

Xcel Energy Supports a Distributed and Technical Workforce Using a Transformative LMS

To achieve operational effectiveness, mitigate risk, and demonstrate they're doing it at the lowest possible cost, Xcel Energy turned to Blackboard Learn®.



Based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Xcel Energy is the largest wind producer and the fifth-largest energy company in the U.S. It operates in eight states and serves more than 3.7 million customers. The company's portfolio consists of over 100 energy-generating plants, including nuclear and non-nuclear and coal, non-coal, and natural gas distribution. It's a critical leader in clean energy production and securing the national electric grid.

INSTITUTION TYPE: UTILITIES COMPANY

LOCATION: BASED IN MINNEAPOLIS, MN

EMPLOYEES: 12,000+

UNION CONTRACTORS: 6,000

Blackboard Learn has been essential in allowing me to create a place where people can have consistent access to the same type of learning, and I can cost-avoid those other types of LMS fees. It's very easy for me to get to my return on investment for the platform based on that argument alone.

Tony Gagliardo

Vice President of Enterprise, Nuclear, and Technical Training, Xcel Energy



The Challenges

Xcel was seeking an instructional process to enhance support for leadership and professional development for employees. Some key challenges the company faced included ineffective use of instructor time, retention, consistency, and accessibility. Before introducing the [Blackboard Learn LMS](#), non-nuclear area instructors taught curricula that lacked a standardized configuration and interrupted the critical field work. “How could I guarantee that our organization had trained them adequately?” said Gagliardo. “Just because the data for the completion records were in the LMS wasn't good enough.

“I had to demonstrate I was adaptive to those specific learning personas in the field at that time, reduce the impact on the business, and adapt to the needs of a technically diverse workforce. I needed multiple ways to do that.”

“At Xcel Energy, this was akin to simultaneously implementing a turnaround, continuous improvement, and a startup learning strategy.”



The Solutions

The decision to use Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Collaborate addresses the needs of Xcel's non-desk workforce, offers additional resilience, and has reduced their budget within the existing footprint of funding. They reinvest any additional surplus into the organization. Effectiveness, efficiency, and experience are assessed in quantitative and qualitative ways to measure training outcomes and satisfy regulatory requirements.



Insights Delivered

A learning ecosystem

Gagliardo considers it the responsibility of the organization's technical trainers to educate senior executive leaders and the workforce on what is offered in a learning ecosystem. When asked why an organization would need Blackboard Learn if they were using a student information system (SIS) or a traditional gold source for recording keeping, Gagliardo has an answer. "We're not using [Blackboard Learn] just to deliver curriculum. We're using it as a place to support communities of practice, we're using it to support personal and professional development, we're using it to speed employee enculturation in very technical fields. This approach, when used in conjunction with our traditional HR human capital management system, or akin to the SIS, creates a tremendous employee performance assurance capability," continued Gagliardo. "We're using it as a consistent place for instructors to offer learning regardless of whether it's in the classroom or if it's in a virtual environment. And nowadays, thanks to the pandemic, we're doing both simultaneously. And yet, at the same time, we manage that data to prove that the people know and can do what we need them to know and do. And that's very important in terms of risk mitigation for our companies or our agencies."

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Operational excellence and compliance

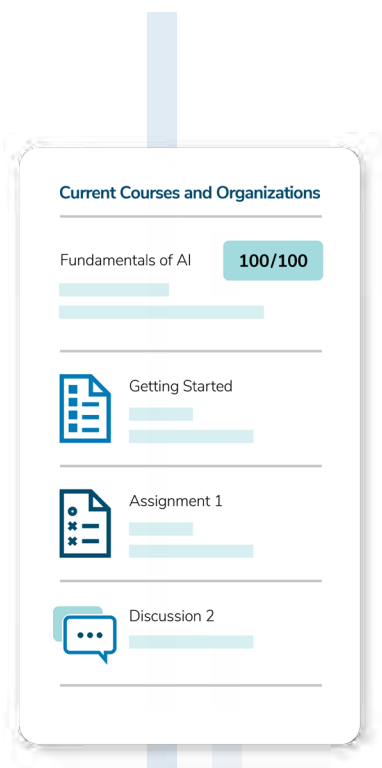
In any utility or federally regulated organization, errors and deficiencies in operations are often under the microscope. Training is typically the first solution to any problem or challenge. "We were able to go on the offensive and proactively engage our senior leaders and then cascade to subsequent layers of leaders and follow the concepts around operational excellence," explained Gagliardo. "It's precision; it's a concept of accountability at all levels, and we were able to use Blackboard [Learn] to do this ... The technology is changing; the competencies are changing. I've got to be able to enable the business to be successful, give evidence-based data that support that success, and then do that at a significant savings."

[Previously] they weren't forced to get into the tech manuals, they weren't forced to do the level of exercises and preparedness we're having them do now when they come into the classroom. This tool has given them the opportunity to learn and change in a manner that they're comfortable doing now.



Doug Barber

Director of Nuclear Maintenance Technical and Energy Supply Training, Xcel Energy



Technical learning and development - at a cost savings

“We’re not typically in a fee-for-service environment here, but I guarantee if you even flew the concept of generating revenue or interdepartmental revenue to offset the training footprint, you’ll be a rock star,” said Gagliardo. “It’s demonstrating that mindset that you’re running your organization like a business that has been so tremendously valuable.”

One of the challenges encountered when rolling out the new tool was change management. Non-desk workforce skill training is not typically administered in a traditional classroom setting. “[Previously] they weren’t forced to get into the tech manuals, they weren’t forced to do the level of exercises and preparedness we’re having them do now when they come into the classroom. This tool has given them the opportunity to learn and change in a manner that they’re comfortable doing now,” stated Doug Barber, director of nuclear maintenance technical and energy supply training, Xcel Energy.

With the new system, Xcel uses the same resources to achieve better support for its plants and employees. Barber oversees approximately 750 courses in his programs, including work process optimization, capital efficiency, and continuous improvement. Utilizing Blackboard Learn has resulted in cost savings and other benefits for the organization. “From a travel standpoint and the additional work time they get in the field, they’re better prepared for this class. And I also can offer this now twice a year in every region, where before from a resource standpoint with the exact same resources I don’t think you do it once a year,” said Barber.

First skeptical, instructors and students have now embraced the system. “I have 100% buy-in from the 55 instructors that report to me where these same instructors were not a fan of that when I first took over,”

stated Barber. Overall, Xcel is finding tremendous value in the LMS. “It’s improved student work-life balance, it’s improved the proficiency of the students ... and it saved us a ton of money, which we’ve been able to internally repurpose instead of having to go out and ask for additional funding or support. So, I can use that money for the fire of the day, whatever that might be,” said Gagliardo.

Leadership development

Xcel uses the same framework from their technical learning and development for their functional leadership development curriculum for nuclear mid- and senior-level leaders. It enables employees to focus on functional and practical leadership skills and data-driven decision-making. “We’re heading into our second and third tiers — the people who participated in the first cohorts are leading the second and the third cohorts. No additional staff required and reinforcement of a consistent tone from the top,” stated Gagliardo.

For work process optimization, the tool enables Xcel to use its best instructors to deliver different topics without requiring them to be in the region or plant.



Epilogue

The organization has plans to roll out Xcel Academy in the fall of 2022 using the same curriculum. It will be deployed for community engagement, investing in supporting a more diverse technical workforce, and developing a pipeline of hires. The program will leverage Blackboard Learn and the existing energy and gas curriculums to introduce socioeconomic and racially diverse members of the community to the energy career field. Simultaneously Xcel is using its learning tools to assist the organization in areas of rapid onboarding and technical onboarding. The approach calls for the rapid validation of core skills and, when needed, upskill within the areas of supply chain, office of the CFO, cyber, and business systems.

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