USDA Celebrates Open-Source Benefits of Learning Management System

The agency's success in leveraging Totara Learn demonstrates the promise of open-source software.

[Adam Patterson](#)

Tue, 09/24/2019 - 09:18

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Jamie L. Whitten Federal Building in Washington, D.C. Photo Credit: USDA

One year after its relocation to the Totara platform, USDA's AgLearn system has benefitted from the adoption of open-source technology.

The integration has allowed the agency to dramatically expand the capacities of its learning management system, Director of USDA's Distance Learning Program Jerome Davin told GovernmentCIO Media & Research. The agency initially launched the system in 2004 on Plateau and has since expanded it — culminating most

recently in a transition to Totara Learn as the next phase in the platform's evolution.

One of the greatest challenges in managing a legacy system is keeping pace with technological development, Davin said.

"[USDA] wanted a platform with the most flexibility," Davin said. "We wanted to embrace open source and cloud."

As federal agencies have sought to leverage cloud computing, their learning management databases have required corresponding software updates to facilitate this transition. Davin helped lead an interagency working session to examine various learning management systems that could be implemented so as to best incorporate cloud technologies.

"We all had different perspectives, but faced similar challenges," Davin said. Despite the variability of their agencies' core functions, government thought leaders faced a uniform set of IT quandaries. Ultimately, both the Department of the Interior and Department of Education adopted Totara Learn as well.

USDA is an expansive organization encompassing 30 unique subagencies, all of which have distinct employee training needs. Totara's inherent flexibility has allowed the agency to better meet these, catering to the skill demands of the nearly 100,000 USDA employees, Davin said.

"We find Totara useful from A to Z — from anthropologists to zoologists," he added.

Bringing AgLearn onto the Totara platform has been instrumental in providing a bulwark of new educational content to USDA staff, particularly through granting access to LinkedIn Learning, Skillsoft and Rosetta Stone — with access to 6,000 new courses through LinkedIn Learning and more than 6,000 through Skillsoft, Davin said. These have not only allowed USDA employees to meet their baseline training needs, but also has encouraged them to seek further education through this newest iteration of the AgLearn system. LinkedIn's "learning paths" allow USDA employees to branch out into subsequent courses currently offered through AgLearn, teaching them more specialized or advanced skills atop what they've already acquired.

Some of Totara's greatest benefits lie outside of its educational utility. AgLearn's newfound integration with commercial cloud providers has drastically improved business recovery processes, reducing both downtime and associated IT costs,

Davin said. Describing an incident where AgLearn would have shut down due to temporary overuse, Davin said the system instead fell back to a secondary database that allowed processes to quickly recover. AgLearn was down for only a matter of minutes rather than potential hours, saving USDA thousands of dollars in the process.

Ultimately, the benefits of Totara adoption come back to a singular baseline — improving the enterprise learning experience for USDA's employees.

"At the end of the day, customer experience is what matters above all else," Davin said.

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