Accounting firm goes online with educational program

BY JOHN T. FAKLER

Grant Thornton, an accounting firm with offices in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, sees its corporate culture replete with caps and gowns.

In June, the nation's fifth-largest accounting firm started Grant Thornton University, an online continuous learning environment that allows employees to have an interactive learning experience from their computers.

Grant Thornton is not alone in cultivating education for workers. Other firms with continuous learning programs include The Home Depot, Hewlett-Packard and Lockheed Martin. And universities are tapping into a new learning market.

Joyce Elam, executive dean of the College of Business Administration at Florida International University, said working professionals in her programs are "extremely busy people." Students hold jobs at Johnson & Wales, Hewlett-Packard, Coca-Cola and Volvo. One student is a GM with the Papa John's pizza chain.

"We try to minimize the amount of time they have to spend on administrative details and focus on academic content," she said.

That instruction is done largely through the Internet, where the school's global executive MBA virtual program combines face-to-face and Web-based learning, she said.

Students are connected via audio and log on with personal icons. Although current bandwidth does not support video, the term launches with a five-day meeting in human form at the Billmore Hotel in Coral Gables, followed by 13 months of online classes.

Since working professionals are not required to be in the same place, the system better accommodates business travel schedules, she said.

"Our students can be anywhere in the world," she said.

Software, hardware upgrades

At Grant Thornton, 3,000 workers everyone from new hires to partners get courses and company updates delivered right to their desks, said Bob Dean, Grant Thornton's chief learning officer.

"We had a strategy at the top, embraced by top management, then we were able to support that statement with a strong technology infrastructure," Dean said. "These are knowledge workers using the computer as a critical tool to serve the client."

Dean said he took software, hardware and network equipment that was already in place and improved on it.

Now, online tools for tax and audit work and e-learning through Webcasts are all available at employees' fingertips. He calls Grant Thornton University (GTU) "a one-stop learning point on the firm's intranet."

The "born-on-the-Web generation" of workers mingle with less Internet-savvy workers to learn from each other, he said.
under way for ISO deadline

Where to go from here

- American Society of Quality
  The ASQ e-Learning Center offers fee-based, online courses on a variety of quality topics.
- Florida Atlantic University SBDC
  Attend the free seminar titled "ISO: What is it? How Can It Help My Business?" in the Learning Center area of the Miami Office Depot store at 2690 Coral Way on Friday, Dec. 13, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.
  For information, call (561) 297-1140, [www.fausbdc.com](http://www.fausbdc.com)
- Florida MEP
  Address: 1180 Celebration Blvd., Celebration 34747
  Phone: (321) 939-4000
  [info@floridamep.org](mailto:info@floridamep.org)
- PROMAX Consulting
  Address: 1901 S. Harbor City Blvd., Suite 600 Melbourne 32901
  Phone: (321) 725-4300
- Registrar Accreditation Board
  [research accredited auditors www.rabnet.com](http://www.rabnet.com)
- World Preferred Registry to research accredited auditors
  [www.worldpreferred.com](http://www.worldpreferred.com)

The ISO 9001:2000 has a greater focus on user needs, and continual improve-
ment of the quality management system and customer satisfaction, while shifting require-
ments away from the manufacturing-oriented terminology and approach of the 1987 and 1994 standards.

Though adopted in late 2000, organizations have until Dec. 15, 2003, to migrate to the new ISO 9001:2000 version. Lew Wyble, senior VP of the ISO Business Unit for PROMAX Consulting, said the time is now for companies certified under the 1994 standards to start preparing for the transition.

The process typically takes six months to a year.

"[Companies] do not want to be in a position where they are required to be complaint or certified [for contractual purposes, etc.], and then next December be noncompliant," he said.

Benefits of ISO

The International Organization of Standardization defines standards as documented agreements containing technical specifications to be used consistently as rules, guidelines or definitions of characteristics, to ensure that materials, products, services and processes are fit for their purpose.

The benefits of international standards are numerous.

"The widespread adoption of international standards means that suppliers can base the development of their prod-

See STANDARDS, next page