

Executing Blended Learning

BY ERIC RODGERS

Blended learning has long been a popular topic of discussion in the employee development space. Yet, for all that attention, too many learning professionals still don't know how to successfully design, build and deliver a blended learning solution.

Intellectual capital remains one of the last true differentiators in our business world today. The ability to effectively leverage that intellectual capital is what allows savvy organizations to catapult past their competitors.

One of the best ways to ensure you make the most of your intellectual capital is through exceptional blended learning strategies. In fact, blended learning has become a mainstream focus for many learning and development organizations. If you consider how things have changed throughout your career, you will most likely agree that more focus and attention is being paid to workforce training and development than ever before — and a large percentage of that is due to blended learning.

Blended learning is arguably one of the most widely discussed subjects in the training world. It has been the focus of countless articles, books and marketing campaigns, but many organizations and their practitioners still struggle with the most foundational question: “How do you successfully design, build and deliver a blended learning solution that addresses all of your needs?”

Like many things in life, sometimes we look too hard in faraway places when the truth is right in front of us. The same holds true for executing blended learning successfully. There is no secret formula or tricky equation requiring superhuman intellect. Instead, success calls for good old-fashioned elbow grease, patience to gather the details and a thorough understanding of what gaps you need to bridge.

Blended Learning Defined

Most learning professionals will have differing opinions and definitions of the term “blended learning.” Let's agree that for the sake of this article, we are defining it as “executing a learning strategy that integrates multiple delivery modalities (both synchronous and asynchronous) and, in doing so, creating the best possible learning solution for your target audience.”

Secondly, let's agree that exceeding a true blended learning strategy is not just about mixing together a variety of learning media and then calling it blended learning. Blended learning is about optimizing the entire learning cycle by strategically aligning the learners with the best learning solutions for their challenges.



Avoid the Most Common (Costly) Error

Experience has taught us that sound planning and preparation are good things. So why do so many organizations and experienced professionals bypass the analysis and design phases?

The brutal truth is that many learning organizations undertake blended learning initiatives without a strategic mindset and approach. They go tactical and pay the price. They may not set out with that intention; however, they often end up at that destination point. They focus on a training event and find themselves diving into the e-learning or the content development without first stepping back and assessing the right learning tools, environment or target audience.

Our most trusted designers, developers and project managers become victims of time constraints and subsequently make a significant and often costly error. They stop planning and jump headlong into the project. This ready-fire-aim approach almost always results in a lack of the most important aspect of the entire process: the front-end analysis. Without the benefit of some up-front analysis and design efforts, the outcomes tend to be very predictable. This is validated by the volume of calls learning professionals receive when the damage already has occurred and someone needs an emergency response to remedy a learning solution gone wrong.

Understandably, many people are reluctant to get involved in detailed job-task analyses. Many professionals respond with something like, "We are not trying to start up a nuclear reactor, so why do we need

to analyze the learning environment? We have deadlines to meet, so let's get started!"

Analysis does not have to equal mind-numbing details capturing every single task, subtask, element and so on. However, some form of analysis does need to be conducted. Too many analysis and design decisions are subjective judgment calls based on a few facts weaved together with some discussion. Later down the road, we start to see the errors of that "skipped" step when we realize our solution has not taken into account important considerations associated with the learner or the environment.

Unfortunately, there is another problem. Too many people say they already know what is needed, so there is no need for an analysis. We have all learned that taking the up-front time to plan and design the right outcome does not cost more. In fact, it actually saves you money in the long term and results in a more effective program.

What You Have and What You Need

While the front-end analysis process can be perceived as tedious, it is absolutely integral to accurately capturing the learners' current state, visualizing their future state and identifying and understanding how to bridge the gap. An easy way to start is by breaking down the analysis process into three discrete components:

- **Target audience:** Know your audience and prepare a training solution that directly matches the learn-



ing styles and conditions for your learners. Consider how many times you have seen training developed in a mode that was easy for the developer but didn't even consider the audience. For example, I witnessed an instructor-led session being designed for personnel who spent most of their day at a computer screen. The course was intended to teach them how to use a new computer application, and the training immediately took them away from the application itself. We must focus our efforts and analysis to accurately capture the nature of our target audience and align

and — most prevalent today — Web-based training modules. If you are focused on information that centers on facts, figures, processes or related cognitive pieces of information, asynchronous learning is a viable approach. The trick is not to bypass the results of the analysis, but to truly understand what the learners need to satisfactorily complete a task from a knowledge perspective. Then determine which vehicle is best for providing that information to them.

Likewise, the skills portion is an incredibly important and often overlooked aspect. The learner should have the opportunity to practice and gain the skills necessary to complete a task or job role. Return to your learning objectives and the analysis insights to best design the skills portion.

Why do we have technicians who are required to sit through hours of Web-based or instructor-led training when what they really need is lab time? The leadership experiences that people take away from great leadership courses are those that immerse the participant in real-life scenarios. Experiential learning is the top-rated form of learning. That's because we as learners are able to apply and adapt as we are learning, and build our own base of important facts and outcomes from that experience.

Engaging Your Participants

You also want to design your program to really engage the participant. Interactive learning that leads to experiential learning provides the greatest return for both the organization and the participant.

Create integrated learning sessions that intertwine with one another, not just stand-alone segments. Too many training courses are poorly integrated into a cohesive learning process. They become stand-alone training occurrences that a learner is forced to work to connect. Focus the design to dovetail from one session into the next, or you risk losing the engagement of the learner.

Develop World-Class Content

Aim for development that focuses on breaking the different modes into highly effective, focused training elements that, when blended together, create a truly robust learning experience. Often, training curriculums require a classroom or e-learning to span the entire learning spectrum and then wonder why the training falls short of expectations.

Design the training so each modality has a purpose or else isn't used. Then let each modality do its respective job and come together with the other modes to complete the learning picture. Don't be afraid to call upon multiple modalities. Simple job aids and procedural graphics can be instrumental in assisting new employees in learning new processes. Structured

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the learning solution to the modality that best suits the audience's needs.

- **Learning objectives:** Why are the participants in training? Is this training session for knowledge exchange? Or is it for skills application? There is a huge difference in what approach to use when you consider the learning objectives. Focus the design elements on the objectives of the training.
- **Blended learning environment:** Having the right environment for blended learning is crucial to the outcome. Also, ensure the learning strategies inject a strong dose of reality.

Mixing Modalities

Now that you understand your target audience's needs, the learning objectives and the environment necessary for success, designing your solution requires careful evaluation of the media and modes of learning and how they can deliver optimal results.

The design phase is similar to designing a car for a specific application: sporty design for the thrill drivers, vans for multiple passengers and storage, compacts for efficiency and so on. The primary point is that when designing the training, consider what your desired outcomes are and how you can weave the best components together to design a complete and successful program. To do that, stick to the basics.

If you are addressing a transfer of knowledge, many forms of knowledge exchange are at your disposal, such as paper-based reading materials, job aids, audio tapes

IN PRACTICE EXECUTING BLENDED LEARNING AT COMCAST UNIVERSITY

In order to ensure all their customers receive a first-rate customer experience, Comcast elected to introduce a new customer-service process to employees. The internal training program utilized pre- and post-Web-based training sessions, instructor-led training, coaching exercises and role-playing, mixed with video segments.

Comcast University separated the courseware into two distinct courses: Supervisor/Manager and Frontline Employee. This enabled the curricula to focus on core elements unique to each role.

Teaming Up for Custom Blended Learning

The curriculum launched with a 20-minute e-learning module that provided overarching customer-service program information. The organizations coordinated on the design elements, and General Physics provided story-boarded and scripted designs for review and approval. To drive rapid development, files and drafts were shared, enabling immediate feedback and real-time revisions. After the pilot was complete, the course was finalized and loaded onto Comcast University's portal, along with the source code.

Simultaneously, the teams collaborated to design and develop the instructor-led modules. They wanted to ensure supervisory/managerial and frontline employee personnel were given opportunities to practice live interactions that mimicked real-world scenarios. Therefore, the project integrated instructor-led sessions heavily designed with interaction and scenario-based exercises. These courses were piloted alongside the e-learning module; then, minor revisions were incorporated and the content and all original files were delivered.

Ensuring Effectiveness With a Multiphased Approach

Thirty days after a manager completed training, a five-minute "infomercial" — based on key leadership video segments, key speaker narration and some creative and visually appealing graphic splashes — was delivered. The purpose was to refresh knowledge of the customer-service key points and renew excitement about the program.

To validate that the audience retained the proper skills and knowledge, the teams coordinated to design and develop online confirmations of learning (COLs). The COLs were designed to evaluate both the e-learning and instructor-led training. The COLs contained scenarios participants were required to address with appropriate actions, and questions covered the important change management aspects of the new program.

The final phase of this multifaceted training was targeted toward supervisors and managers through five-minute "communication capsules" on each element of the customer-service training. These short e-learning modules were released once a week, focusing on key aspects of implementing transformational change with their teams.

Each capsule included resources such as talking points, suggested activities for team meetings and a job aid to distribute to their teams. This final component to the training not only refreshed the content, but also helped provide supervisors and managers with the needed tools to empower their teams to implement the customer-service program.

According to Comcast Chief Learning Officer Martha Soehren, "This program is receiving very positive feedback from our operational leaders, and we are realizing improvement in customer-impacting processes and metrics." **CLO**

— Eric Rodgers

on-the-job training remains one of the most effective means of transferring both knowledge and skills. The trick is balancing the cognitive and the skills portions into right-sized chunks. Strive for designs that allow the learner to interact and apply his or her learning by interacting with a program, person, piece of equipment or process.

Pilot Your Program for Optimal Success

As the saying goes, this is "where the rubber meets the road." The true test of your program comes once you put it into gear and roll it out for your audience. Crafting a well-knit delivery that seamlessly brings together multiple segments or pieces of a program is not always easy. Careful, up-front planning and working through a pilot session is the optimal approach.

When piloting, you can test the transitions, validate the learner's actual learning and validate the timing or compatibility of the various learning modes. Careful review of the pilot data can provide important modifications or tweaks to the program that can dramatically impact the delivery success.

Relevant, Up-to-Date Content

The only remaining piece is to ensure your content remains up-to-date by modifying the content to address changes. So revision control and change management are critical elements to a successful blended learning program. Up-front planning enables you to use optimal modalities for content that is extremely dynamic. Make sure your design includes careful thought surrounding the stable nature of the content, and allow that to factor into your decision making, too.

Take a More Prominent Role in Corporate Competitiveness

There is an art, as well as science, to crafting effective blended learning solutions. But that doesn't mean it has to be difficult. The two key aspects are performing proper, up-front planning and having a strong understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the different training modalities available. After that, everything else falls easily into place.

In a corporate landscape that places so much emphasis on the transfer and strengthening of intellectual capital, training is playing an increasingly crucial role in competitiveness. Having full and proper command of every tool in your arsenal can go a long way in making your organization — and your department — as successful as it can be. **CLO**

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