

Introducing Online Learning in a Small Organization: The Case of the Diplomatic Institute of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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Abstract. The Diplomatic Institute (ISDI) - the structure of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs dedicated to internal training of the personnel – has started several experiments in the field of online learning. Tools such as Blogs, online learning modules, webinars and Netvibes have been developed and have contributed to enrich the training offer of the Institute. This paper illustrates the challenges that this small structure has faced and the results that have been accomplished so far. It also shares seven lessons learned from this experience.

Keywords: Ministry of foreign affairs · Diplomacy · Training · Online learning

1 Introduction

Being appointed Director at the Diplomatic Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy, the structure of the Ministry dealing with training of personnel has been for me a great privilege as well as an opportunity to explore new approach to diplomatic training and test some ideas developed over a long period. Working as a diplomat. I learned the importance of training in a profession where people change “job” every four years, moving from an Embassy to another Embassy or back to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Diplomatic Institute (ISDI) was founded in 1967 and is part of the Ministry’s General Directorate for Resources and Innovation as this confirms the close relationship between training and management of human and financial resources.

To put the training challenges of the Diplomatic Institute in context, it may be appropriate to provide a few details about the structure of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The Ministry is responsible for the State’s functions, tasks and duties in matters concerning Italy’s political, economic, social and cultural relations with other countries and International Organisations.

The Ministry operates through a network of more than 300 offices around the world: embassies, permanent missions to international organizations, special diplomatic delegations, consular offices and Italian cultural institutes. If we consider only the 127 embassies abroad, 26 are located in the European Union, 23 in Asia and Oceania,

21 in the Americas, 21 in Sub-Saharan Africa, 18 in non-EU countries in Europe, and 18 in the Mediterranean and Middle East.

At the beginning of 2014 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs counted about 6,900 people. Of these, 4,200 permanent staff and 2,600 non-permanent (local) staff.

Therefore one of the challenges of the Director of the Institute is to find the best sustainable way to train a potential population of 4,200 staff, half of which are not working in the headquarters in Rome, but in different places in the world (plus the 2,600 local staff all of whom work abroad).

The internal demand (and the need) for training keeps increasing while the resources, not surprisingly, fail to keep pace and are, in fact, falling. This paradox affects many people responsible for training. While there is no magic hand in the real world, it is best to see opportunities in those challenges rather than consider them as traps.

When I arrived at the ISDI in 2011, the development of an online learning system compatible and sustainable with the structure of the Institute and of the Ministry itself was identified as a key opportunity. These two concepts (compatible and sustainable) are particularly relevant in order to understand the initiatives that have been setup and the success (and some failures), The lessons learned in doing this are the subject of this paper.

2 Why Online Learning

The terminology “Online Learning” covers a range of different things and solutions. When deciding to develop Online Learning facilities in a small structure I had the advantage of understanding the complexity of the issue.

As far ago as 2003 I published (together with my friends Jovan Kurbalija and Ed Gelbstein) a booklet entitled “Online learning for professionals in full time work” (DiploFoundation, 2003), which makes a distinction with online learning in the academic world. Both may use the same technologies, but with significantly different objectives.

Online learning is based on several premises and promises – essentially that it can be particularly effective for professionals, that it is easy to implement and quick to deliver results, that it is cost-effective and that online learners love it. These are all true, but not all the time and not for everyone.

Some of the benefits of successfully implemented online learning identified more than ten years ago are still valid and have been applied to the experience described in this paper:

- The ability to deliver learning opportunities to anyone, at any-time, almost anywhere;
- A learning experience that is often perceived as being “better” than classroom instruction;
- Easier access to experienced professors, lecturers, facilitators and mentors;

- Access to massive information resources through the World Wide Web, including commercial information service providers (such as, for example, Lexis-Nexis or the Economist Intelligence Unit);
- The possibility for learners to actively participate in the learning process, in particular shy learners who may hesitate to participate fully in a more traditional learning environment;
- Access to online learning and technical support;

The planning and implementation of ISDI's Online Learning strategy has taken into account all these principles. The action has been articulated in several phases which has led to the use of a wide range of tools and services available online. In this way a new innovative training offer has been created to complement (not substitute) the traditional one.

The tools used include the Moodle Platform for developing and hosting self-paced online modules and the Wordpress platform for the development of a Blog. We also used Survey Monkey for experimenting with the evaluation of the courses and Webex and Adobe Connect for online webinars.

Other experiments looked at non-traditional activities such as Webradio programming (diplomaziaedintorni.wordpress.com), the organization of a Pecha Kucha contest and the creation of a calendar with visuals.

(www.slideshare.net/ArturoToscanini/cybersecurity-guidelines-for-diplomats).

Some of the characteristics of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that affect the training offer support the choice of the Online Training trials:

1. High turnover of personnel – Staff and managers rotate regularly (every 3–5 years) moving back and forth from headquarters to Missions abroad or from Mission to Mission.
2. Low level of knowledge sharing – There is no formalized internal system to ensure internal knowledge sharing of micro-procedures or practices established by practitioners.
3. Increasing average age of personnel – Due to restrictions in recruitment the age profile of staff is continuously increasing. The current average age is 50 years.

On this last point it is important to note that in future new staff will be recruited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in limited numbers due to legal provisions concerning the Civil Service. This limitation makes it very important that the future requirements, for newly recruited staff at all levels include a good understanding of IT, and knowledge of social media platforms. This will enable the Administration to exploit the opportunities offered by the Internet and by the e-tools available.

3 The Blog as a Training Tool

The need to reach a wide number of users (we should call them “learners”) located in the four corners of the world is an issue for considering the use of blogs as a training tool. This could be defined as “soft training”, by making available selected useful sources for particular topics.

A couple of years ago (in 2012), we experimented with a blog focusing on the knowledge of “soft skills” relevant for diplomats when acting as managers.

The blog, called ISDI Learning corner (istitutodiplomatico.wordpress.org), is based on the experience of the Institute in terms of training needs for this specific topic. The sources used for the blog postings are focused on professional and personal growth and reflecting the training needs of a Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The blog is in English, and uses the free Wordpress platform. It can be consulted by the personnel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy as well as by other interested people.

The Wordpress platform gives the possibility to set up a subscription service through which subscribers can receive in their email every newly published post. People can subscribe using the “Follow” function, available on the blog, simply providing their own Email address. The Administrator can also “invite” new potential subscribers who will have to accept the invitation. According to our experience the “unsolicited” action (“Follow”) is less effective in terms of gaining new subscribers than the invitation by the administrator.

This “push” service is a great asset and makes the post more effective than the simple publication on the site. For this reason much effort has been put in increasing the number of subscribers amongst Ministry personnel which remains the first and main target of the Blog.

The number of subscribers has progressively increased thanks to the subscription campaigns launched through the invitation function. The progression of the subscriptions is as follows:

May 2012 – 250 subscribers
 March 2013 – 850 subscribers
 March 2014 – 2100 subscribers

Before setting up the Blog, no other tool had been used to make training material easily available and simple to consult. In particular this was the first time that a Blog had been used by a Ministry of Foreign Affairs for sharing internally knowledge related to soft skills. In the past training on soft skills was limited to some traditional seminar done in a face-to-face format. By definition, this kind of activity, however effective, could only reach a limited number of officers.

In order to ensure the continuity of blogging, having started with two weeks when posts were published more or less at random, it was decided to establish a timetable that provides at least three posts of different types every week.

These types include articles about books, videos and other content considered suitable for the development of “Soft Skills”.

Users can comment on every post. The comments are moderated and published only if they specifically relate to the post. Each post can be easily shared on the main social networks. The number of replies has been limited and this is probably due to the limited familiarity of staff with these tools as well as a tendency not to express opinions or to engage in a public domain. On the other hand one the objectives of the initiative was to familiarize personnel with the new tools available in the web 2.0.

The Wordpress platform gives the possibility to monitor access to the blog and daily statistics provide, for example, the number of accesses and where they come from.

Information concerning this blog has been provided to homologous institutions of the European Union. Invitations to use this blog have been extended during coordination meeting of Training Directors of MFAs training institutions. This kind of action has not yet produced the same encouraging results that have been reached at our internal level. Further action is needed to explain the effectiveness and usability of the tool.

4 The Online Learning Modules

Starting from scratch can be an opportunity but it also means that you have no previous experience to refer to. This was the challenge the Institute faced for developing Online learning modules. The first modules produced by the Institute were introduced two years ago. The steps to achieve this were:

- (1) Selecting a Learning Management System: ISDI decided on the Moodle platform because of its flexibility, simplicity of use and wide adoption by small and medium-size organizations.
- (2) Procurement of bandwidth: The procurement of a fiber connection was considered a priority in order to ensure the adequate performance of external connections to the Online Learning system.
- (3) Development of Content: The Institute mainly provides training on the specific activities and responsibilities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Therefore the personnel of the Ministry were the best qualified people that could develop learning material. We started by involving those most willing and open and we

also adapted some available published material. While this is not the best solution, it is the only one available to build a culture of online learning in an environment where this is completely. In a way, is a confidence-building exercise.

The screenshot shows the ISDI e-learning platform interface. At the top, the logo "ISDI e-learning" is displayed, along with the text "Ministero degli Affari Esteri" and "DGRI - Istituto Diplomatico 'Mario Toscano'". A user is logged in as Stefano Baldi. The main content area is titled "I miei corsi" and shows a list of courses:

- Corso di Formazione Salute e Sicurezza**
 - Contenuti del corso
 - Il corso tratta principalmente le direttive emanate con il Testo unico in materia di salute e sicurezza nei luoghi di lavoro (Insieme di norme contenute nel Decreto legislativo del 9 aprile 2008, n. 81)
- Elementi di Cerimoniale**
 - Contenuti del modulo
 - Viste all'estero di Personalità italiane e viste in Italia di Personalità straniere.
 - Grandi eventi.
 - Le onorificenze
 - Disposizioni di cerimoniale ad uso delle rappresentanze all'estero
 - Regole di etichetta in Italia
 - Regole di etichetta all'estero
- Gli strumenti della Pubblica Amministrazione digitale**
 - Contenuti del modulo
 - Il codice dell'Amministrazione digitale
 - I nuovi "strati digitali" dei cittadini
 - Normativa
 - Il documento informatico
 - La firma elettronica

The first module to be developed concerned the essential knowledge of rights and obligations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Personnel. It was a very short self-paced course that gave the opportunity to test the system and gain reactions from the first group of participants. This first trial identified the need to link the completion of the course to an automatic (or semi-automatic) system to issue the certificate of participation and register it in the electronic personal records. It is important to recognize and/or reward those who complete the courses and a certificate is a good “motivator” for many participants. The certification system took a few months to be completed by the IT Department of the Ministry that worked closely with the IT staff of the Institute (alas, composed by only two very able people).

Other modules have been developed taking into account the lessons learned with the first trial. The main difficulty in developing new self-paced modules is to find internal experts to develop the text and related quizzes. Persuading people to spend time to share their knowledge and put it in writing is not always easy. One factor is the difficulty of explaining the benefits of this effort. A strong point remains that these modules allow reaching staff abroad that would otherwise not have access to face-to-face training.

The modules that have been developed so far are:

- (1) Obligations and Rights of Civil Servants
- (2) Protocol practice
- (3) Human Rights
- (4) Visas Management
- (5) Consular assistance to Italian nationals abroad

The wide range of topics reflects our attempt to cover different sectors (and potential beneficiaries) to validate this kind of online training. The variety can also be explained by the availability of qualified internal staff to develop the modules. Many other people were asked to work at new modules but have not yet provided any contents.

The short online (self-paced) module on “Consular Assistance to Italian nationals abroad” is a good example for showing the way these courses are currently organized. The stages and results obtained in the first edition of the module were:

- (1) Request to the diplomatic network (in this case limited to embassies and consulates) to identify who should attend the online module. This is also considered as an authorisation to attend the courses by the Head of Mission (312 participants 154 of which were local staff). The participants were working in 99 different embassies or consulates
- (2) The participants were authorised to access the platform and the module remained open for a defined period of time (four days);
- (3) 83 % of the participants passed the verification test (and got the certificate).

5 The Distance Learning Experiment

The initial good results experienced with self-paced modules led to the decision to experiment another type of online learning not self-paced but based on a series of live streaming with the possibility to interact using the chat. The Distance Learning approach was particularly suitable for specific courses to virtual classrooms composed of people working in different Missions located all over the world (what internally is defined as “decentralized training”).

The equipment that has been adopted for the implementation of Distance Learning experiment is LifeSize (www.lifesize.com).

This kind of equipment provides:

- (1) Videoconferencing System (over IP)
- (2) Live streaming facilities
- (3) Creation of Video Library

In the case of the Diplomatic Institute:

- Videoconferencing has been used for video sessions with specific locations abroad and with Universities. Interactive video seminars have been organized and this has allowed time and travel expenses savings.
- Live streaming has been a key feature for implementing and broadcasting specialized courses (in administration, accounting and consular matters) for Embassies, Consulates and Italian Cultural Institute all over the world. This approach has led to the creation of virtual classrooms located in our missions abroad selected for the participation to the courses.
- Most of the videos have been recorded and they now constitute a unique internal video library that is used for continuous learning purposes.

The quality of videoconferencing and live streaming is affected by the bandwidth available at the end point. Taking into account the limitations experienced in some remote countries and thank to the opportunities offered by the equipment, we have reduced the bandwidth usage while maintaining an acceptable quality of the live streaming.

6 The Diplomatic Webinars

In collaboration with the DiploFoundation (www.diplomacy.edu), in 2013 the Institute organized a cycle of jointly developed webinars (online seminars using Internet) on advanced diplomatic topics.

(www.diplomacy.edu/capacity/onlinediplomacy). Each webinar included a short background document and an interactive video presentation.

The basic idea behind this experiment was that time is limited and people lead busy lives. Diplomats also need to stay current with what is happening in the world and take time to reflect on changes and developments.

In the series organized we addressed the challenges of modern diplomacy from two perspectives: evolution of diplomacy and technology - looked into history in order to see what we can use in addressing modern diplomatic problems; social media and diplomacy – focused on the use of modern social media tools in diplomacy (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, blogs, wikis).

The screenshot displays a webinar interface with the following elements:

- Header:** "Diplomatic immunities" and "Article 29 Host governments must take all appropriate steps to ensure the protection of diplomats."
- Metadata:** "E-Diplomacy, Geneva, September 2013" and "20" participants.
- Chat Log:** A list of messages from participants, including questions and answers about diplomatic immunities and social media usage.
- Poll:** A poll titled "2. Can you protect your intimate and personal space on the Internet?" with results:

a. Yes	15/23 (65%)
b. No	15/23 (65%)
No Answer	3/23 (13%)
- Video:** A video feed showing a man speaking, with a "DIPLO" logo in the background.

The results were encouraging, but only when these webinars were included in formal training courses where attendance was compulsory. The few webinars that were offered for voluntary participation had relatively low attendance (even if feedback from participants was good). This could be explained with the fact that the use of new technologies and tools, even when they are simple and short, need time and practice before becoming part of a “corporate culture” and therefore being part of the accepted normal training programme.

7 Netvibes

The Institute also trialed the use of Netvibes (www.netvibes.com) for training. Netvibes is an easy-to-use online dashboard that, in the case of diplomats, can be particularly effective for aggregating information provided by many online sources.

Taking advantage of the positive experience I had gained using Netvibes (free of charge in its basic offer), basic training and practice were introduced in the programme of the “Innovation Lab” series of workshops for diplomats attending courses at the Institute (mostly junior diplomats and mid-career diplomats).

The examples for the courses were based on two pages I had previously created, both in the public domain and freely accessible;

- (1) a page concerning information sources of general interest for diplomats with a couple of subsections dedicated to the European Union and to training (www.netvibes.com/diplosor)
- (2) a page concerning Science diplomacy (www.netvibes.com/sciencediplomacy)

Digital Diplomat at work

General EU MFAs Blogs Italia IT+Science Training Roma cultura

(64) ISDI Learning Corner

- Success, failure and Courage 9 hours ago
- Be a better writer 2 days ago
- A day in life of an E-diplomat 4 days ago
- Mediocrity and Talent! 1 week ago
- 7 Tricks to Improve Your Memory 1 week ago
- Decision making 1 week ago
- Self-confidence 2 weeks ago
- Quality time matters! 2 weeks ago
- Success, failure and the drive to keep creating 2 weeks ago
- Knowledge 3 weeks ago

older >

(100) Diplo Blog

- Small island developing states and Internet governance 4 days ago
- The winds of net-war: China warns of US arms race in cyberspace 4 days ago
- Does diplomatic law really protect? Part three 5 days ago
- The International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on Kosovo: Does it have relevance for Crimea, Catalonia and Scotland? 6 days ago
- Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies: technical, monetary, policy, and development contexts [webinar digest] 1 week ago
- Online trust: between competences and intentions 1 week ago
- International law leaves everyone vulnerable in cyberspace 2 weeks ago

older >

(100) Mr. Media Training

- Why You Should Engage With Your Critics 2 days ago
- Hillary Clinton Needs A New Message, Stat! 3 days ago
- Did A High School Principal Plagiarize A Graduation Speech? 4 days ago
- 1,000 Blog Posts! 5 days ago
- What These 1990s Songs Teach You About Public Speaking 1 week ago
- As Seen On TV: What Would You Do In This Situation? 1 week ago
- Thank You, Casey Kasem 1 week ago

older >

(137) CreativeMornings

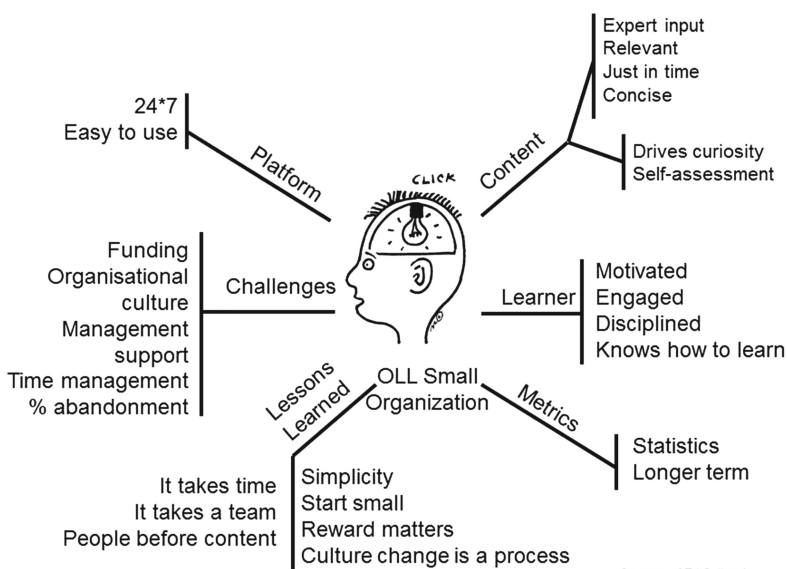
- "Love is the only way." —Vanessa German Watch the talk. → 6 months ago
- fastcompany: Bre Pettis's MakerBot has attracted millions in... 6 months ago
- Christoph Niemann speaks on everything from finding happiness at... 6 months ago

The Institute staff was encouraged to use Netvibes for training purposes and this led to the creation of an original Netvibes page dedicated to learning English. The page (www.netvibes.com/englearn) is structured in several subsections dedicated to various aspects of language training.

The feedback of those who attended the workshops was good and this kind of tool was perceived as useful for professionals, like diplomats, who have to manage large amounts of information. Nevertheless the follow up in terms of implementation of new public pages by those who attended was relatively modest. One example, though, is the page concerning EU information (www.netvibes.com/dgue03#GLS).

8 The Seven “Lessons Learned”

- (1) *It takes time* – Rome was not built in one day and the same apply to introducing and developing even the simplest form of Online Learning in an Institution. It also takes time before the OLL becomes part of the learning culture.
- (2) *It takes a team* – No matter how good and knowledgeable a leader is, it takes a team of motivated people to set up online learning. The more they know about the organisation, the easier it will be to develop a sustainable system.
- (3) *People before content* – Reasonable content can only be developed by the right experts. This is particularly true in the case of an MFA given the specificity of their activities and knowledge. Persuading people to collaborate with and contribute to the OLL project is vital to its success.
- (4) *Simplicity ensures sustainability* – Complicated systems and procedures can be discouraging in an environment not used to new technologies. Therefore simplicity of use and access should prevail on the temptation to have the “perfect” tool (which, by the way, does not exist).



Courtesy of Ed Gelbstein

- (5) *Start small* – Projects and objectives must be sustainable. In a small organization it is better to have a limited project up and running than the pursuit of the “grand design” that will always be in the “feasibility study” phase. It is even more so in an organization with a high level of turnover.
- (6) *Reward is part of the game* – In adult learning there must be a concrete objective to justify training. The simple appeal to the need for continuous learning will not work if not accompanied by some kind of reward and/or recognition. This can be a certificate, career progression or new career opportunities or anything else that can motivate the individual.
- (7) *Creating a new professional culture is a process* - The ability to use new tools for professional purposes is not only related to training but also to an individual’s sensitivity, willingness and readiness to put into practice what is being taught. Making people aware of opportunities is only the first step of a much longer process aimed at creating a new professional culture.