

Rod Knox, Virtual College CEO

Learning Technologies Outstanding Contribution Award

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Executive summary

Rod Knox, CEO of Virtual College, is a pioneer in the field of e-learning. His radical, challenging approach is as important today as it was in 1995, when he first launched Virtual College. He has made an outstanding contribution to the industry through his technical understanding and innovative ability to discover new markets, paving the way for younger e-learning businesses. Virtual College was one of the first companies to use the Internet for e-learning; under Rod's guidance, they now have 1.75 million learners and ambitious plans for the future.

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Rod Knox: Learning Technologies Outstanding Contribution

This year, Virtual College celebrates its 20th anniversary. Our talented people have always been at the core of our business, with one man driving our success: Rod Knox.

Rod has made an outstanding contribution to the e-learning industry and its success through his continued passion and innovative approach to developing new solutions to age-old learning problems. In his career as CEO of Virtual College, he's made significant contributions to the industry, from opening up new markets to being one of the first to use the Internet to deliver e-learning.



Everything in Virtual College is driven by our five values of customer focus, collaboration, innovation, integrity and passion. These values have been informed by Rod's personal ethos and his desire to demonstrate the transformative power of e-learning.

From electronics to e-learning

“ I have known Rod Knox for over ten years and his vision for how technology can engage, extend, and enhance learning has had a profound impact on vocational education and training. The work of Virtual College, driven by Rod and his team, has had a catalytic effect across the sector as Rod was definitely ahead of his time. ”

Bob Harrison, Ufi Trust board member and Education Advisor, Toshiba

Rod's early career in technology manufacturing highlighted an interest in training and the potential of new technologies to change in-work learning. His degree in manufacturing systems engineering and subsequent work for key manufacturers in Yorkshire pinpointed the benefits interactive media could bring to traditional training.

In 1995, he partnered with Dr Robert Gomersall, an expert in assessment systems and founder of BTL Learning & Assessment, to create Virtual College. At first, they worked with electronics manufacturers and local schools, providing training via CDs or video footage. Their innovative business drew government funding and recognition, including citation as best practice in the 1998 green paper, *The Learning Age*.

Soon afterwards, Rod saw the disruptive potential of the Internet's networking technologies and the exciting new path it could open up for e-learning. In 2000, Virtual College harnessed the Internet to create an online learning solution for NHS

Bradford, maximising its interactive qualities to communicate with a huge number of people. This was one of the first learning management systems to use the Internet, helping steer multimedia learning in an entirely new direction.

Since then, Rod's passion in challenging traditional learning methods to benefit organisations and learners has transformed Virtual College from a two-man operation to a 120-strong team, with over 500 courses developed and more technologies than ever before.



Lord Salisbury visiting VC in 1998 to present the first virtual learning NVQ

Twenty years of business experience

Rod is in a unique position as CEO of a twenty-year-old e-learning company. While other businesses see online learning as the norm, Rod was one of the first to spot the impact the Internet would have on training, seizing this cutting-edge opportunity before any of his competitors. His positive and wide-ranging contributions to the industry have resulted in significant changes for Virtual College, e-learning customers and the sector as a whole.

Opening up new markets

“*[The public sector] is a difficult market to work in ... Rod and Virtual College have shown persistence, patience, tenacity and an understanding of the high standards and processes for public sector procurement.*”

Peter Edwards, Head of Consultancy and Engagement, Digital, British Council

One of Rod's pioneering activities has been the opening up of new markets to e-learning. In the late 90s, the idea of training in any other way than face-to-face was radical, so Rod tackled a tentative market with a focused solution. Virtual College set up e-academies; small groups of stakeholders from sectors which didn't use e-learning but would strongly benefit from it. Through collaboration with these stakeholders, Rod established the training needs of people working in those sectors and Virtual College created e-learning to satisfy the requirements.



Safeguarding



Construction



Council



Healthcare



Housing



Schools

Opening up new markets continued...

By partnering with businesses and public sector organisations and meeting their training needs, Rod introduced an often reluctant market to e-learning. This new style of training helped save them time, money and completely changed the way their employees and stakeholders learned.

Rod and Virtual College were the first to introduce e-learning to brand new sectors where vocational training was essential. One of these was food hygiene training; in 2002, Virtual College produced the first online course for the Food Hygiene and Safety Certificate, awarding their 50,000th certificate eight years later in 2010. Now, the course has had over 380,000 completions.



Another important new market where face-to-face learning was standard practice – and consequently not all frontline staff were receiving timely training – was the safeguarding of children and adults. In 2006, Virtual College formed the Safeguarding Children e-academy, with 16 members joining by the end of the year and a total of 30 by May 2007. The courses in this e-academy were available five years before the NSPCC launched their first e-learning. There are now over 50 courses in the e-academy, over 60 local Safeguarding Children boards are involved in content development, and the NSPCC is a key customer of Virtual College. Encouraged by Rod, Virtual College has also donated over £200,000 to children's charities since the business began.

Rod's passion for e-learning and his belief in its ability to significantly reduce training budgets while providing high quality skills development means he's still committed to opening up new markets, paving the way for other e-learning providers. This problem-solving attitude has ensured Virtual College is protected against financial problems: since 2007, annual turnover for the company has increased despite global economic difficulties.

Maximising new technologies

“ The internet had hardly got going ... Rod’s vision in seeing the potential of e-learning in training; in the potential of networks for delivery; in thinking long term; and in driving the vision forward has been absolutely pivotal to our success and as a result in the development of the industry as a whole. ”

Dr Bob Gomersall, Chair of BTL Learning & Assessment and Virtual College

Rod’s early training and career has given him an intrinsic understanding of which technologies will be effective for learners, and which won’t. Through careful testing and iterative processes, Rod and Virtual College have set the standard for other e-learning companies and contributed to the widespread adoption of specific technologies in the sector.

There are two areas in which Rod and his work at Virtual College have maximised the opportunities new technologies bring: e-learning manageexample of the collaborative ethos



An early example of the collaborative ethos that Rod used to establish Virtual College.

Establishing best practice for learning management



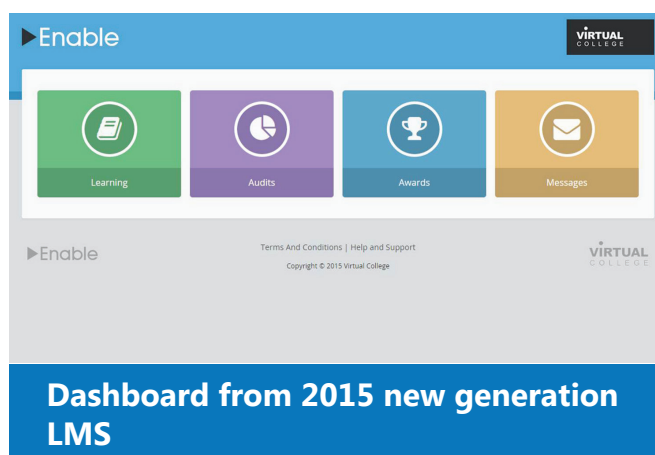
Enable – Virtual College’s bespoke LMS

Rod has been fundamental in developing best practice for learning management systems (LMS): he believes the best LMS must be able to change as organisations and learners’ needs change, no matter how radically.

Virtual College’s original LMS was launched in 1996. Due to their rapid expansion over the next decade, Rod pushed for Virtual College to build a whole new LMS that would give customers as much data as they needed about their learners and make content management much more efficient.

In 2005, Enable – Virtual College’s bespoke LMS – was launched, with much greater functionality and scalability plus the ability to commission content. Since then, Rod has encouraged iterative developments of Enable, each one helping to manage the increase in learners from 250,000 in 2009 to 1.75 million in 2015.

The use of a flexible, responsive system was pioneering and has become a blueprint for e-learning providers across the UK. Rod’s collaborative approach means Enable has worked successfully for every one of Virtual College’s 5000 unique customers over the years. However, his drive to continually improve the customer experience means a new generation of Enable is due to launch in 2016. The British Council is one of the first users, thanks to a new iteration which allows Enable to be translated into any language.



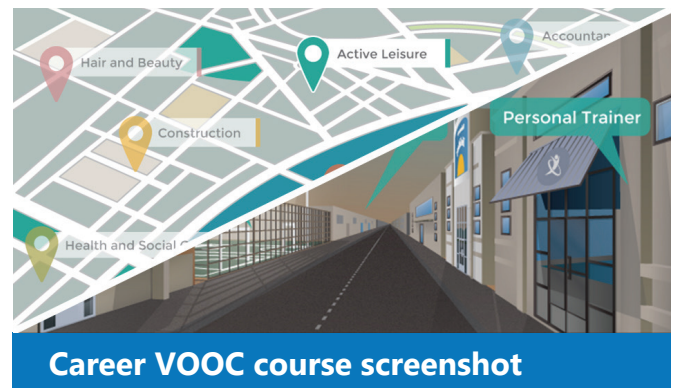
Putting the learner first – always

Rod's collaborative approach to maximising new technologies is one of the reasons why Virtual College is a pioneer in the field of e-learning, significantly contributing to the sector and encouraging organisations to take up new training media for their learners.

The quality of the learner experience is essential in deciding which new technologies to use. From easily-accessible CDs in the late 90s to even more accessible online training, Rod has focused on those technologies which solve a learner's problem – not just those which are in fashion.

Rod's approach is to maximise the use of each technology while it's appropriate for learners: in 2003, Virtual College piloted e-learning for Pocket PCs, a device many businesses were using at the time. Picking up on the opportunity of smartphone technology, in 2011 Rod steered the development of a free mobile app to help businesses adopt lean manufacturing processes, ensuring the resource was available to managers on the shop floor.

A recent development in improved learner experience is the pioneering Career VOOC (Vocational Open Online Course). Rod, working in collaboration with City & Guilds, identified the need to transform careers guidance for a new generation of workers and those looking to change career. These engaging courses help learners address their skills gaps and 'test the water' of a new role without risk.



Rod's awareness of the popularity of independent e-learning is driving a brand new user experience: the personal learning vault. It's designed to accompany a learner through their lifetime and provide a suite of suggested courses alongside their profile and incentives. Rod has successfully secured Local Enterprise Partnership backing to launch this radical project.

Each time Rod and the Virtual College team maximise the e-learning potential of a new technology, they do so with the learner experience in mind. Rod's belief in the quality of their product and desire to explore new, relevant technologies means Virtual College offers plenty of free e-learning content to professionals, parents, carers and young people. This is a unique approach in the e-learning sector and one which has had a significant positive impact by encouraging the rest of the industry to follow suit.

Challenging the traditional approach

“*Rod Knox has been a visionary, a pioneer and a practitioner for the e-learning industry who has really made his vision come true. Rod's skills have made a unique contribution and are driven by a passion for learning to be available to everybody via technology.*”

David Patterson, CEO, Learning Light

Virtual College has 1.75 million registered learners; just over 5% of the UK's working age population. Rod's problem-solving approach has helped introduce e-learning to more people than ever before, transforming it from a niche way of learning to a mainstream training technique used by thousands of businesses.

This includes areas in which e-learning was previously considered to be impossible. Rod faced stiff opposition to his decision to take safeguarding training online, due to the sensitive subject matter. Yet Virtual College's range of over 50 safeguarding courses has now been used to train more than 750,000 people, making them one of the largest training providers of safeguarding in the UK.

Rod and the team were one of the first organisations to provide e-learning for electricians. Previously, essential course The 17th Edition was seen as possible only with face-to-face training, especially as a final exam was required. Yet Rod partnered with an organisation to provide the in-person assessments, and transferred all other material

to an easy-access online course – saving time and wages for electricians.

In 2010, Rod identified an untapped opportunity high on the government's agenda: getting more young people into apprenticeships. The challenge was to make apprenticeships more meaningful and ensure young people were placed in the right business for their career, which had previously been difficult to do on a national scale. Yet Virtual College, under Rod's guidance, created a system where young people could register, assess their skills and deliver this information to assist their training provider. Normally reserved for managerial positions, this process means more training providers can concentrate on practical, face-to-face time with young people rather than administration.

Transforming the e-learning industry

Stories like this have the hallmark of Rod Knox – a pioneering, challenging approach to e-learning driven by passion, a desire to solve problems and two decades of experience. Rod has made a truly outstanding contribution to the e-learning industry: he was one of the first people to take e-learning mainstream, is a radical early adopter of new technologies, and a determined advocate of the benefits of e-learning for all industries.

After twenty years of hard work, his vision of widespread e-learning and a thriving e-learning industry is now a reality. And with Virtual College's new goal of 20 million online learners by 2020, it's clear Rod's innovative, disruptive approach will be influencing the industry for years to come.

Footnotes

1. The 2011 census showed there were 33.8 million people aged between 20 and 64 in the UK.