

case study

Grant Thornton

Benefits of Centra® Add Up at Global Accounting Firm

Solution Overview

Industry — Financial Services, Accounting

Challenge

Improve continuing education process while containing business travel and meeting costs

Benefits

- Improve flexibility and convenience of training, through recorded sessions
- Reduce conference call costs associated with virtual learning, by adopting VoIP
- Speed orientation process for newly hired employees
- Supporting evolution of a continuous learning culture

Solution

Centra Live
Centra Knowledge Center

Grant Thornton is a leading global accounting, tax and business advisory organization that serves public and private middle-market clients through 50 offices in the United States. Grant Thornton International serves clients through more than 585 offices located in 110 countries.

“ We felt that this strategic initiative was a wise technology investment in the face of shrinking budgets for business travel and increased demands on our professionals’ time. Now, the use of Centra is helping us reach our business goal of creating a continuous learning environment for all our employees. ”

David Holyoak, Chief Information Officer and Partner
Grant Thornton

Real-Time Benefits of Real-Time Virtual Collaboration and Learning

It’s Monday at 10 a.m. in Chicago, and David Holyoak, chief information officer and partner at Grant Thornton, is reviewing his notes for a four-hour meeting scheduled to start in about an hour with partners at the company’s New York office. Normally, in this situation, he’d be on a plane making its final approach to LaGuardia Airport. But instead of making a business trip that could devour several days of Holyoak’s time and drain thousands of dollars from the firm’s business-travel budget, Holyoak can now attend the meeting “virtually” without ever leaving his Chicago office. It is made possible by Centra Software’s real-time online collaboration software, which was deployed throughout Grant Thornton in the fall of 2000.

Volatile business-travel costs and increasing demands on employees’ time were two key factors that compelled Grant Thornton to pursue a solution to create a virtual learning and real-time collaboration environment throughout its organization.

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Holyoak first became aware of Centra's solution in 1999 when he launched a search for a Web-based communications technology that was Y2K compliant and could integrate seamlessly with Grant Thornton's existing network infrastructure. As soon as Holyoak saw a demonstration of Centra, he recognized that the technology would be a valuable application within the organization. "Grant Thornton is an organization that sells knowledge, and we have ongoing regulatory requirements to provide a certain number of continuing-education hours annually to employees," Holyoak said. "We needed to improve the continuing-education process and looked to augment our traditional classroom approach of regularly scheduled courses with a more flexible Web-based program that could deliver on-demand training and communications. We also felt that the rising cost of business travel for meetings and training, in terms of employee time away from work and corporate expenses, could be offset by the Centra solution."

After a stringent evaluation of 12 vendors, Grant Thornton was most impressed with Centra's support for voice-over-IP, optimization for remote users, the ability to record and archive training sessions and meetings, and cost-effective licensing and maintenance options.

VoIP and Recordings Increase Flexibility

"The voice-over-IP functionality was very appealing, because we would not be limited to conference-call technology or the conference-room environment," Holyoak said. "Instead, our people can remain at their desks and communicate with other groups or one-on-one. Instead of 'everybody go to the conference room,' it's 'let's get everyone connected online with Centra.'"

Holyoak also notes that the recording feature within Centra gives Grant Thornton employees the flexibility to fit training and continuing education into their individual work schedules. "The ability to record a session was very attractive because of its flexibility and convenience," Holyoak said. "Not only can we use it to make people more effective, but we can leverage the recorded content to allow employees who missed an online session to play it back later. Also, by using archived Centra webcasts in

new-employee orientation programs, we can ensure that everyone has a similar experience."

More Efficient and Cost-Effective Communications

The implementation of the Centra solution was an integral part of Grant Thornton's corporate initiative to create an innovative and effective continuous learning environment.

Bob Dean, chief learning officer and partner at Grant Thornton, adds that Centra has been valuable because it empowers Grant Thornton to deliver multiple channels of learning through the organization's Grant Thornton University (GTU). GTU is a one-stop, comprehensive source for learning resources that integrates a learning management system with content and delivery channels.

"The ability to connect online and interact with practice and technical leaders from across the firm's 50 U.S. locations was a key driver in our decision to implement Centra," Dean said. "Shortly after implementation, we were able to deliver critical knowledge to our tax and insurance practices in a matter of days, not months. The Centra-powered solution is changing the culture at Grant Thornton, giving us new ways to deliver knowledge and business communications that are more efficient and cost-effective than ever before."

Making Life Easier for Grant Thornton Employees

Almost a year into the Centra rollout, Grant Thornton recognized the value of its investment when the tragic events of September 11, 2001, raised fears about flying on commercial airlines. "After September 11, many Grant Thornton partners did not want to get on an airplane to travel to our annual partners' meeting in November," Holyoak said. "The fact that we had Centra in place was very timely and allowed us to hold a virtual partners' meeting instead of canceling or conducting it in a less effective manner. Centra allows us to be flexible and conduct business more effectively. It also makes life easier for our employees."

Later, in 2002, as a result of the demise of Arthur Andersen, Grant Thornton had an opportunity to hire many highly qualified accountants. Centra helped many former Arthur Andersen employees hired by Grant Thornton to quickly

adapt to their new employer’s culture and procedures. The recording and archiving capabilities of the Centra platform proved to be invaluable.

“Centra was essential in integrating 550 former Andersen employees into our firm in a matter of only three to six weeks,” Dean said. “Using an employee-orientation program that we had produced and archived in Centra, we were able to get them up to speed quickly in terms of our internal procedures and processes, our technology, and even how to perform everyday tasks such as filling out a time-and-expense report. We were able to make these new employees feel welcome and become efficient at their new jobs in a very short time.”

On a typical work day at Grant Thornton offices, partners and employees use live Centra webcast sessions for a variety of learning applications, ranging from tools and competency training to updates on accounting and tax practices. Centra is also used for fast dissemination of knowledge on new regulatory legislation, product education and virtual GTU classes for which employees can earn continuing professional education credits (CPEs).

“Not only is virtual learning cost-effective for the company, it improves the working environment for employees,” Dean said. “With the amount of training and daily communications now accessed conveniently from desktop computers via Centra, employees can be more productive and appreciate not having to travel.”

The value of Centra’s Web collaboration to Grant Thornton’s business became apparent when it was recently used to communicate knowledge to employees regarding the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, an important piece of federal legislation on corporate and accounting reform that led to procedural changes at the company. Sarbanes-Oxley had far-reaching consequences for clients, and it was critical that Grant Thornton employees respond quickly and help clients understand what this would mean for their businesses. “Traditionally, we would have flown experts in

to train the trainers, and then sent the trainers out to local offices,” Holyoak said. “Or, we would have typed up lengthy memos and distributed them throughout the organization. Neither of these two methods is efficient or cost-effective, but with Centra, we eliminated travel expenses and improved the quality of the training by connecting employees directly with the experts. The result is that we were able to immediately deliver a consistent message to clients. We were prepared, proactive and unified as a company in our response — a clear competitive advantage.”

Fast, Reliable and Easy to Use

User statistics from 2002 confirm the widespread acceptance of the Centra application: 1,800 unique learners out of 3,000 U.S. Grant Thornton employees, 140 unique programs delivered, 25 programs delivered in one month, and 20 consecutive weeks of multiple live webcasts. According to Dean, the exceptional reliability and ease of use of Centra’s technology makes it all possible.

“Centra is easy to use, and it has been 99.9% reliable,” Dean said. “Such reliability is critical to the seamless delivery of integrated video and audio through our network.”

Extending the Centra Experience

Grant Thornton plans to continue to leverage the key time-saving and efficiency-boosting benefits of Centra’s technology to control costs, improve continuing education and employee orientation and enhance communications throughout the organization.

“We have moved from one way of delivering learning — largely the traditional classroom — to three or four ways to deliver learning that accelerate speed to market with new knowledge and services,” Dean said. “Centra has been pivotal in helping evolve our culture to a continuous learning environment.”

According to Holyoak, Grant Thornton plans to extend the Centra experience outside the organization to clients and other business partners and has already taken the first

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step toward this goal by purchasing Centra's product for self-service online meetings over the Internet.

"Centra focuses on delivering outstanding products and services — a very similar approach to how we provide services to our clients," Dean said. "Today and in the future, Grant Thornton will rely on Centra as a vital application for achieving the high levels of professional training and corporate communication mandated by our industry."