

# Constructing a Foundation for Continuous Learning

*FMI Quarterly* talks with the heavy civil American Infrastructure about winning the American Society for Training and Development's BEST award.

*By Kelley Chisholm*

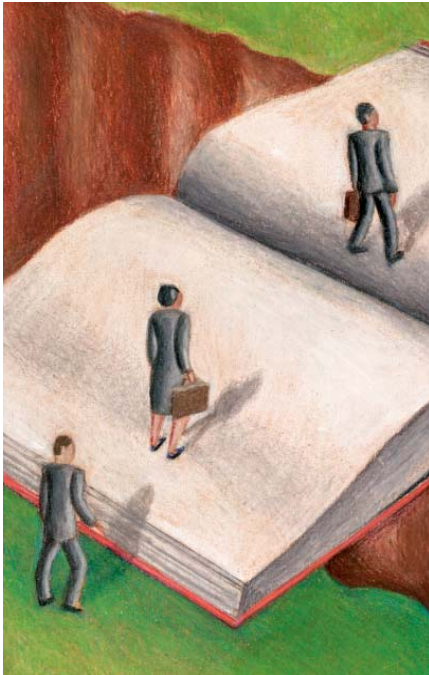
**C** Let's face it: People love lists. For example: *ENR's* "Top 400 Contractors;" Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work For;" David Letterman's Top 10 and *Forbes'* "400 Richest Americans." People like to classify and organize things, and lists provide a sense of logic and categorization. As soon as you see a list, you wonder what's on it and in what order. Being included on a "best-of list" is a mark of respect as it carries with it the inference of being a winner, and people love winners. Savvy marketing departments will and should publicize inclusion on any reputable best-of lists to further their organizations' brands and reputations.

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Each year, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) publishes its "40 BEST Award Winners." ASTD is the world's largest association dedicated to workplace learning and performance professionals, and its members come from more than 100 countries. There are nearly 140 U.S. chapters and 25 global networks. Started in 2003, the BEST Awards program "recognizes

organizations that demonstrate a clear link between learning and performance.”<sup>1</sup> Award winners demonstrate they are BEST at **B**uilding talent, **E**nterprise-wide, **S**upported by the organization’s leaders and fostering a **T**horough learning culture. Each BEST winner is featured in the October issue of *Training and Development Magazine*, which is published by ASTD.

It is unusual to see a construction company included on an ASTD BEST list, but in 2008, American Infrastructure was ranked No. 3 in a listing of 40 other companies from a variety of different industries, including financial services, health care, manufacturing and information technology. American Infrastructure (AI) is a vertically integrated, heavy civil construction company and material supplier, headquartered in Worchester, Pa.



It builds the civil infrastructure that communities depend on to provide clean drinking water; to move goods, services and people; and to support new growth and development. AI customers range from local and federal government to residential and commercial developers.

*EMI Quarterly* had the pleasure of speaking with Neil Cohen, vice president of human resources, and Jamie Leitch, director of career development and training at American Infrastructure about the BEST award.

**Chisholm:** Please tell us about the BEST nomination process.

**AI:** Companies are invited to apply for this annual award through ASTD. We decided to apply because

we believed we have quality learning and development programs, and we wanted to benchmark our practices against the best companies in the country. As an added honor, we were asked to lead a roundtable discussion and share some of our best practices with other organizations.

**Chisholm:** Were these best practices the same as the ones mentioned in the *Training + Development* magazine article, such as your foreman development program, lean production principles, etc.?

**AI:** Our best practice discussion centered on a particular topic, which was “building alignment for L&D [learning and development] with your C-suite.” It centered on our foundational principle called the “Collaborative Way,” which is one of our guiding principles of working collaboratively with each other across the organization. Within that topic, we talked about the various programs in our organization and how they related to the topic. Many of the examples we gave were about our foreman development program, but it was also a cross section of the best practices mentioned in the article.

**Chisholm:** Who were some of the participants in the roundtable discussion?

**AI:** Some of the bigger companies included Sun Microsystems, Wachovia, UPS, T. Rowe Price and Cigna. We were the only heavy civil construction company there.

**Chisholm:** What do you think contributed to your firm being ranked so high?

**AI:** We believe that our ranking has to do with our unwavering dedication to our corporate vision: “Through working together, we will compete successfully with the best, fastest and safest competitors in the world, build a great place to work and leave footprints in our industry.” This vision drives our efforts and ability to create, support and champion ongoing learning opportunities for all of our employees.

**Chisholm:** Tell us about the overall culture at AI, and in particular, the L&D environment.

**AI:** Our culture is very collaborative and entrepreneurial; we have a passion for excellence. We have a unique learning and development function in that it is matrixed across the organization. This structure allows us to maximize our impact as we leverage our environment to create learning and development programs that are aligned with both operations and employee development goals.

**Chisholm:** Please explain more about your matrix.

**AI:** We run a lean organization, and people within the organization are called upon to service AI in any way for the development of our company as well as for individual growth. Employees take ownership of the training. We have removed the learning function from an ivory tower in one department, and we have spread it across the organization. We’re allowing people to function in dual roles. They are specialists in their particular area, such as safety or operations, but we have tapped certain individuals to function as learning leaders within their areas. They surface ideas about development and training in their areas, and we work together as a matrixed whole to make decisions about learning and development within the organization.

**Chisholm:** The *Training + Development* article mentioned an annual employee survey. What sort of feedback are you looking for, and how do you use the information? What is the response rate?

**AI:** There is a survey called the “Best Places to work in Pa.,” and we use that

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same survey for our employees. The survey itself is a series of multiple choice and free form questions that cover areas such as strategy, communication flow, career development, recognition programs and pay and benefits. There are more than 70 questions. We have over a 60% response rate. The results are very important to us.

**Chisholm:** It appears that you have great support from AI senior management. Tell us more about that and how it has contributed to the success of employee learning and development.

**AI:** It starts at the top with our CEO Ross Myers, who is very supportive of our learning and development programs at American Infrastructure. He and our senior management regularly serve as facilitators for many of our learning and development programs. Ross has created a culture that promotes continuous learning and that ensures all of our learning and development programs are free of charge to every AI employee.

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**Chisholm:** With 89% of your employees working in the field, how is training delivered? Is technology playing a role?

**AI:** Technology plays a large role in our training delivery, but within the construction environment, we have to temper that with the viability of this technology at the job site. As such, we take into account a variety of factors before we select the optimum delivery medium. We deliver training in numerous ways: video

teleconferencing, on-site classroom, computer-based training (real time and user determined), on-the-job training and a combination of blended learning options.

**Chisholm:** What types of courses do you offer online? Do you develop these in-house?

**AI:** We offer a variety of courses. We have about 700 business-related courses — everything from technical desktop-applications to soft-skill training. We augment those with targeted training in particular areas such as safety, lean engineering, etc. Currently 15% are developed in-house. We actually just purchased a learning content management system. One big initiative for 2009 is developing more in-house, online courses. We will be working with our SMEs throughout the company to develop these courses.

**Chisholm:** Explain your efforts to develop high potentials with the Career Development Roadmap and mentoring program.

**AI:** We originally rolled out the Career Development Roadmap as a tool to accompany our succession planning program. The goal was to strengthen our ability to engage, develop and retain our high potential employees. Senior leadership, HR, the employee and his or her mentor work together to create a three- to five-year plan that incorporates a combination of assessments, internal/external training, mentoring assignments and experiential learning/rotations. The tool proved successful, so we have incorporated an abbreviated Roadmap into our annual performance reviews.

**Chisholm:** Who serves as mentors? What training do they receive?

**AI:** Right now, we are all over the board with this. There are different numbers of mentors in different business units, and in some units, mentors are assigned while in others they volunteer. We hope to launch a clear way to do this in the first quarter of 2009. This would include how to select mentors and how many there should be per business unit, along with formal training on how to be a great mentor. We have several hundred mentors throughout the company.

**Chisholm:** Your retention rates with high potentials are impressive at 92%. How long have you been measuring this? What age range do most of your HiPos (high potentials) fall in?

**AI:** Our HiPos vary in age, but probably average in their late 20s to early 30s. We have been measuring retention rates for both high potentials and all other employees for several years as part of our overall company mission and HR strategy.

**Chisholm:** Tell us about your eight proprietary certification programs. Whom are they geared to? Are they required? Does completion of these program(s) help employees move up the career ladder at AI?

**AI:** Our certification programs are geared to employees at all levels within the company. Only a few courses are required; all others are offered as a means of career development for our employees. These programs help our employees either become better at what they do, give them lateral growth opportunities or help them move up the career ladder at AI.

**Chisholm:** Explain your Foreman Development Program.

**AI:** The Foreman Development Program was created as a means to internally develop our employees to satisfy forecast labor needs in this area and as a means of career development. In other words, we wanted to “grow



our own,” and not have to rely primarily on recruiting people externally. As mentioned before, we align all of our development programs to both business need and employee needs/goals. A development plan within the program is customized for each participant based upon his or her career goals and experience level. This customization includes experiential assignments, assessments, classroom and best-practice sharing sessions, on-the-job training and mentoring.

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**We are truly a collaborative organization, and that is one of our foundational principles.**

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designed to provide a cross section of our high-potential employees with training in business-related topics that are aligned with our work operations. As such, they will be able to get a more well-rounded experience that furthers their development within our organization.

**Chisholm:** What are some of the challenges you face in terms of developing AI’s employees?

**AI:** Some of our challenges include finding the right medium, or combination thereof, to help us train in our dispersed field environment. Our workforce has varying levels of both computer literacy and computer access at the workplace, and we are on a continual quest to ensure that we are developing our programs with both the business and employee needs in mind.

**Chisholm:** Will the current economy have any effect on your L&D budget?

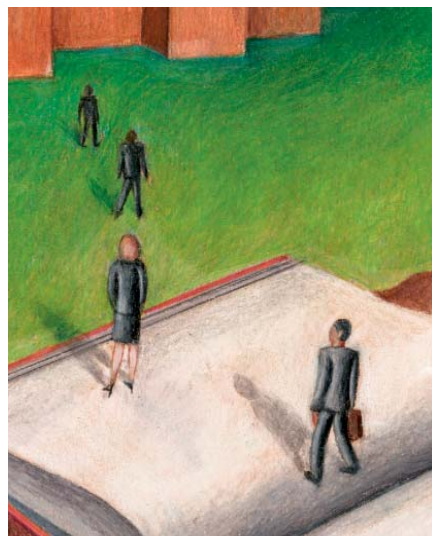
**AI:** We’re not anticipating any significant impact, although we certainly monitor our L&D investment carefully.

**Chisholm:** Is there anything else you’d like to share with our readers?

**AI:** We were just awarded *Training Magazine’s* 2009 “Training Top 125 Award”. We will discover our ranking in February 2009. We are truly a collaborative organization, and that is

**Chisholm:** Is AI still partnering with Drexel University for the Construction Management Certificate?

**AI:** Yes, we are in our 11th year of partnering with Drexel University for our Drexel/Myers Construction Management Certificate. We will also be launching a new Business Leadership Certificate program with Drexel University. This program is



one of our foundational principles. That's how we do business within the organization, and on virtually everything we do. C-level support comes from the top and they all significantly support L&D.

Perhaps CEO Ross Myers sums up learning and development at American Infrastructure the best. "We constantly strive to provide our employees with career development opportunities to grow, excel and succeed. This, in turn, will help us compete successfully with the best, fastest and safest competitors in the world, build a great place to work and leave footprints in our industry."

*FMI Quarterly* thanks Neil and Jamie for their time, and congratulates them on their best practices that led them to winning this award. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Rivera, R. & Paradise, A. (2006). *2006 State of the Industry in Leading Enterprises*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD, p. 3.