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# Not Your Father's Classroom

*Technology Helps Organizations
Meet Customized, Just-in-Time
Training Needs*

# Not Your Father's Classroom

Going or gone are the days in which the options for training consisted of a number of different courses listed in a catalogue or annual training calendar. Organizations want to understand why they need training and how it will help improve bottom-line measures such as client retention and revenue growth. Today's approach involves working with business units and, in some cases, their customers to define development needs and provide custom content when necessary.

And because time is money and time to market is a critical component of an organization's success, many want training delivered quickly. Short-term, just-in-time training to address specific needs or respond to a particular problem is becoming more and more common. The focus is on brevity and practical, current application; such training provides what employees need today, not several years from now.

The enabler of customized, just-in-time training is technology, which is driving huge changes on the training and development front. According to current estimates, 80 percent of today's instruction is still by live teachers, but about 6 percent is done remotely, mostly online in Web-based venues. Computer-based courses with no live instructor now account for 13 percent of training, and that percentage is expected to continue to grow.

More and more often, technology will be employed in place of classroom training because it allows employees to learn quickly, at significantly less expense and far greater convenience and flexibility. Along with new concepts of Web-based and blended learning, electronic performance support systems that provide on-the-job access to information, advice and learning experiences are becoming more and more prevalent.

### Web-based meeting services provide effective learning experiences

With travel costs rising and the global recession shrinking budgets, Web-based meetings and videoconferences are on the rise. Common Web meeting services can be used equally effectively for training.

Training via the Web can be instructor-led, providing an effective hybrid of live and online training, or recorded for future viewing 24/7. Many courses conducted over the Web can be approved for continuing education credits for those states requiring adjusters to gain CEUs to maintain their licenses. Web-based training can be complemented with features such as Web links and glossaries. Emulation software also is available that providers employees the ability to practice and learn on a claims system without having to log into the system itself.

### Blended learning takes on a new meaning

Blended learning, which originated in the late 1990s with the rise of personal computers in the workforce, is an approach in which different methods, techniques and resources are packaged to provide a flexible and adaptable learning environment under the supervision and support of an instructor inside or outside the classroom. With a blended solution, the role of the instructor changes to that of a facilitat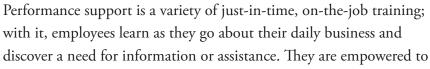or who assists the employee with the learning process. The real key to blended learning is selecting the right combination of media that will drive the greatest business impact for the least cost. Providing more than one type of media accommodates a variety of learning styles and often proves to be more effective than training that focuses on one delivery method.
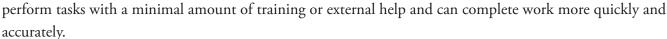
Luckily, with the development of new, Web- and computer-based learning tools, the potential components of blended learning have increased significantly. CDs, Web-based training, Webinars, conference calls, e-tutoring and other tools can be combined to provide an optimum learning opportunity.
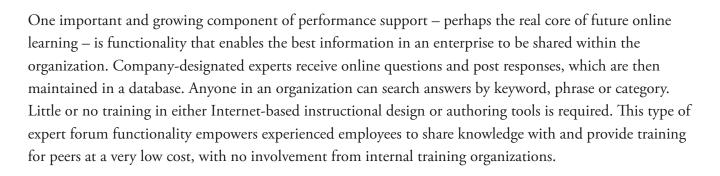
***Electronic performance support offers convenient access to job information***

Electronic performance support systems are computer-based systems that improve worker productivity by providing on-the-job access to information, advice and learning experiences. They can:

- Reduce the complexity or number of steps required to perform a task
- Provide information an employee needs to perform a task
- Provide a decision support system that enables an employee to identify the action that is appropriate for a certain situation.

Performance support is a variety of just-in-time, on-the-job training; with it, employees learn as they go about their daily business and discover a need for information or assistance. They are empowered to perform tasks with a minimal amount of training or external help and can complete work more quickly and accurately.

One important and growing component of performance support – perhaps the real core of future online learning – is functionality that enables the best information in an enterprise to be shared within the organization. Company-designated experts receive online questions and post responses, which are then maintained in a database. Anyone in an organization can search answers by keyword, phrase or category. Little or no training in either Internet-based instructional design or authoring tools is required. This type of expert forum functionality empowers experienced employees to share knowledge with and provide training for peers at a very low cost, with no involvement from internal training organizations.

Those more experienced in traditional training design and delivery might question that last point. Relevance and convenience must be the basis on which to judge user-based forums. The material in such databases tends to have a great deal of bearing on the day-to-day work of an organization, and employees can easily access knowledge stored in a database. For the right job, in the right situation, a relevant and accessible database can provide the right kind of training.

In addition, such collaboration integrates training into the business mainstream; rather than an event or a place, it becomes interactive, vital and available at the point of need, building a bridge from learning to job

performance itself. In this context, the distinction between learning and work begins to blur and disappear - a fundamental shift in the thinking about how people acquire and put knowledge to work.

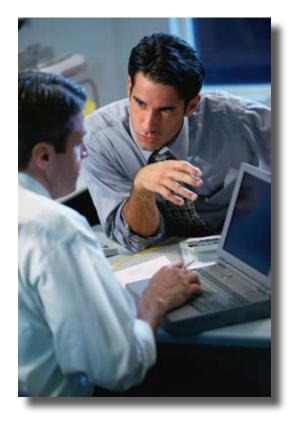### *Social networking allows for greater information sharing*

Performance support systems – in particular, expert forums – are part of a trend towards learning as an interactive and social experience. Rather than organizations pushing information to employees, learners can actively pull knowledge that they decide is valuable to them. Social networking takes this trend further. With work becoming more virtual, companies are beginning to explore the value of social networking in information exchange. In theory, knowledge can be created by all employees and can flow back and forth in a way that enhances productivity, improves communication and creates and more flexible and fast-acting company as a whole.

However, social networking can seem like a free-for-all, which often prevents companies from adopting it. Anyone can comment on a blog or post, and the opportunity to share ideas, information and opinions leads both to informative and helpful content and to offensive and inaccurate content. In addition, social networking tools can be used very effectively for collaboration, but they also can be a great consumer of time.

Companies must establish specific purposes and processes for the use of social media and communicate and enforce standards for contribution, while being careful not to be so rigid about contributions that team

members stop participating. In essence, successful use of social networking tools is about striking a balance between active employee participation and appropriate corporate controls.

## *A time and a place for everything*

Even though training needs and methods continue to evolve, some fundamentals have not changed: there is a time and a place for all types of training, including face-to-face education and interaction; leadership development is still key; and showing results is critical to the ongoing viability of training programs.

Subject matter alone doesn't determine an appropriate training delivery methodology; how individuals learn also needs to be taken into account. Different learning styles can relate to generational differences, but, as a general rule, they are more specifically tied to the individual. As effective as Web-based training and information sharing might be, organizations should not abandon face-to-face training; rather, they need to leverage the most appropriate approach given the subject matter and individuals involved. If learners need to interact to practice skills, evaluate behavior and give feedback, face-to-face participation in a group, coaching and mentoring are still the best ways to accomplish those goals.

And though skill acquisition is critical, companies need to continue to invest in leadership development. It is always a good idea to strengthen your current leaders and identify and develop those of the future; while leadership and succession planning is critical in normal times, it is even more so in the extraordinary circumstances we find ourselves in today. Companies need effective leaders at all levels and in all places to help steer through such economic storms.

Leadership development typically involves such concepts as strategic thinking, effective communications, problem-solving and decision-making, teamwork and customer service. Unlike skill acquisition, modification of behaviors connected to those concepts requires presence and participation. The most effective leadership programs are those that provide for activity and interaction, followed by reflection by the participants and complemented by coaching and feedback upon return to work. Because of those factors, leadership development programs are not good candidates for technology-based forms of training (though social networking can tighten bonds among your leaders and help them perform more effectively).

Finally, it is as important as ever to measure behavioral changes and bottom-line results that training generates. Training volume alone doesn't equal success, and gauging results can be difficult. Regardless of that difficulty, organizations want to see solid results in return for training investments. As long as we fail to measure and show results, the mindset that training is a cost, rather than an investment, will remain a threat to training resources.

Most functions typically have hard measures, such as revenue generation and quality standards, against which they are evaluated. It is those measures that training needs to positively influence. If you can prove you have accomplished that, you have the potential of changing mindsets and demonstrating how fundamental training is to the success of your company, no matter which learning tools, traditional or technology-based, you use.

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