Chapter 11
Online Tutoring

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter presents a detailed case study of a leading United States-based online learning center, Smarthinking, Inc. Conducting business in an entirely online setting, Smarthinking provides asynchronous and synchronous online tutoring for several general education courses and degree-specific courses, supporting students enrolled in secondary and post-secondary education 24 hours a day, seven days a week throughout the calendar year. Smarthinking employs hundreds of professional educators from around the globe. With an operational infrastructure similar to that of a call center, Smarthinking focuses on educational transactions rather than customer support for cell phones or credit cards. The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into Smarthinking’s services and its online training and management practices, which have been substantiated by research from various professional fields. This chapter discusses the early development plans, technology infrastructure, organizational systems, and product delivery elements of the organization. Highlighting design and implementation principles, four primary areas are addressed:

- **Smarthinking’s Background:** The chapter begins with a review of Smarthinking’s background, products, and services, and the organizational culture of its large remote team of online tutors. Strategic developments within the organization are also discussed.
- **Technology & Challenges:** Highlighting Smarthinking’s key technology platform, this chapter puts into context some of the challenges encountered with product delivery.
- **Proof of Concept and Online Training:** Having provided fundamental background on Smarthinking, this section presents evidence on the efficacy of the company’s educational programs, research-based quality control mechanisms for the product, and internal management and operations practices.

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- **Future Trends and Directions**: This section considers future trends in the field of online teaching and learning relative to the aforementioned principles. Within the context of an ever-changing technology landscape, such trends include exploring video and voice applications, using the student archive as a research valuable research database for student learning, and particular platform customizations.

**BACKGROUND**

A Washington, D.C.-based privately held corporation, Smarthinking, Inc., (www.smarthinking.com) provides synchronous and asynchronous online tutoring to secondary and post-secondary students within the United States and abroad. The service is a 24/7 virtual “call center for education” where online tutors are available to address “drop-in” academic questions from students who log-in to Smarthinking’s website.

In July 1999, co-founders Burck Smith and Christopher Gergen started Smarthinking with the premise that professional instructors could deliver educational services via the Internet, particularly at non-traditional times. This fundamental premise behind Smarthinking has its roots in Smith’s previous research on economic and organizational challenges facing higher education (Smith, 1997, 1999). Set within the context of a consortium of Massachusetts community colleges, Smith argued that given the competition between public and private institutions, increasing prices, and state budget cuts, the expansion of multi-institution distance education options via the Internet could (a) increase student access and the variety of course offerings, (b) improve the quality of course offerings, and (c) decrease delivery costs (Smith, 1997, p. 23). The creation of Smarthinking was a logical extension of this position as the organization leverages a virtual workforce of educators; since Smarthinking is not limited by its geographic area, the organization is able to choose the most highly-qualified professionals to efficiently deliver services across various educational institutions while fostering equal or greater quality than individually run services from any one single institution or program (Chediak, 2005; Ehmann Powers & Hewett, 2008; Jaschik, 2005; Maeroff, 2003; Paley, 2006; Smith, 1999)

**Products & Services**

Smarthinking offers students asynchronous and synchronous tutorial sessions. In synchronous tutorials, students connect with online tutors via a whiteboard and interact with their tutors in real-time. For asynchronous tutorials, students have a choice of asking offline questions or submitting essay drafts for a tutor critique. Students may access online tutoring services at home, at school, at a library, or from another location with access to the Internet. At some schools, students are able to access Smarthinking from within their online course. Smarthinking has over 300 direct institutional clients, including schools, college, universities, and libraries; in addition, students in over 1,000 institutions use Smarthinking via publisher partnerships. Online tutoring is offered for more than 25 subject areas, which include high enrollment and core courses in both high school and higher education. Committed to the provision of high-quality, pedagogically-sound education, Smarthinking rejects the “answer service” or “homework service” approach, opting instead to use tutorial sessions to provide the necessary skills to allow students to discover their own answers. Smarthinking primarily works through colleges, universities, textbook publishers, and public departments of education. Students who use Smarthinking’s service originate from a variety of schools, primarily United States-based four year colleges, community colleges, for-profit universities, textbook publishers, and other distance
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