A large learning disability charity uses learning technologies principally to manage its face-to-face training programme in a more efficient and effective way.

Key facts about the employer
Founded in 1946, Mencap is a national charity with 500 affiliated local groups providing a range of services for people with learning disabilities, including education and employment support and residential and day services. Mencap employs approximately 7000 staff across England and Wales. Recently staff turnover has been higher than normal following Mencap’s acquisition of some Southern Cross and NHS services.

Approach to workforce development
Mencap’s central learning and development team consists of three managers and a small admin team, as well as 13 in-house trainers. It is responsible for the training of 7000 employees nationally including support staff and managers. Annually, it delivers 2,500 training courses, mostly through its in-house trainers, but with some external provision too.

Compliance and mandatory training is at the core of Mencap’s L&D provision, and uses the lion’s share of its budget.

“Our definition of compliance is what the law, the CQC, the CSSIW and the NHS tell us we have to do, plus what we call ‘Mencap law’; all those things that we as an organisation regard as essential, over and above the legal requirement. This focuses mainly on person-centred support, which is core to our organisational philosophy.”

Leadership training is also a priority and includes management training, a talent management programme including business school training, and externally run action learning sets.

Geography poses a challenge. The organisation works all over England and Wales, with many staff employed in home care or community-based services. For lower volume training, for example management training, where 60 managers might need the same course in a year but none want the cost of travel, logistics are challenging.

How technology supports training and development
In recent years, Mencap has rethought its approach to online learning.

“We used to deliver aspects of induction using e-learning, such as fire training. We found that many supported living services did not have computers, or employees had limited computer skills. Likewise we used to carry out medication training by distance learning (both workbooks and e-learning), which seemed on the face of it quite good value at £50 per learner. However, we found that completion rates were low at around 50%, and it was costing us money chasing people to complete. We also had concerns about the quality of these approaches.”
Mencap discontinued a project to develop digital learning materials for use in-house and sale to third parties as they found it was not possible to produce suitably nuanced, effective and interactive learning within a reasonable cost. Today, rather than delivering a lot of e-learning modules, Mencap uses technology to support locally delivered face-to-face learning, and the central co-ordination of its workforce development activity.

Training delivery
The ‘Learning Swerve’, a dedicated area on Mencap’s intranet, holds a range of in-house resources to help managers update their own team’s knowledge and skills. These include small lesson plans for operational managers to use with staff, workbooks for learners, and slide presentations for managers to use at team meetings. This digital delivery of printable materials and presentations approach suits Mencap managers and employees. For example, the storing of workbooks as pdfs which are printed ‘just in time’ by managers whenever a new employee starts means not only a large reduction in printing costs, but also an easily updateable system. Mencap updates induction workbooks regularly, and at least annually, regardless of whether the induction standards change. This is achieved cheaply, comprehensively and consistently by using digital delivery of the workbook via the intranet.

Learning Swerve materials focus on compliance training.

“Rather than training all the staff in a team about medication administration online every year, we do the initial training face-to-face. Then each year managers will carry out observations and structured conversations to make sure staff remain skilled and competent. Managers receive training on how to conduct these observations. Doing training every year, whether it’s face-to-face or online, does not prove that someone is ‘skilled and competent’, as the inspectorate requires. It’s observation that does that.”

Managing learning and development
In 2011, Mencap centralised its L&D provision to improve compliance while reducing costs. A learning management database was developed within an existing HR management system for service managers to review and amend staff learning records, monitor training compliance, and book staff onto training.

Improved management of information now allows Mencap’s L&D team to schedule and commission face-to-face training more cost-effectively. Monitoring training needs in different geographical areas shows the team where face-to-face training will attract best attendance, minimising costs per learner. Over 18 months, attendance levels on courses have risen from 50% to 75%.
“The learning management system also enables more accurate reporting of induction completed within 12 weeks. In the past, local records would only record that an employee had been signed off by the manager having looked at their workbooks. Now we have a system where we can accurately record not only completion of workbooks, but completed observations and face-to-face training.”

The learning management system supports accurate reporting of workforce learning and qualifications and makes learning and development a more visible organisational priority.

The team has also introduced an electronically readable evaluation form for use on courses. An Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) machine is used to read the 25,000 evaluation forms received each year and this helps monitor the quality of the learning delivered.

The business case for learning technologies
Mencap’s investment in technology-enabled centralisation of learning management has cut the cost of its training budget and achieved a step-change in compliance levels:

“It’s made an enormous difference. We’ve reduced overall costs by £300,000 and improved the quality of our learning and development and this is despite an increase in staff numbers over the period of close to 1000. We can run reports for senior managers on every aspect of training and compliance, across every part of the organisation. We can see where we need to target resources and where we need to prioritise. Our compliance, now with statutory requirements, is 95%. It was 50% a few years ago.”

A recent benchmarking exercise showed that on average Mencap delivered more training per worker annually; 4 days compared to 2.5 days; at a lower cost per head than comparable organisations.

Future plans
Mencap is planning to introduce a new, more powerful HR and training management system that integrates the management of payroll, rostering, expenses and workforce planning, as well as the booking of training and maintenance of staff training records currently handled by the system. Email alerts for managers about refresher training, training schedules and so on will be possible, as will the addition of an individual’s personal development plan. Also, backfill and travel costs associated with training will be recorded and monitored.

The new system will reduce managers’ admin time, freeing them to observe practice and support quality outcomes. It will also be usable by all employees, who will be alerted when they need a particular piece of training or refresher course, and will be able to book their own training directly through the system. This supports Mencap’s overall aim for employees to take more ownership of their own training and professional development.
Although Mencap’s main focus has been on delivering quality face-to-face training interventions, it also recognises the potential of e-learning and plans to make more effective use of free e-learning, particularly to support specialist areas such as dementia. To guide managers to quality, up-to-date materials, Mencap will create pathways on its intranet to pre-vetted free external e-learning sources that staff can use to support face-to-face training.

**Tips for others in the social care sector**
- Technology can help you manage learning, and judge its effectiveness.
- Find a learning management system that fits your organisation. You don’t have to build your own, but you do want something that can be customised to fit your circumstances. Ensure it does the administration, monitoring and reporting you need.
- Do a cost analysis. Hidden costs mean e-learning may not be cheaper. Factor in time away from work, travelling to a computer, basic IT skills and chasing completion of online courses.
- Look for interactivity and some form of assessment in your e-learning. There is too much dry, uninvolving e-learning that allows people to just click through screens and say they have completed the training.

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