

How Expedia Accelerated Its Managers' Learning

A CLIENT STORY



Overview

Like most companies today, Expedia relies heavily on project teams to tackle the complex sales, operational and customer service issues that require increasing speed and efficiency. Fortunately, Expedia managers better understand how to manage projects and interpret financial results because of the training they've received from Paradigm Learning's **Countdown®: A Strategy Game for Project Teams** and **Zodiak®: The Game of Business Finance and Strategy**.

Expedia created excitement and fast results by training managers in project management and business acumen.

Expedia Stays Ahead of the Competition

Thanks to leaps in technology, greater competitive pressures and ever-increasing consumer expectations, companies today are faced with tackling more and more complex process, productivity and people issues. Smart companies use formal project teams to address these issues in such areas as sales, operations, customer service, IT and more, relying on employees throughout the organization to apply their knowledge and skill on these teams.

Expedia has made great use of project teams to achieve positive results – after all, it is the world's most popular online travel service. But like many companies using project teams, Expedia discovered that many team members had no formal training in the *discipline* of project management. Some, for example, had never heard of PMBOK – the project management body of knowledge, which is an internationally recognized standard of tools, processes and terminology. Without common ground, project team members were not able to operate at maximum efficiency.

"We needed our people to be able to contribute immediately to their projects," says Antigoni Mallen, Expedia's director of learning and development.

"You have to know what a scope statement is, or how to do a work breakdown structure, before you can fully contribute to the project teams."

Expedia: Moving at the Speed of Light

Expedia executives realized that their project teams would work more efficiently if team members and team leaders had the same baseline knowledge about project success. The company needed a learning experience that would meet its expressly stated learning goal: Make sure managers can join a project team and, at the first meeting, be able to contribute immediately.

There was one other factor in play for Expedia in choosing a learning program. "Our culture here is very fast paced – like the speed of light – and our employees love being challenged," Mallen says. "They say challenges are fun."

"Expedia continues to build a strong corporate culture because of its belief in the importance of enhancing business acumen at all levels of the organization and in strengthening the skill of employees to work in project teams."

Antigoni Mallen
Expedia

Countdown®: A Strategy Game for Project Teams

Countdown®: A Strategy Game for Project Teams is a one-day classroom-based simulation designed to provide project team members with a thorough understanding of the essentials of project team success. Based on generally accepted project management tools and techniques (PMBOK®), Countdown can educate everyone in the organization on how to effectively participate on a project team.

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With that in mind, Mallen looked for a training experience that would be both fun and comprehensive. "It would be unconscionable to sit Expedia employees in a room and have somebody lecture to them about the basics of project management for a day," Mallen adds. "They would just wither and die in that environment."

Expedia turned to Paradigm Learning, which built its reputation on creating award-winning business games and simulations that engage rather than bombard. **Countdown®: A Strategy Game for Project Teams** is a high-energy half-day simulation that quickly immerses learners in an intense seven-month project. Small teams use a game board to move through project milestones, deal with incoming e-mails and voice mails, communicate with stakeholders and more.

Competing against other teams, they use project management tools such as Gantt charts and critical path analysis as they learn the decision-making and communications processes that lead to success.

The second half of the one-day session "bridges" to the participants' own work environments, "connecting" the game to their own jobs and project team issues.

Mission: Building Strong Project Teams

After a brief testing phase, Expedia added Countdown to its company-wide management training curriculum.

Since then, participant feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. As with many training

Project Management Matching Game

Test your knowledge of some of the commonly used project management terms by matching the word with its proper definition.

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|--------------------------|--|
| 1) Critical Path | A) A collection of logically related project activities, usually resulting in the completion of a major deliverable |
| 2) Crashing | B) Graphic display of schedule-related information |
| 3) Gantt Chart | C) Taking action to decrease the total project duration by adding resources (human and material) to the project schedule without altering the sequence of activities |
| 4) Phase | D) A tool used to relate the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS) to individual resources to ensure that each activity of the project's scope of work is clearly assigned to individuals |
| 5) Project Scope | E) Graphic representation of the "triple constraints" of time, cost and requirements that "trade off" each other as decisions are made within the project. |
| 6) Responsibility Matrix | F) The series of activities that determines the earliest possible completion of the project |
| 7) Scope Creep | G) All the work required to deliver a project's product or service with specified features and functions |
| 8) Trade-off Triangle | H) Modification to the agreed-upon project scope as defined by the approved Work Breakdown Structure |

Answers: 1) F; 2) C; 3) B; 4) A; 5) D; 6) D; 7) H; 8) E

Zodiak®: The Game of Business Finance and Strategy

Zodiak is a sophisticated business simulation that uses a board game to teach participants the basics of business acumen and financial literacy in a fun, fast-paced format. Created by corporate training leader Paradigm Learning, the game is designed to put learners “in the driver’s seat” by allowing them to purchase and run a multimillion-dollar company over a period of three years (in actuality, five hours). Zodiak has been played by more than one million people in over half of the companies on the Fortune 500 list and has been translated into 13 languages.

About Paradigm Learning

Paradigm Learning (www.ParadigmLearning.com) is a privately held company based in Tampa, Fla. Since 1994, it has worked with more than half of the companies on the Fortune 500 list, creating award-winning business games, business simulations and Discovery Maps® to address critical business issues. Its flagship program, **Zodiak®: The Game of Business Finance and Strategy**, has been played by more than one million people worldwide. Other products address such issues as talent leadership, managerial accountability, building teams, project management and organizational change.

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initiatives, it’s hard to quantify a financial return on investment, but Expedia relies heavily on post-course evaluations from what Mallen describes as “very discerning and critical employees.” Even among this discriminating group, Countdown consistently scores what Mallen says are extraordinarily high marks, averaging a rating of 4.7 on a five-point scale.

“The verbatim comments we receive – this is a great way to learn, or that they learned what they needed to know, or that they could use the information immediately – tell us we hit the mark,” Mallen says. “Those are great measures. You can’t say something like, ‘Expedia’s stock price went up two points because people were into the simulation.’ No company can do that.

“But I can say with confidence that our learning objectives were met.”

Expedia Tackled Building Project Teams – Then Business Acumen

Having experienced success with Countdown, Expedia again turned to Paradigm Learning when it decided to develop the business acumen of its managers.

“In addition to project teamwork, another part of our culture is that there’s a lot of transparency around our business financials,” says Mallen. “So, naturally, there was a need for our managers to understand the connection between what they do and what it looks like on our income statement and balance sheet.”

Mallen knew that financial education had a high potential for being dry and boring, but she had seen firsthand the energy Countdown brought to another potentially soporific subject – project

management. And that’s why she knew it was time to bring in **Zodiak®: The Game of Business Finance and Strategy**, Paradigm’s award-winning business acumen training program.

Expedia used a version of Zodiak designed for service organizations. By allowing small teams of learners to run a fictitious company for three business years, the game helps them understand how businesses earn and spend money. It strengthens participants’ business acumen—their thorough understanding of what it really takes for a company to make money—in addition to enhancing their financial literacy, which is a basic understanding of the numbers on financial statements.

Zodiak is being used with Expedia managers at all levels who can benefit from increased business acumen. Because of an open-enrollment policy at Expedia’s headquarters, participants have come from every department in the organization – including sales, technology, business development and engineering.

Expedia runs Zodiak as a one-day training session. The game itself lasts approximately five hours, followed by an additional 90 minutes of exercises designed to “connect” the game to learners’ real-world jobs. They even get a chance to apply their new knowledge to Expedia’s actual financial statements.

How has it worked? The post-course evaluations say it all, Mallen says. “It was the most fun and interesting class I’ve ever taken,” one participant writes. “Makes me want to learn more,” writes another. “Fun and so easy to stay engaged,” another participant writes. “I found myself wishing that college finance and accounting had been delivered with a similar approach.”

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