S&B Automotive Academy: Net cam technology streamlines work-based assessment and cuts costs

Summary

S&B Automotive Academy has developed a seamless and interactive online system for remotely assessing its apprentices on-demand. The system utilises state-of-the-art video technology deployed at workplaces throughout the UK, which links into the Academy's virtual learning environment (VLE). It has successfully gained Learning Innovation Grant 5 (LIG 5) funding to develop the technology, which is already cutting down travelling costs for assessors, as well as saving time and contributing to a substantial reduction in their carbon footprint.

About S&B Automotive Academy

S&B Automotive Academy is based in Bristol specialising in training apprentices for the motor industry.

It offers a wide range of apprenticeships reflecting many varied career paths within the industry. S&B has developed a strong internal ethos focused on the proactive use of technology by lecturers and support staff. This ethos is also the basis for cooperation between S&B and its project partners.

S&B are the lead provider in a consortium of 5 supporting partners, who are all part of the Net Cam's Jericho project. The other supporting partners are:

- Reflections Training Academy
- KTS Training(2002) Ltd
- Paragon Skills for Industry
- Rapido Training
- S&B Automotive Academy Ltd.

About LIG funding

The LIG funding is administered by the Association of Learning Providers (ALP). LIG funding supports the innovative development and application of ICT technologies and e-learning within the work-based learning/skills sector. As at June 2008, LIG funding has supported hundreds of projects across a wide range of geographical and occupational areas.
The challenge

S&B Automotive Academy, although based in Bristol, operates throughout the UK with students based as far away as Scotland. S&B employs workplace assessors who each have a leased car to travel to assess their students. With the rising cost of fuel and the amount of time it took the assessors to get to the workplaces, S&B decided that it would need to look at other ways to make the process more efficient through the use of modern technology.

Some of the main challenges it faced included:

- sourcing and evaluating the best equipment to use;
- changing the culture of how work-based assessments were traditionally carried out;
- convincing some employers and unions that the system was not trying to spy on staff or business; and
- some employers did not have internet access and some use a dial-up modem.

The activity

S&B already has an excellent VLE, with interactive tools and an excellent network of learning providers all supporting innovation and the development of education for their learners. The idea was to use this network and look to develop its internet communications to try and further improve the assessment of UK-wide workplaces.

*Diagram showing the Net cam model and how systems link up and communicate*

S&B has enabled the net cams to be available through its VLE, so assessors have access to them wherever they have a computer and an internet connection.
The successful LIG 5 bid has enabled S&B to fund the net cam project; it has also facilitated the opportunity of collaboration with providers from other sectors. This means that work-based assessment by remote access using net cams is not just considered for the motor industry.

Each partner involved in the project receives 12 employer net camera packs, which contain:

- 24" flat screen to monitor multiple assessments/reviews;
- router to interface workplace network to net cameras;
- protection carry case;
- two net cameras per pack; and
- media pack with utility belt.
The partners have also had 15 VLE software development sessions to help them learn how to use the equipment for assessments.

Initially, S&B investigated 21 web-based cameras and trialled five, which was very successful.

**The outcomes**

The net cams have really helped to make a much more efficient and seamless system of assessment. One of the real benefits of being able to have this technology is the fact that assessment can take place at any time as required. If a visit is cancelled for any reason or if the apprentice wants to demonstrate their competency, then all the assessor needs to do is log in to the VLE and access the net cam for the apprentice's workplace. This also benefits the needs of the apprentice by offering a greater choice of access to learning and assessments.

"Costs and time are always an issue and as technology is advancing at a phenomenal rate, we must always look at better and greener ways of working. The new ways of assessing are very beneficial for the apprentice, he/she can truly be assessed on demand." - Jon Winter, Managing Director, S&B Automotive Academy

The net cams can also be moved physically and controlled remotely by the assessor during the assessment at the workplace and have a variety of high quality features to enable zooming and panning in detailed clarity.

Making these changes could be difficult to implement and facilitate, but assessors have embraced the new technology to such an extent that they would like to see it available for all workplaces for assessment purposes in the future.

"Some assessors were a bit hesitant to embrace the new technology, however, we conducted a live assessment that allowed them to see how easy the system is to use. In fact, the assessors are now looking forward to the day that every employer is set-up." - Jon Winter, Managing Director, S&B Automotive Academy
The use of Net Cams for assessment has helped to cut down the CO2 emissions already, with the aim for S&B to have visits reduced by 25% by September 2011, and a further 25% by 2012.

**The impact**

The real advantage of the net cam project has been the quality of the images and video captured for the assessment process, and also the two-way communication between the assessor and the apprentice, which is through real time over the internet.

This methodology of assessment really focuses on how technology can be utilised in a dynamic way and what S&B has done is recognise not only its responsibility towards improving its carbon footprint, but also enhancing the quality of equipment and systems at the same time. This type of activity demonstrates how you can save money but make real investments into the quality of education for the future, which is something that is going to be very important in the next couple of years in particular.

Apprentices have also found that the Net Cams have enabled them to be at the cutting edge of new technology, seeing how it works; it gives them the opportunity to have their work captured efficiently, which has improved time management greatly.

"The students that we have been working on the pilot are impressed by the ease of use of the cameras and technology, and the fact that they can carry out true on-demand assessments." - Jon Winter, Managing Director, S&B Automotive Academy
S&B's goal is for all its employers in the future to receive a net cam as part of their apprenticeship programme. It will use Net Cams to allow partners and stakeholders to view good practice in teaching and training. S&B is moving forward to allow school students to be better informed of what sector they would like to be trained in by looking and communicating with real working environments.

"Look at what they currently do, have an open mind to technology to make positive changes. Above all, have vision – see it, believe it and do it." - Jon Winter, Managing Director, S&B Automotive Academy

**Useful links**

- S&B Automotive Academy
- S&B Transmission newsletter
- Jisc RSC South West website

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