

Mobile Learning Strategy

Five calls to make when developing a mobile learning strategy

By Tim Hildreth and Pam Boiros



Welcome to the exciting (and confusing) world of mobile learning. Over the past several years there has been a rising drumbeat of interest in mobile learning, or “mlearning”, from across the corporate landscape. With the advent of exciting new mobile devices, this drumbeat has gotten louder. Training & Development magazine listed mobile learning as one of the six trends that will change workplace learning forever. The authors of *The 2020 Workplace* see a time in the not-so-distant future when the mobile phone will become the office and classroom, providing everything from new-hire orientation to on-the-job performance support.

There have been some very dramatic changes over the last few years that have made mobile learning a more viable option for many organizations. There have been numerous improvements in the landscape: networks have gotten faster, devices have gotten “smarter,” and with the arrival of tablet devices, the form factor/usability of devices has improved dramatically.

The iPhone® and other full-screen smartphones changed the way users interact with their phones. The larger displays made these devices a more attractive platform for many types of content and were instrumental in moving large numbers of users toward those devices. However, they were still very different from the desktop and far from “roomy” enough for the kinds of content and interactions

that are supported there. Tablets change the game completely. With resolutions similar to many laptops, these devices make it possible to provide much richer content and with sales of these devices soaring, many learning professionals are now looking at tablets as the natural direction for future (and rapid) growth³.

So, is the time right for your organization to take its first steps into mobile learning? The state of the market is still in flux, and there are still many unknowns that may make it difficult to create a long-term strategy. At the same time, many organizations are eager to get started and begin learning what works. The best path is probably to begin a few well thought-out experiments while keeping an eye on developments in the market. The trick is to focus on the right areas—and these five questions:

1. What does “mobile” mean?

One might assume that mobile learning is learning that is delivered on a mobile phone or tablet. But in discussions with our customers over the years we have found that for many customers, mobility still means “portability.” Broadening the discussion to include mobile and portable, there are a diverse range of learning content types suitable for use on the different device types including laptops, media players and e-readers – in addition to the ubiquitous smartphones and tablets. The first issue to resolve for your organization is to ensure all stakeholders

are on the same page and can come to a consensus on expectations when it comes to defining mobile.

2. What problem are you trying to solve?

Mobile is only a component of an overall learning strategy. Learning professionals need to give thought to where it is most appropriately applied. One way to approach this is to think about the audiences that are most dependent on mobile devices, such as salespeople, executives and field technicians. The needs of these mobile audiences are unique and understanding them will help drive the decisions you make about your mlearning direction.

No matter what audience(s) you decide to focus on, you want to make sure the learning experience you deliver is appropriate for smartphones or tablets. When it comes to smartphones, most companies are staying away from pure formal learning with its requirement for an extended period of attention and in-depth assessment. Small devices, with their cramped (or virtual) keyboards, simply don't lend themselves to high levels of interactivity. And given that on-the-go employees may be in situations where they are likely to be distracted or interrupted as described above, lengthy, immersive learning experiences may not be ideal.

Organizations with phone-centric mobile initiatives are focusing performance support, short refreshers or job aids, videos, assessments and surveys, or reminders and notifications of upcoming online (and offline training). Whatever the content, it's important to remember that "short and sweet" beats long and involved.

3. What devices will you support?

Form factors, operating systems and limitations of various phones and tablets make it difficult or impossible to "build once" and then deliver to many devices. Common file formats that a company may be using for their general elearning (Adobe® Flash®, Java, Java Applets) simply will not work on one or more popular mobile devices. Once you understand the capabilities and limitations of various devices, you are likely to conclude that your mobile program needs to be focused on a limited number of devices or even a single device.

One of the largest debates in the mobile learning space is whether to build an "app" or not. Certain mobile platforms – most notably the Apple iOS ecosystem, including the integrated Apple App Store – tend toward an app-centric view. Some mobile platforms do not support apps at all, relying instead on mobile browser support. When considering your mobile initiative, there are numerous pros and cons associated with building platform-specific apps.

Additionally, you'll need to keep in mind the challenge that is on many IT departments' minds these days: will you support only company-sponsored "official" devices, or will you support the emerging "bring your own device" BYOD movement and allow users to access content on whatever device – company or personal – they choose? Answering this question will be much easier if you make a call on number 4 first...

4. Do you have the necessary organizational support?

Your mobile learning strategy needs to be aligned with overall organizational strategy and informed by a thorough understanding of the company's overall information technology approach.

Most successful programs begin with a strong partnership between the HR/Training group and the IT department. You want to make sure that you understand security and network access guidelines and you also need to consider the technical support needs your program will create. Your IT department may have already arrived at a conclusion about what devices it will and will not support, and you should understand these choices and why they were made.

You should also understand what the dynamics are in your organization regarding providing mobile devices to employees. According to a 2012 iPass Mobile Workforce report, the average mobile worker puts in 240 hours a year more than the general workforce, so the potential benefits to business are clear. Some companies want their employees to be "always on" and therefore supply smart phones to virtually all employees. Others restrict phones to those audiences who are deemed to have the greatest need. Because not all learners will have access to mobile devices or the desire to use them for learning, it is important to ensure any assets you want to use for mobile learning also be available through whatever systems your learners normally use to access training. At the outset of your planning, it is wise to sit down with senior leaders to understand what their views are on mobile devices and if they envision a time in the near future when the organizational approach may be changing.

5. How does it fit into your existing learning strategy and ecosystem?

Mobile learning presents an opportunity to improve employee performance, productivity and engagement, but it isn't right for every need. To be successful you need to have an understanding of how mlearning fits within a broader framework, and this will be driven by the maturity of your learning program and systems, your goals and your workforce. Some issues to consider and discuss with cross-functional stakeholders:

- Does your organization have a strong learning culture?
- Do your systems support mlearning?
- What are the primary goals of your overall learning program?
- Is your workforce a good fit for mobile?

Summary

The evolution of the mobile market will play a key role in whether you decide to move forward with building content geared specifically around a single device (such as the iPad) or if you want to take a more flexible approach. The devices you support maybe largely dictated by your organization's IT decisions, including whether they will purchase tablet devices for employees, or their level of support for BYOD. Today the trick for content providers and consumers is to "future-proof" their mlearning strategy—which means including options for new developments and devices in the rapidly changing mobile market. **TEL**



Tim and his team are responsible for all aspects of Skillsoft's strategic product direction and go-to-market strategy for Skillsoft's content and technology products including Skillport, courses, Books24x7, authoring tools, KnowledgeCenters, and the Skillsoft Advantage Series. Recent innovations from Skillsoft include the all new Skillport 8 and Skillsoft's evolving mobile strategy. Tim considers himself a life-long learner and teacher and has travelled extensively and lived abroad. He has over 20 years of experience in Product Management and Product Marketing including 12 years with Transparent Language, Inc., a leading provider of computer aided language-learning (CALL). He has a degree in Political Science from Williams College.



Pam Boiros is the Vice President of Corporate Marketing at Skillsoft -- a role that helps to define Skillsoft's marketing strategy, demand generation initiatives, branding overall company messaging and marketing communications. Pam Boiros joined Skillsoft in 2000, as part of the Books24x7 organization, where she was responsible for overall product and content strategy of the Books24x7 "On Demand" product line for over 10 years. Prior to Skillsoft, Pam was with global scientific publisher Elsevier in various sales and marketing roles.

References:

- 1 "Six Trends That Will Change Workplace Learning Forever" by Ketter and Paula. Training & Development Magazine, December 2010.
- 2 The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop, and Keep Tomorrow's Employees Today, by Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd. pg 215.
- 3 https://www.ipass.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/iPass_MWR_Q2_2011.pdf