

# Developing the Human Resources Diploma Toolbox

First presented at the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) Learning and Technology Conference October 2003 <http://www.learnandtech.ahri.com.au>

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## **Abstract**

*"Like it not, when it comes to rewarding its employees, STAR is a pretty lousy payer'. Or at least that's what many of our employees think...."* So goes the learner's introduction to their project to manage remuneration in the case study organisation, STAR Industries. Taking on the role of General Manager (GM) of Human Resources (HR), learners complete up to nine projects that align to the Business Services Training Package.

This session will showcase the HR Toolbox, which integrates reusable learning objects with a case study in an online learning environment. It will discuss the experience of a pilot of one Unit in the Toolbox conducted with enrolled students.

## **Introduction**

First some background about Toolboxes.

They're called 'Flexible Learning Toolboxes' and they are primarily designed to be a set of online learning resources. Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) may load a Toolbox onto a web server, integrate it into a learning management system such as WebCT, distribute it on CD-ROM, or simply use it as a classroom resource.

More information is at [www.flexiblelearning.net.au/toolbox](http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/toolbox).

### **What qualification is the HR Toolbox for?**

It's an online learning resource for the Diploma in Business (Human Resources) – BSB50801, in the Business Services Training Package (BSB01). The HR Toolbox contains a learning pathway that covers all elements across the 9 units of competence in this qualification.

### **Who is our target audience?**

The HR Toolbox is designed for very broad range of learners, and any of these characteristics may apply to them:

- they may have a HR qualification at Certificate 4 level
- they may work in a Human Resources area, and they will be able to carry out learning projects in the workplace
- they may not work inside a Human Resources area, may not have access to a suitable workplace where they can carry out learning projects, or to HR practitioners or HR resources in the workplace.

Clearly, flexibility needed to be a feature of the HR Toolbox.

## ***Key design questions***

But flexibility wasn't the only issue.

When conceiving this paper we were thinking of talking about our team composition, our development flowcharts, our learning objects development model, instructional plan templates, reviewer checklists, and so on. But in the end these seemed less important than some key questions we kept on asking about the product we were developing:

1. Is the learning flexible, both in terms of the way learners can engage with the Toolbox and in terms of how it may be delivered?
2. How easy and intuitive is the interface?
3. Is the learning authentic (realistic to the workplace)?
4. What supports or features can we add that will help create a positive experience of online learning?

## **How did we find the answers?**

We're not suggesting that we formulated those questions at the start of the project. Rather, they emerged as key themes that came out of our continuous evaluation, which comprised a few things:

- feedback from stakeholders (teachers, HR practitioners and a reference group)
- evaluation of instructional plans and content by reviewers
- user testing of a prototype
- piloting of a model Unit of Competence.

## **User-testing & piloting**

If we had to say what was the single most important process that shaped the product, it would be the user testing and piloting process. This comprised three broad events:

Event	Process	Output
User testing event 1	11 end users representing students, TAFE teachers and industry trainers used a prototype and provided feedback on usability, ie interface, navigation and clarity of language; 3 of these users were observed while they used the prototype (Nov 02)	User testing event 1 report <sup>1</sup>
User testing event 2	A teacher with 6 students enrolled in a model unit, BSBHR506A, using the Toolbox materials as a pilot group, an interim evaluation was conducted (April 03)	User testing event 2 report (WA pilot interim evaluation)
User testing event 3	This was actually an extension of event 2: it was the final evaluation of the above pilot group (June 03)	User testing event 3 report (WA pilot final evaluation)

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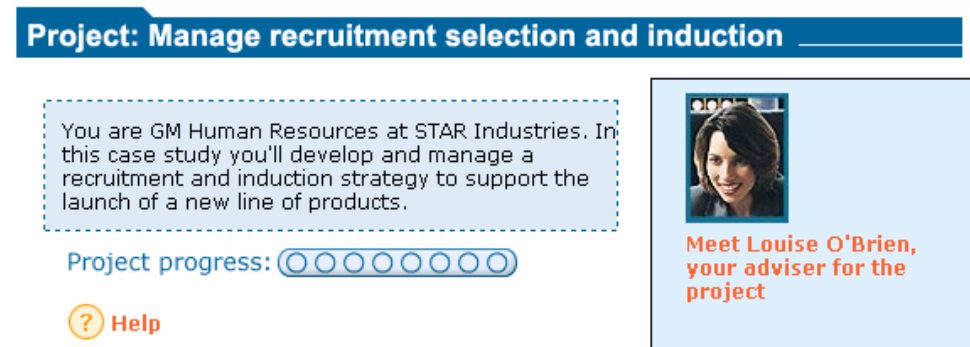
<sup>1</sup> The reports all contained tables of key findings and developer responses to document how we fed the information gathered back into the product design.

## Product overview

Before we discuss what we learned from the evaluation process, we can take a quick tour of the main features of the product. While reading this section you may care to make some observations for yourself on our key design questions.

### Case-based learning

Figure 1: Case study project screen



#### Your project

Ben Russell, CEO of STAR Industries, has approved the new positions, and you're about to go to a meeting of line managers to learn more about the business strategy and the new range of products that this recruitment event supports.

Before you start the project tasks, make sure you have the position descriptions and person specifications for the new positions.

*Click the icons for your case study materials:*



Each Unit of Competence is presented through a case study set in **STAR Industries**, a fictitious company that is a national manufacturer, wholesaler and retailer of doors, windows and other building materials. This has been created so that *all* students have access to an authentic context for learning about HR management.

The learning materials in each Unit are organised around an overall **Project**. These projects are broken down into **Tasks** that present learners with realistic situations and challenges that they are likely to be faced with as an HR manager.

Figure 2: Case study task screen, where learners are encouraged to adapt tasks to their own workplace

## Task 5: Monitor the job offers

In this task you will monitor and review processes for job offers.

Project progress:

Help



**Making a decision in this scenario**

### What's happening at STAR



A verbal offer has been made to Paula Jenkins, an applicant for the marketing position, subject to the contract being signed. Peter Habib, one of your HR officers, is liaising with her. But you've heard there is a problem and Peter has left you a message asking for help.

Click the icons for your case study materials:



Complete the task at STAR	... or adapt the task to your workplace
<p>Review any existing STAR policy on job offers. Make a decision on this matter and justify your decision in an email to the General Manager, Marketing. The email needs to include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a rationale for current HR policies (ie issues like equity, fair play, etc)</li> <li>• a compromise proposal for this employee that may link in with the probationary system</li> </ul>	<p>Start by identifying policies, procedures and processes for job and salary offers. Then you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identify areas where you can see potential for human error in the job offer process. What systems could you put in place for ensuring line managers and HR officers follow correct procedure? and/or</li> <li>• prepare a proposal for review of processes related to job and</li> </ul>

Each task is built around a clearly defined item of work that the learner produces, reflecting what may realistically be done in a workplace. Learners may complete this piece of work in the case study, or adapt it to their own workplace; the two options are displayed side-by-side.

Students are encouraged to add these outputs to a portfolio. RTOs may determine what items in this portfolio contribute towards assessment.

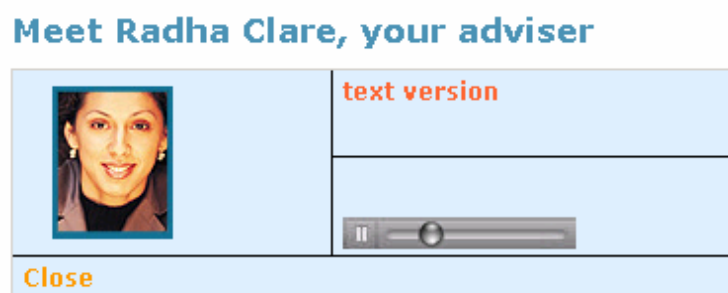
## Learning supports

The student is provided with learning supports in the form of:

1. tips and work samples from an online mentor
2. learning objects
3. ideas for online groupwork to promote the online learning community.

### ***1. Tips and work samples from an online mentor***

Figure 3: The learner's HR adviser



Radha Clare

The adviser is a character in the case study who is an experienced HR practitioner – these tips and work samples have been written by practising HR professionals/managers and teachers to address the most common concerns a new practitioner may have about a project task

In the Teacher Guide, teachers are encouraged to prompt students to explore issues that the adviser raises with any HR mentors that they have access to. The idea behind the online adviser is to model a mentoring relationship – ideally this model should be transferred to the student's workplace if possible.


## 2. Learning objects

Figure 4: A screen from a learning object

Overview | Worksheet | Match-It | Web research | **Interview** | Review quiz |

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### Align recruitment and selection to organisational goals



#### Interview

**Fiona Shields**

Fiona is General Manager of Recruitment at Optus [www.optus.com.au](http://www.optus.com.au). In this interview she gives a strategic view of recruitment in the organisation, and talks about recent changes that have been made to recruitment processes.



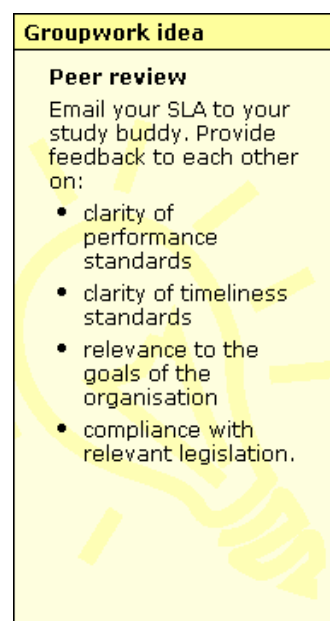
**Ask Fiona a question**

- How do you source candidates for different types of jobs?
- What selection processes do you use?
- What is the value in using an assessment centre?

The learning objects are guided learning resources containing worksheets with readings, glossaries, web links, matching and sequencing activities and interviews with real HR managers, and they underpin each project task to help learners gain the knowledge and skills they need to complete each project task.

### 3. Ideas for online collaboration

Figure 5: Groupwork box on a Task screen



Designed to encourage the learning community, groupwork ideas typically focus on peer support and peer networking – there is a wide selection of these in the Teacher Guide.

### ***What did we learn?***

So, what are the answers to the four key questions we identified earlier? Here they are again:

1. Is the learning flexible, both in terms of the way learners can engage with the Toolbox and in terms of how it may be delivered?
2. How easy and intuitive is the interface?
3. Is the learning authentic (realistic to the workplace)?
4. What supports or features can we add that will help create a positive experience of online learning?

The table on the following page relates our 'lessons learned' to those questions. While these findings are based on a group of busy, motivated students studying at AQF level 5, we expect most of the broad 'lessons' below (with the exception of the first one) will apply to most online learning situations.

Question	What did we learn?	Have we acted on this?
1, 2	<p><b>Learners were a busy, task-oriented group who liked to be able to go directly to 'must have' information.</b></p>	<p>We experimented initially with first introducing learners to the case study via a 'what's happening' meeting with case study characters, but we later decided to allow learners to fast-track their pathway so they could go directly to their project and task instructions.</p>
2, 4	<p><b>Simplicity and predictability in interface design works.</b></p> <p>Learners responded well to the on-screen tree like menu bar and felt that with pages following a consistent design, they knew where to find things. Surprisingly, they were happy with the 'no-frills' version of the graphic design that was used for the pilot</p>	<p>We kept the simple, tree like menu that reflects the navigation of many internet sites (all learners were experienced internet 'surfers', but only one had previously used it for online learning).</p> <p>Instructional design templates were developed and validated during the user testing events and implemented</p> <p>After the pilot we did 'dress up' the graphic design to reflect in-house design standards but not as a response to any specific feedback from users.</p>
3	<p><b>A case study is stronger if learners can relate it to their own workplace.</b></p> <p>Learners liked the STAR Industries case study and Intranet, but also the guidelines for adapting tasks to their own workplaces. They felt they came away with practical things they could use at work.</p>	<p>We improved the screen design to more clearly show the dual streams of completing the task at STAR or adapting it to the learner's own workplace.</p>
4	<p><b>A good facilitator will add value to online delivery.</b></p> <p>Without one, would fewer students have completed? Our guess is yes, as contribution to and participation in an online community provides important supports and scaffolds to online learners (Oliver &amp;</p>	<p>A groupwork idea is provided on each Task page to prompt learners to interact. Many of these activities are open-ended and provide structured activities to encourage peer networking and peer review.</p> <p>Increased effort went into creating</p>

Question	What did we learn?	Have we acted on this?
	Herrington 2001).	<p>a comprehensive teacher guide to give online facilitators as much help and additional material as possible.</p> <p>However, an online facilitator has a specific set of skills that a learning resource can't bestow – for example they will know when to direct students to a collaborative task, and when to encourage more independent networking and peer support among the students.</p>
4	<p><b>A clear timetable helps focus learners' efforts.</b></p> <p>Learners commented (positively) on the pressure that comes from a timetable to complete one task per week, and that this focused their work and kept them 'on task'.</p>	<p>The Teacher Guide contains a suggested delivery timetable based on a one task per week schedule.</p>
4	<p><b>Learner's attitudes towards on-line learning matters.</b></p> <p>It is important to ensure all learners are aware of their responsibilities as well as the learning culture that surrounds this type of learning. One student didn't complete due the conflicting demands of work and other study.</p>	<p>The supports, scaffolds and features that we build in may influence this, but this is a difficult one for developers to address. We also added an outline for an orientation session in the Teacher Guide, and a link in the learning materials to a good website that helps learners 'get ready' for online learning. Beyond that, it's largely out of our control.</p>

As well as these concrete 'lessons', we also speculated on other issues from the experience of running the pilot.

**Did this learning design help the students to develop a sufficient level of underpinning knowledge?**

The students were encouraged to include theoretical concepts into the assessments they developed. However, as the assessments were submitted, it became evident that the students focussed their papers on finding practical solutions to work problems that were presented to them. On-line chat discussions were a good method for drawing on and testing students' theoretical knowledge .

One of the students commented that she came away with practical skills, but queried whether the underpinning concepts or knowledge were as strongly conveyed as in a face-to-face class. The counter to this is that perhaps the situated learning design of the Toolbox does facilitate conceptual learning, but in an applied environment, so to the student, it doesn't appear as just learning about concepts.

Reading lists have been added to each Unit and to learning objects, but again, learners will gain most from these if they have some guidance and follow up discussions with their learning group.

### **What do we mean by online learning?**

An interesting experience of the pilot was that the students all printed out all the materials, so to some extent the Toolbox was merely a delivery mechanism and may as well have been provided on a CD-ROM, and they only [need to go](#) online to interact with their 'learning community'. Somebody may ask 'If it's an online learning resource, shouldn't the Toolbox require the learner to work online?' When you actually state this it seems so simplistic it may not even be an issue – except in terms of *learner expectations*.

Here's an example of what we mean. One student commented that while called online learning it was not that dissimilar to distance learning delivered by post in terms of how she actually *used* the *resource*. Did the fact that she was interacting with a teacher and peers online figure as part of her expectations for online learning? Did she participate in that activity? Since the pilot more interactive quizzes and tools, web research activities, and audio and visual material have been added.

### **Conclusion**

How did we go? Did we produce a product that is flexible, has an intuitive interface, provides an authentic learning experience, *and* provides supports to create a positive experience of online learning? The feedback from reviewers, the reference group and users in the testing and pilot groups suggests the answers are mainly yes. But it will be useful to check that feedback against users' actual experiences with the Toolbox, after it has been released.

There are other important questions that we can't answer until it has been released and RTOs, teachers and learners use it. Did the separation of learning objects from the case study provide clearer/easier points of customisation for teachers/RTOs? Did the presentation of HR 'content' in learning objects make the Toolbox easier/harder to use? Did the use of learning objects make *any* difference to how RTOs, teachers and learners used the Toolbox? As developers we will be keen to tap into the Toolbox users' networks to find some of these answers.

## **Reference**

Oliver, R. and Herrington, J. 2001, *Teaching and Learning Online*, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia.