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BLENDED LEARNING THAT WORKS

Diane Senffner and Leslie G. Kepler

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LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

BLENDED LEARNING THAT WORKS



AUTHORS

Diane Senffner

Diane Senffner, MEd, is the CEO of Cine Learning Productions. She has more than 15 years' experience creating award-winning e-learning and video courses for both the public and private sectors all over the globe. Diane has published her research and theories on story-based learning, including the cover story for the February 2015 issue of *TD* magazine, "Story Time."

Leslie G. Kepler

Leslie G. Kepler, EdD, is the senior training transformation consultant with Cine Learning Productions, managing transformation project client relations and design teams. She provides expertise in instructional design, training facilitation, curriculum review, needs analysis, and transformation possibilities. With all the tools and techniques available to the training profession, Leslie's mantra is, "There's no excuse for boring training!"

Community Manager, Learning Technologies

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Patty Gaul

Associate Editor

Caroline Coppel

Production Design

Tony Julien

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Imagine a truly functional workplace where learning is integrated into the fiber of the company. What does it look like?

Employees are likely accessing learning at their convenience using computer-based training (CBT), videos, or mobile learning. They're engaging virtually with ease because the right tools have been put in place. A distributed workforce is not a problem, because core work groups attend training sessions together using webinars. After the sessions, they chat, brainstorm, and collaborate using other virtual tools, creating informal learning environments. Peers and mentors ensure that on-the-job training happens. No employee goes without important new hire information, because it's available online, at the time of hire. Just-in-time performance support allows employees to access key information and how-to guides in order to problem solve in the field quickly and easily. There are some classroom training sessions, but only for topics that must be learned in person. And coaches work with managers to help them apply what they've learned in leadership and soft skills training.

What we've just described is not unattainable. But to accomplish it in your own workplace, you need to look beyond stock training methodologies and begin blending them in an intentional, thoughtful way. Blended learning offers organizations the potential for more efficient and effective training and the opportunity to create the elusive "learning culture."

Unfortunately, blended learning in the workplace is often described as having two components—typically an instructor-led, classroom-based component and an online component. This is actually an early "blend," but we know considerably more now about adult learning than we did in the early days of learning and development (L&D). Today's blended learning is much more than two content delivery methods. It typically includes multiple content components and delivery methods based on what is best for the type of learning being designed.

In this *TD at Work* issue, we present an expanded concept of blended learning. Blended learning design can capitalize on multiple training modalities to provide delivery options with employee benefits that are not available

from training delivered solely in person. Blended learning delivery is intended to be more:

- flexible—online components are usually available 24/7, and start and stop times may be fluid
- scalable—participation is not limited to a static group size, compared with classroom-based delivery
- meaningful—blended learning creates the best solution for each type of training, and doesn't use a one-size-fits-all approach.

Blended learning increases options for just-in-time learning to apply knowledge and skills sooner. It can increase an organization's ability to provide informal learning or performance support. Well-designed and well-executed blended learning gives employees access to training in a useable format when they need it, often from wherever they are able to access it. Blended learning can transform an organization's employee development from fixed delivery to flexible access.

This *TD at Work* issue is for you if you are in any way responsible for your organization's employee development program strategy, purpose, design, and delivery. It will provide information about:

- when blended learning is an effective choice
- how blended learning is delivered
- which blended learning modality to use for different types of learning
- key information for making blended learning design decisions
- potential blended learning benefits and constraints.

WHEN TO USE BLENDED LEARNING

For many organizations, blended learning has become an appealing choice. But far too often, it is "the flavor of the month": Organizations want to try it, but they don't delve into why or when it is truly an effective choice. Nevertheless, there are some terrific reasons to consider blended learning if some of the following criteria apply.

Disparate Populations of Employees

Blending learning into virtual elements has revolutionized training across the miles. Globalization was once a serious conundrum for training professionals. With limited travel funds, it was almost impossible to deliver critical content consistently or at all. We can now easily and cost-effectively reach employee populations worldwide with the wide array of virtual tools available.

For example, field sales groups once suffered from a tremendous lack of training. On-the-road sales teams were often too far from central offices to go in for training, and companies did not want to take them from their core jobs to do so. Today online learning webinars and mobile performance support bring them the vital tools they need to be successful while staying in the field and supporting their core function. Similarly, shift workers no longer have to lose sleep to attend off-hours training courses. Learning on demand is a game changer for them.

When Content Can Be Chunked

Most learning content, if correctly designed, can be broken down into smaller pieces, or chunks, in order to deliver it in a blended approach. Depending on the kind of content—whether it's information-based, a demonstration, skill practice, performance support, and so on—you can choose a modality that is best for that particular chunk of learning. As a result, different parts of the same training program can be delivered in different ways.

Just-in-Time Content

One of the great benefits of blended learning is the ability to deliver quick, just-in-time content after a class or training session. In the past, for instance, an appliance repair worker might have to go to a house with dozens of manuals outlining common repairs to home appliances, broken down by brand, type, and so on. This traditional delivery method was time-consuming and cumbersome. Today, after the initial training program has occurred, workers can easily pull up videos and graphics on phones or other devices that take

them step by step through the repair, just-in-time, and in great detail.

Using blended learning, you can also deliver just-in-time content for employees to use as study guides. These guides can easily refresh the memories of workers who need to revisit a skill or process, and the material can be delivered through a mobile device or desktop computer. Study guides are also great for certification courses.

Desire to Decrease Face-to-Face Training

In many cases, training employees in a classroom environment is restrictive. Employees are taken away from their core work for too long to train in a classroom, and travel costs for remote employees are too expensive. Sometimes the training staff is simply too strapped for time and money to use or continue to use a classroom approach. Blended learning can cut down or eliminate classroom learning, depending on the type of content and technology available.

There are, of course, times when face-to-face training is ideal. Not many people would want a surgeon who had learned to operate by paging through a CBT session; few would disagree that hands-on training with the instructor in the operating room is the best way to learn these skills. However, can doctors be trained through multiple modalities when hands-on training and the guidance of an instructor are not required? Absolutely—and it's happening today in medical schools all over the world.

THE KEY IS TO CHOOSE THE DELIVERY MODALITY THAT IS MOST EFFECTIVE FOR THE AUDIENCE AND THE TRAINING PURPOSE, AND THE MOST REALISTIC GIVEN THE ORGANIZATION'S RESOURCES.

Necessary Technology Is Available

In order to apply most blended approaches to learning today, a company or an organization must be able to support certain technologies. Bare-minimum technology requirements include Internet access and enough bandwidth so programs run smoothly; access to professional websites; a web-based learning management system (LMS) or learning content management system; and the ability to launch e-learning courses with sound (narration infinitely enhances learning). For virtual instructor-led courses, access to a webinar or virtual classroom tool is needed (such as WebEx, GoToTraining, and Adobe Connect). And with the popularity and efficiency of video as a learning tool, you should have some way to launch video, such as through YouTube, Vimeo, a streaming service, an LMS, or the company server.

Much has been written about the battles between L&D and IT functions within organizations, with IT often winning by using the “lock it down—better safe than sorry” approach. But today’s learning sites and tools are no less safe than many web and technology tools already employed in organizations. L&D professionals should learn as much as they can about the tools they use in order to make a case for their deployment. It can be done!

Needed Technology Is Accessible

Finally, don’t forget your audience. All the cool technology and blended learning programs in the world won’t mean anything if they can’t access them. There are fields where it is challenging to deliver training using technology, particularly the service industry or any customer-facing industry where employees don’t have regular access to computers or mobile devices. It is important to know the technology restrictions of your employees before moving to a blended modality.

HOW IS BLENDED LEARNING DELIVERED?

As mentioned in the introduction, blended learning is defined as combinations of content

media, training delivery methods, and a variety of direct or indirect instructor-learner interactions. Perhaps your organization already has blended learning, but you haven’t thought of it as blended because it doesn’t involve lots of technology bells and whistles. Rest easy, there are many options for providing your employees with blended learning training. Do your programs have prework, mentoring during or after training, or course or topic resources available for access anytime? These approaches are actually blended learning concepts. The key is to choose the delivery modality that is most effective for the audience and the training purpose, and the most realistic given the organization’s resources. However, know that there are more blended options available than ever before, if you have access to the appropriate technology.

Blended learning modalities include synchronous and asynchronous participation, in-person or virtual delivery, and hard copy or soft copy resources, as shown in Table 1. With so many options, ask yourself which modalities will best serve the content and the learners to produce the desired performance results.

WHICH MODALITY FOR WHAT CONTENT?

Understanding which modality to use for what type of content or training is key to making the blend meaningful to the learner and achieving your desired results. When selecting an approach, you need to consider the content, the audience, and available resources, including technology. Another consideration is risk, which may dictate the modality of compliance training.

Risks are inherent in any type of training. There is a false sense of security in corralling employees into a room to learn something. In spite of being a captive audience, they still choose whether they want to learn or not. It is partially the trainer’s job to make sure what is being presented is relevant to the learner and gives them reasons to invest in what’s being learned. It’s the instructional designer’s job to create a learning program that engages and gives the learner opportunity for practice, assessment, and application on the job. A blended approach is no

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