

Alameda County Social Service Agency's E-Studio: The Future of Virtual Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD) has always been committed to offering virtual training to staff, it was not until 2019 that a renewed commitment to include e-learning and virtual learning in the Staff Development Unit strategic planning conversations took place. Those planning conversations have led to the integration of virtual learning into HSD culture, because staff are now either teleworking or social distancing at work due to the COVID-19 pandemic and do not have access to traditional, in-person training. Offering

staff virtual training opportunities through e-learning modules, virtual instructor-led courses, web-based classes, and virtual videos is vitally important for their continued growth. This case study examines the best practices of the Alameda County Social Service Agency E-Studio and how Sonoma County can benefit from implementing a similar training unit. This report includes recommendations for creating a virtual training culture by strategically utilizing the resources Sonoma County already has and making plans to implement new components.

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Introduction

In 2011, Sonoma County Human Services Department's (HSD) Staff Development Unit embarked on a journey to train staff differently, through e-learning modules and virtual training. E-Learning modules are self-directed trainings delivered via any electronic device. Virtual trainings are instructor-led trainings offered through a virtual format or recorded and posted to the learning management system (LMS). To accomplish the move to virtual learning, staff development leadership purchased Articulate Storyline and Adobe Captivate software to be used by training staff. Even though there was interest in training and learning virtually, the movement to integrate this into HSD culture did not gain significant momentum.

In 2019, Staff Development leadership purchased updated Articulate Storyline software and trained the staff who would create the e-learning. The new software, trained staff, and an increased interest in integrating remote learning into HSD culture elevated e-learning into broader strategic planning discussions. Since early 2020, most HSD staff are either teleworking or social distancing at work due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so providing in-person training is not possible. The need to provide remote training options for HSD staff has motivated the Staff Development Unit to include virtual learning opportunities in 20–21 Fiscal Year training plans. Staff Development is working with external trainers to offer all trainings in virtual formats as well as creating e-learning modules in-house. The decision to visit Alameda County and its E-Studio for this

study was motivated by the benefits of web-based learning and the fact that Alameda County boasts a successful existing video and e-learning studio. Meeting the Alameda County E-Studio staff and gathering information about implementing an E-Studio in Sonoma County has been key in the development of a virtual training culture for Sonoma HSD.

Background

Like many counties, Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) hosts a unit of staff development professionals, but unlike other counties, it boasts a professional-grade video/e-learning studio, called E-Studio. Alameda County SSA comprises 2,400 staff members, including executive managers, managers, supervisors, and staff from four departments. The Staff Development Training and Consulting Team (TACT) operates as its own department, providing training to all SSA staff.

E-Studio, a specialized unit of TACT, was created in 2014. It was developed to supplement in-class trainings with modern, virtual learning formats, because traditional trainings were costly and did not satisfy the training needs of the SSA staff. The initial budget to build E-Studio was \$5000 with one Staff Development Specialist (SDS) specifically dedicated to working on E-Studio projects. But as the need for more e-learning trainings grew, a second SDS was hired in 2016 who designed and conducted technology trainings as well as developed online videos. Finally, in 2018, a third SDS was added to the Alameda County E-Studio

team to assist with project requests as well as oversee the implementation of SSA's Simulation Lab. The E-Studio staff is passionate about what they do. In their own words: "to do this work, you must be willing to learn and want to learn."

E-Studio Projects

As the learning culture has shifted, E-Studio project requests have become more complex, leading to the utilization of more advanced equipment and development processes. These projects utilize the creativity and innovation of the E-Studio staff, who have created an expansive menu of e-learning services to offer SSA staff.

E-Studio project categories include but are not limited to:

- E-learning modules administered to staff via a Learning Management System, which allows for tracking of completion. E-learning modules are created using Articulate Storyline 360 or Articulate Rise (subscription-based software).
- Training clips posted to the SSA Intranet for all staff to access when information is needed. Training clips are tutorials or how-to videos meant to provide visual explanation of a task or to offer a solution to a problem. These videos are not tracked and are designed for reference purposes only. Vimeo (web-video server), and sometimes Articulate, are used to create these training clips. They can be posted to the SSA Intranet on the TACT-TV page or the TACT Task Library.
- Special projects made available in the form of talk shows, video vignettes, senior management announcements, induction training, disaster worker services instruction, and videos or e-learning requests by a specific division, TACT Radio segments and TACT Talks with various topics and speakers. These projects are developed with the intent of not being tracked or posted to the SSA Intranet. They are created with Articulate Storyline or Rise, Abode Premiere, or Camtasia.

E-Studio Project Workflow

Over the past four years, E-Studio staff have refined the process for e-learning and video project requests by utilizing subject matter experts (SME) who join the development process, guide the project learning objectives, and sign off on changes. The script review process directs the learning format for the project and includes the SME and E-Studio staff. A Project Production Board is available for leadership to access anytime and includes information about past, present, and future projects, as well as project hours, requesters, and progress. E-Studio staff led a table read of each script with the actor(s) and offer suggestions, communicate the vision of the project, and work diligently to create a high-quality product. Staff actors and actresses are utilized for videos, narration, and voice-overs with great success.

E-Studio Pre-Production Work

The E-Studio staff develop the final script for each training or product and plan each overall project to result in high-quality video and virtual learning. Depending on the complexity of the video shoot, up to three E-Studio staff members may be necessary for production. Production staff will scout for locations and reserve rooms for filming that offer appropriate lighting. The staff will make note of needs for extra lighting, microphones, teleprompter, or cameras for the day of filming. Preparing the video and audio, as well as the staff schedules for the video shoot, requires time and planning.

E-Studio Software, Hardware, and Equipment

The quality of E-Studio equipment has improved over the years as the demand for more innovative and advanced video projects has increased. The equipment needed to create high quality video projects includes more sophisticated desktop software, advanced LED lights, DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) cameras, and video editing software. Each E-Studio member uses a powerful, customized PC desktop (\$5000 each) and three to four monitors. While the hardware and software E-Studio currently

uses costs several thousand dollars, the purchase of these items is offset by the savings of contracting with fewer in-person trainers.

E-Studio staff research and purchase the most up-to-date subscriptions or free software from the following sources to produce impressive e-learning products:

- Adobe-Premiere Pro, Photoshop, After Effects, Media Encoder, Creative Cloud
- Articulate Storyline 360, Rise 360
- Audacity (audio) and Techsmith Camtasia (screen recording)
- Google (file sharing) and Vimeo (video storage)

The Benefits of E-Studio

E-Studio has benefitted Alameda County SSA in many ways by increasing access to high-quality, attractive visual learning that meets the complex needs of their customers. Utilizing in-house staff to create trainings for virtual formats has freed up meeting rooms, saved money on in-person training, maximized staff time by offering trainings that can be watched quickly and on their own time, and offered a personalized approach to training. E-Studio uses an LMS and department Intranet to hold trainings that can be accessed on-demand in a centralized, easily accessible location. E-Studio is staffed with three full-time staff who are creative, innovative, and have the support of leadership to stay current with modern, best practices.

Recommendations for Sonoma County

The recommendations presented in this paper would have differed slightly had this study not been conducted during the time of COVID-19 and the Shelter-in-Place Order. The current reality for HSD staff is that they are teleworking and social distancing and do not have access to in-person training, which makes e-learning and virtual learning a priority. Recognizing that HSD staff should have access to training that provides growth opportunities as well as the ability to guide their own learning with personalized options is essential. Working and living through a pandemic has shifted Staff Development

Unit priorities and created a greater focus on creating a virtual learning culture at Sonoma County HSD.

The following components are key to incorporating virtual learning into HSD culture now and into an E-Studio model in the future:

1. Establish a Virtual Learning Taskforce that includes HSD Staff Development and County Workforce Development units to define and develop a plan for integrating web-based learning for all staff in the short-term and for an E-Studio model long-term. Include other county training representatives as appropriate.
2. Prepare a cost analysis and cost savings report for virtual vs. in-person training, led by the Organizational Development Manager. Include estimated training costs for FY 20-21, utilizing virtual training formats.
3. Define virtual training goals and outcomes for the HSD Staff Development Unit and examine the costs of software and hardware that will be appropriate for reaching those outcomes.
4. Explore the feasibility of adding a staff member or shifting an existing staff member to focus primarily on E-Learning projects, including videos and e-learning trainings. Include business case and cost.
5. Explore and share the powerful capabilities of the Sonoma Higher Ed LMS including Virtual Classrooms, which will be important in implementing a successful virtual training program. Create a proposal, including business case, for the purchase of Virtual Classrooms.
6. Utilize the Staff Development team members who hold Articulate Storyline 3 licenses and have already been trained to use Articulate to create customized trainings or to convert trainings for department-wide or division-specific use.
7. Train additional HSD staff who already hold Articulate Storyline 3 licenses so they can be utilized to create division-specific training modules. There are currently 15 staff that can

potentially create e-learning modules for new curriculum or convert in-person trainings.

8. Commit to reducing workload as appropriate, to allow staff to complete e-learning projects successfully and to make virtual learning a priority.

In conclusion, the Sonoma County Human Services Department has the opportunity to develop a new learning environment for staff, one that will keep them engaged while working remotely or in the office. Although operating an E-Studio in Sonoma County through the Staff Development Unit would be a future goal, components of E-Studio can be successfully developed and implemented now, using what is already in place, while other components will need to be researched and developed.

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