

Blended Learning:

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The term "blended learning" means different things to different people. Virtually by definition, the "blend" in blended learning encompasses multiple combinations of learning approaches, depending on need and circumstances.

Formal versus Informal: The Key Distinction

When blending learning is in the context of embracing individualism, the most important distinction is not necessarily face-to-face versus e-learning but the blend of formal and informal approaches to learning. Formal learning is the traditional, preparatory approach in which learning takes precedence over all other activities. Formal learning can be — and increasingly is — blended learning, taking place in classrooms, on computer screens and via other technologies. Whatever the delivery method, formal learning requires the learner to be exclusively engaged in learning for the duration of the course or module.

By contrast, informal learning takes place anywhere and everywhere except in a formal setting. It might be learning via an instant message exchange, a conversation with a subject-matter expert during a collaboration on a specific project, a colleague's referral to "the guy who knows all about that" down the hall or many other informal interactions that take place throughout the workday.

While formal learning provides a foundation of known skills, values and processes, informal learning helps to harness innovation and meet organizational challenges. Informal learning disseminates knowledge through an organization more quickly than formal learning, which typically requires the creation of structured content.

Informal learning is essentially individualized learning because all learners can choose — or find — their own way to transform a moment in the workday into a learning experience. Indeed, as formal learning processes and infrastructures mature, and the nature of work continues to evolve, informal learning becomes increasingly important in the blended learning mix. Knowledge

workers especially need to share their experiences in context to ensure learning becomes part of the work of meeting business issues and challenges.

Individualism, Informal Learning and Innovation

There is both an important and inevitable link among individualism, informal learning and innovation. Innovation, in turn, is key to an organization's ability to thrive in an environment of continual, fundamental change. Reflecting the sentiments of business leaders around the globe, Siemens CEO Klaus Kleinfeld said, "You can only win the 'war' with ideas, not with spending cuts."

Innovation means being able to swiftly uncover and unlock new sources or organizational value. It means minimizing an event that can slow the pace to business value — whether it's a reorganization, a merger or even onboarding. Innovation also means maximizing the personal potential and value of each employee via effective professional development and meaningful career paths. Maximizing the personal potential of all employees will maximize their professional potential, as well.

This means acknowledging each employee has different knowledge needs and ways of acquiring knowledge. It means providing individuals with the information they need to adapt to changing work expectations. It means empowering employees to be able to assemble, join and contribute to teams that address business challenges and opportunities. When individuals can get the knowledge they need, when they need it, and join forces with other empowered individuals, the impact of the whole greatly exceeds the sum of the parts.

Embracing Individualism



The (Social) Network Effect

Anyone who has ever worked in an organization knows about water cooler wisdom and the speed of the grapevine. More than fodder for “Dilbert” or the latest hit sitcom, research into organizational knowledge and social networks reveals that informal networks and learning might be better paths to productivity than formal structures.

Experts estimate that 4 percent of organizational knowledge can be found in structured repositories. Another 16 percent consists of unstructured data: text, graphics, video and audio recordings. The remaining 80 percent resides solely in people’s heads — heads that can transfer, resign, retire or otherwise leave an organization, with all that knowledge leaving right along with them.

Social network analysis — pioneered by academics, including Max Gluckman of the University of Manchester and Mark Granovetter of Stanford University, and popularized by

Malcolm Gladwell’s “The Tipping Point” — demonstrates that the exchange of knowledge often bypasses the organizational chart. People at all levels perform critical roles as knowledge brokers (those who bring external knowledge to bear within an internal social network) or network focal points (those who hold the network together by “connecting the dots” between seekers and owners of knowledge). People who fail to become part of a social network on the job are not only missing out on potential learning opportunities, but they often are at risk of leaving the company. Social network analysis reveals not only the connections but also the gaps in an organization’s knowledge base and knowledge sharing.

Most important, informal networks should not be allowed to languish because of formal barriers. These might be functional (such as breakdowns between divisions), geographical (breakdowns across physical distances), hierarchical (breakdowns between

in practice:

Seagate Technology: A Blend of Education, Leadership

Education ties into many aspects of Seagate Technology, one of the world's largest producers of disk drives. The California-based company emphasizes development for its employees and tracks their progress in that regard.

"We have a corporate objective that speaks specifically to the development of people," said Debbie Hancock, vice president of global leadership and learning. "The corporate objective becomes goals, and everybody's performance evaluation is measured throughout the year. So the expectation is that everyone throughout Seagate has some kind of development goal measure in their overall goal set."

Further, she said there is another layer of objectives specific within the global leadership and learning organization.

"We have guiding principles that frame the offerings and our learning opportunities that we provide to leaders and all employees," Hancock said.

According to Maria Wayne, director of leadership development at Seagate, her organization focuses on providing support for a specific strategy that Seagate is implementing worldwide.

"All the programs that we're rolling out are tied specifically to this strategic initiative, which is related to reorganizing and repositioning Seagate in the marketplace," Wayne said.

Consistency is key for Seagate training, Hancock and Wayne said, and the company goes to great lengths to ensure all its global employees receive equal training opportunities.

"It is critical that within the global leadership and learning department, we actually provide the same development opportunities globally to everyone," Hancock said. "As these are rolling out, there are no inconsistencies within the business units that certain people receive X training, and X training wasn't offered in Europe, but Y training was. We really are very conscientious about providing services globally. Because of that, we want to make certain that the content provided within each of the educational opportunities is consistent, so whenever I have a team meeting and talk about decision making or succession planning, etc., the people in Asia are using the same language, tools and guiding principles as the people in the U.S. and Europe."

Further, Wayne said a blended approach has been ideal in addressing the challenges that arise with training global employees. She also said there are no instructors on staff at Seagate. Rather, the company looks at its own employees to lead facilitation sessions.

"We are leveraging a 'leaders as teachers' methodology, which has been embraced totally within the organization all the way up to the CEO, who teaches in our organization," Hancock said. "We have roughly 37 percent of all executives — at the VP level and above — who are participating as facilitators."

The "leaders as teachers" program has been underway since February 2006. As of mid-December, 150 leaders were facilitating sessions, Hancock said.

In addition to leveraging internal expertise, this approach helps control the costs of learning and development, Wayne said.

"Because of the model that we're using — the blended solution and the 'leaders as teachers' — we don't go to outside vendors to deliver instructional training," she said. "We do host a line of courses from Harvard, which is a class that is consistent and predictable, forecastable every year. With the blended approach, it's really no additional cost in terms of specific, separate dollars. It's just people's time and salary, which their own company funds anyway. Blended solutions — at least the way we're implementing them here — allow us to roll out training to 1,000 people, 1,200 people at a time, with no extra costs."

In addition, Wayne said Seagate doesn't distribute hard copies of learning materials. Instead, materials are e-mailed or placed in a central depository where participants can access them and print if necessary. This method also has led to cost savings, she said.

Additionally, Hancock said the curriculum will evolve in accordance with Seagate Technology.

"As the company changes and as the strategies evolve and merge into something new, just like the business, we will continue to reflect those new requirements into our overall curriculum," Hancock said. "That means that the shelf life of these products really isn't that long. They will be put to bed, and we will be listening to our customers, to the business and picking up on clues and information that will help us continually evolve the curriculum. We're going to start again and start again and start again."

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employees of different levels), tenure-based (break-downs between longtime and new employees) or through organizational change such as a merger, the creation of a team around a product or service introduction or leadership changes.

Finding the Balance

So, how does an organization ensure informal, individualized learning takes place? The answer lies in both organizational policy and organizational culture. It requires finding that balancing point between providing the tools and technologies to facilitate informal learning and simply not getting in the way of the connections and networks workers form.

Knowledge management is at the foundation of a successful, informal learning infrastructure. There must be an organized repository of information from which individuals can draw at their own time and pace. And bearing in mind where organizational knowledge resides, this cannot be a repository only of the 20 percent accounted for by structured and unstructured data.

Organizations need to understand their social networks, the informal experts who make them work and how to tap into that expertise. That might involve capturing oral histories, establishing mentoring relationships or providing an expertise directory, as well as identifying experts immediately accessible via instant messaging.

Robust knowledge management also enables employees to create their own learning courses, literally, on the fly. Information stored and tagged as learning objects — whether text, presentations, audio, video or other formats — can be assembled dynamically into a logical pedagogical sequence appropriate to the learner's level of expertise and available time. This kind of dynamic learning is useful especially for employees who need to quickly get up to speed on a topic, or who want to make use of what might otherwise be unproductive time.

It is also an important way to accommodate the different learning preferences of individuals and groups within an organization. Not surprisingly, learning professionals think older workers are less receptive to technology-based learning than their younger counterparts.

Older workers are also less likely to participate in learning overall, often because of a perceived lack of time or value. This resistance can be mitigated by giving employees the ability to choose not only when but also how they wish to learn. In addition, older workers can be tapped for their institutional experience both to empower them individually and to make sure their expertise becomes part of the organization's knowledge base.

Organizations also should establish and cultivate communities of practice. These are self-identified communities whose members share a common

purpose, context, concern, interest, problem or passion, no matter whether they work within the same department or formal organizational structure. Communities of practice regularly engage in sharing or learning to propel their knowledge or practice and develop a unique perspective on their common body of knowledge, practice, techniques or domain.

An employee might discover a community of practice through a specific work assignment, but the most effective of these communities transcend the “mini-teams” that might be assembled for a specific purpose. Community members continue to engage in activities with other members for an open-ended period of time.

Informal learning also can take place in the context of organizationwide “jams.” This is particularly useful for large, geographically dispersed organizations. A jam is an Internet- or intranet-based discussion and idea-stimulation vehicle that is more formal than a chat room and typically organized into separate forums, each based on a subtopic related to the overall jam topic. A jam takes place continually and usually lasts between 48 and 72 hours, thereby encouraging employees in multiple time zones to participate.

Participants who register at the site post or reply to existing posts. Forum moderators highlight hot topics, or “jam alerts,” as they emerge in the discussion. Participants use full-text search to browse for posts on a certain subject or for posts that particular individuals have contributed. Individuals share knowledge and learn while the jam is ongoing, as well as from the results generated after it ends.

Whether an informal social network, a community of practice or a jam, for this type of learning to succeed, an organization must create a culture of trust to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange. Organizations must provide time and space for individuals to connect. Individuals must be accountable for trustworthy behaviors. Policies must be applied fairly across individuals, and decision-making needs to be transparent.

A commitment to trust at the organizational level gives individuals the freedom and confidence to both share knowledge and acknowledge where they have knowledge gaps. Informal learning is strengthened when employees feel they can deliver information clearly and consistently, and when they demonstrate respect for others’ vulnerability and confidential information. Managers, in turn, should embrace individualism and individual learning styles by allowing appropriate latitude in completing a task, using mistakes as an opportunity for learning and not discouraging uncertainty.

But Is It Working?

Clearly, informal learning can be both a liberating and a challenging undertaking. Along with creating an environment where informal learning can flourish, organizations must determine how to measure its effectiveness. This is difficult even in the formal learning realm. Of the \$60 billion-plus spent on training in the United States each year, it is estimated that less than 10 percent is evaluated at an impact level. How, then, do you measure learning that is seamlessly embedded in everyday work activities and interactions?

IBM CLO Ted Hoff recently said, “The majority of employees still perceive learning to be classroom or e-learning courseware. In these instances, we can collect feedback across all four of Kirkpatrick’s levels according to the employee’s perception — One, did you like it? Two, did you learn something? Three, did you apply your learnings? Four, if so, how did your application of the learning affect the business?”

“But as embedded learning becomes more of the reality, employees will have less acknowledgement or awareness of ‘learning’ as learning — it will just be a part of doing the job. So, relying on participant feedback to provide input on the business impact of learning will become less feasible. Therefore, establishment of the business impact metrics at the front end of the learning solution design and development process becomes all the more important.”

Knowledge workers today need to expect the unexpected. They will be joining ad hoc teams that cross organizational boundaries, not as an exception, but as a rule.

These teams likely will comprise individuals not only with different sets of expertise but also from different countries and cultures. Even if an organization is not global, it is increasingly likely that its workers will provide global delivery of services or products.

Today’s workers also must expect to be called upon to assume roles and perform job functions for which they were not formally trained. How will they handle this new set of expectations? By knowing they can learn when they want, how they want and from whom they want.

Blended learning today places the learner at the hub of an environment that includes both formal and informal learning opportunities and that embraces the needs and preferences of the learner. In the new calculus of organizational success, individualism and informal learning foster innovation, and innovation ensures the organization will stay ahead of the curve, grow and thrive. ■

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