced remained unresolved (or, in some cases, one issue would be 'fixed' without understanding the impact giving rise to other problems).

The permissions structure was overly complicated and ineffective. There was no way to see who was enrolled in what courses - reporting was done manually, making the management of volunteer training labour-intensive. Users that needed to update courses were often granted System Administrator access which put the site at risk of accidental misuse. The current hosting arrangements resulted in unscheduled outages that would take time to resolve, due to the limited application knowledge of both VSO and the hosting company. As a result there was a loss of confidence in the platform and a reluctance to bring more training online.



Objectives for the latest platform development

Recognising many of the issues the organisation faced with its current set up, in 2012 the charity embarked on a system upgrade. Sarah Barker, who joined the organisation in July 2012 as the eLearning & IT Training Coordinator, managed the project working with the volunteer training team, employee learning & development (L&D) team and the communications team. The main objectives were:

- **Enable global pre-departure training:** VSO wanted to extend online training for volunteers to be appropriate for those recruited globally. **Moodle needed to support volunteers across multiple countries** with diverse backgrounds, while also taking into account locations with low internet reliability and different ways of working (e.g. home-working).
- **Enable employee training:** The existing site, Volzone, was not set up in a way that VSO could use it effectively for employee learning. The employee L&D team were keen to leverage technology to extend the reach of training into VSO country offices, but **didn't have a clear eLearning strategy** so some pilot courses were agreed to get this started.
- **A more user-friendly experience:** The previous design was out-of-date. VSO had invested in **corporate branding** and web standards, and wanted to use this work and apply it to the Learning Hub. The site also needed to cater for all kinds of locations, backgrounds and age groups.
- **Improve stability of the technical platform:** There was consensus that VSO needed to upgrade the current Moodle site to the latest version to **improve stability** and to take advantage of newer features and plugins. A **key requirement was to partner with an organisation** that could perform the upgrade as well as provide reliable hosting and application support.

Project implementation

VSO embarked on a rigorous process to identify and appoint a Moodle partner. Sarah approached several Moodle suppliers with a detailed questionnaire outlining VSO's issues and requirements and requested a quote. Two suppliers were then shortlisted based on cost and the ability to deliver - one of which was HowToMoodle (HTM).

Owing to the added risk of working with an offsite provider, Sarah scoped the project into two phases:

- **Phase 1:** To create a (test) copy of the site and upgrade it to Moodle 2.4. This would allow the new version to be reviewed in workshops to determine the scope of remaining work.
- **Phase 2:** To apply the new brand, revise the site configuration and implement any enhancements identified during the workshops – then test and deploy the new site.

In October 2012, VSO's Moodle site went down and the existing

host was unable to restore the site for several days. This put some pressure on to move to a new host as quickly as possible, so the project plan was revised to begin with:

- **Phase 0:** Move the existing Moodle 1.9 site onto the new hosting platform before embarking on the upgrade.

A quote was requested from the shortlisted companies to complete Phase 0 and 1. Both companies quoted a comparable price. In addition, HTM provided clear evidence about their ability to partner effectively; **VSO was impressed with their responsiveness and willingness to tailor their services to meet the charity's needs.**

HTM were selected in November 2012 and completed Phase 0 in January 2013 and Phase 1 in February 2013, in time for Phase 2 workshops.

In March 2013 HTM provided onsite consultancy as part of the workshop process, to review more detailed questions and requirements from VSO and propose solutions.

A critical success factor of Phase 2 was to be able to define what work HTM would do and what work would be done in-house at VSO, to make the most of HTM's Moodle expertise and keep within budget. HTM reviewed VSO style guidelines and **implemented the new theme**, making the site much more user friendly. They also built three enhancements including an interactive map of VSO's offices, and some updates to the online user block to differentiate between volunteers and employees and allow users to appear 'offline'. VSO carried out a configuration clean up, including revising roles and responsibilities, and designed the new eLearning courses for the launch. The new site went live in May 2013 with three global volunteer courses launched within two weeks. In June 2013 VSO launched the employee section of the site.

Sarah Barker, eLearning & IT Training Coordinator

"HowToMoodle were very helpful in providing targeted services to help us achieve our outcomes, at low cost, and were very open to our suggestions for how we might partner (what work HTM would do, what VSO would do). We have recommended them to other NGO who are just getting started."

Challenges and Solutions

The main challenges from the most recent stage in the project were:

- **Lack of internal resources:** Sarah was the only dedicated resource (and also had competing commitments) so there was limited time for workshops. Some key people left between April and June 2013, at a critical time of the project. To address this,

Sarah focused on ensuring the platform on time addressing the 'must have' requirements. The volunteer training team and employee L&D teams focussed on getting their courses ready.

- **Strict budget.** Due to budget restrictions VSO needed to make the best use of HowToMoodle's expertise. To do this, VSO and HTM worked together to agree roles and responsibilities. HTM provided accurate quotes for the scope of work agreed, with the flexibility to be engaged for additional work when needed.
- **Impact to user authentication:** VSO's decision to move away from their existing hosting solution (integrated with Active Directory), meant that the user authentication model needed to change. This solution required VSO to contact impacted users to reset their password, which resulted in the need to delay Phase 0 deployment from December 2012 to January 2013.

Successes / benefits of the project

The main benefit for VSO has been to **enable global training approaches**. VSO now has a standard approach to volunteer training consisting of online self-briefing, the social online training course and a single face-to-face weekend. This approach provides a more consistent experience to volunteers regardless of their recruitment base. eModerators are finding that the training experience has been enriched (compared to UK only courses) due to a wider variety of perspectives coming through in forum discussions - VSO volunteers a unique opportunity to share with and learn from colleagues in different parts of the world.

For employees, VSO has used **online learning to meet global needs** that they couldn't possibly afford to meet through face-to-face interventions, given the number of countries where they operate. Since the upgrade, the L&D team have launched an online employee induction, anti-corruption training, training on performance management and migrated some existing IT training courses (now with reporting enabled). In the second half of 2013 VSO rolled out new people management processes and implemented the Salesforce platform to manage employee and volunteer records. The training programme involved six teams (one business person, one IT person) delivering face-to-face training in the six regions where VSO operates.

Country office representatives flew to the regional hubs to attend the training. The launch of the same content as eLearning allowed country office 'trainers' to return to their home offices and pass on the learning with confidence. The eLearning modules will also cater for new joiners, **reducing investment in face-to-face sessions in future**.

In addition there have been the following benefits:

- **Peace of mind and confidence in platform:** In partnership with HTM, **VSO are assured that the site is reliable and stable**, so they can concentrate on their learning objectives and continue to

offer new courses.

- **Scalability:** The site now has one technical system administrator, one site manager and the ability for specific people to manage their own categories/courses. **Automated reporting has drastically reduced the effort required to monitor compliance and progress.**
- **Visual appeal:** Due to the theme/branding changes and additional enhancements, **the site is now a lot simpler to use and aligns to VSO's brand.**
- **Financial:** VSO used to run face-to-face training over 5 days; this has been reduced to 2 days, playing a significant part in **reducing the cost of the volunteer training programme by at least 30% overall**. Now, any investment in face-to-face training for employees can also be made available online for all locations, and allows new joiners to be trained 'for free'.

The Future

Since the upgrade, there have been very few technical issues and overall it's working well. It is reassuring for VSO that HTM are there to provide support and can provide training if needed, as people leave or move to new roles.

In 2014 VSO will launch some significant new training programmes:

- An international development course based on materials provided by a partner university
- A "Leadership for Results" programme for senior managers, running from about February to August 2014: a blend of master-classes (one face-to-face and one virtual), coaching triads, action learning sets and access to an external online "Leadership Development" resource.
- A "Monitoring & Evaluation" training programme for both volunteers and employees: 12 modules which will be rolled out as face-to-face training for selected participants, and made available to the rest of the organisation as online learning.

VSO will also be looking to gradually improve the quality of the content on the site. The Learning Hub still hosts a lot of volunteer information not related to learning; this reduces the effectiveness of navigation and search. Ideally this will move onto a new VSO intranet that volunteers can access. Some of the volunteer information is now out of date, and the owner has left.

The employee L&D team is actively promoting the Learning Hub to make sure country offices are aware of it and encouraging employees to complete mandatory training and to enrol in courses to meet their development needs.

As VSO continues to extend its online learning capabilities, the organisation has a broader aspiration to look for ways to use technology to enhance their development programmes in education.