DESIGNING BLENDED SOLUTIONS

PART 1: GETTING STARTED

In this definitive series of four articles, Clive Shepherd shares the critical aspects of designing effective blended learning. The first step – analysis – will uncover the information that underpins every design decision.

The concept of blended learning may seem a little old-hat for 2013. After all, people have been blending learning methods and media for as long as there have been things to learn and teachers willing to teach them. Yet somehow, it is only in the last couple of years that the modern learning and development professional has fully comes to terms with the fact that a single approach – a classroom course, perhaps, or an e-learning module, or a period of on-job instruction – when used on its own is rarely capable of completely satisfying a learning objective.

Right now blended learning is the strategy of choice for most major employers, whether or not this is how they describe it. Today's blended learning is broad in scope, extending well beyond formal courses to include all sorts of online business communications, from webinars to videos. Increasingly, social and collaborative learning is incorporated into the mix, as well as performance support materials, and opportunities for accelerated on-job learning.

Employers recognise that learning at work takes place continuously, whether or not it is formally planned. They understand that courses are not enough to change behaviour and improve performance. As a result, they increasingly expect more far reaching solutions that go well beyond the presentation of information and half-hearted attempts at providing opportunities for practice. They want learning solutions that deliver and that means fresh demands on the designer of those solutions.

In this series of four articles, I explore what I believe to be the most important elements in a systematic approach to the design of effective and efficient blended solutions: analysing the unique characteristics of the situation in which the solution is to be deployed; selecting the right blend of methods to meet the needs of the

situation; and determining the delivery media best suited to these methods. This might sound abstract and theoretical, but stick with me, because the process can be quickly and easily applied in practice.

THE THREE L'S

I'm going to start with the first step in the process – analysing the situation. We do this first because the information we uncover at this stage underpins just about every decision we make it comes to design. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that the design seems pretty obvious once you have the right information at your disposal.

Situation analysis has three elements, which can be described quite simply as **the three L's** – the learning, the learners and the logistics. In this article I'm going to concentrate on the learning. Next time I'll handle learners and logistics.

By 'the learning' I mean the end point that we're aiming towards with our solution. Be careful, because while learning may be our aim, our 'client' is probably much more concerned with what this learning might achieve in terms of increased performance. If we can focus in on performance, this will serve us well when we come to making design decisions. We cannot always take a requirement for a learning solution at face value. Our client may be wrongly diagnosing the problem. Work performance is influenced by: objectives, organisation structure, available resources, working conditions, incentives and disincentives, aptitudes, motivation and the quality of feedback. None of these are going to be fixed through a learning intervention. Our job starts when there is a shortfall in knowledge and information, skills and attitudes.

KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

Knowledge and information are not quite the same. Knowledge is information that has been stored in memory, so it can be referenced without the need for some external resource. This is an important distinction when you're analysing requirements. It's essential you find out what really needs to be remembered and what can be safely looked up as and when needed.

There is a definite change in expectations in this respect, because it has become so easy to search online on a PC or mobile device that it seems pointless to try and remember all the information that's relevant to your job. You'll want to pick out those items of information that are imperative for someone to know if they are to perform effectively. The rest you can provide as a resource.

Perhaps the greatest danger when analysing requirements is to over-estimate the amount of knowledge that people are going to need. The main culprits are subject experts who have long since forgotten what it's like to be novices in their particular fields and think just about everything that they know will be interesting to learners and important for them to know it. A good way to resist this is to ask the question: "What's the absolute minimum that learners need to know before they can start practising this task?" Again, this keeps the focus on performance.

SKILLS

At work, skills matter a great deal more than knowledge. Skills are the abilities to do things, to put knowledge into practice. As such, they directly impact on performance. There is really only one way to acquire skills and that is through practice, ideally with the aid of specific, timely and relevant feedback.

If there is one consistent fault with the training programmes that most organisations provide it is an over-emphasis on theoretical knowledge and a wholly inadequate provision for feedback. By far the most successful training technique is to provide only the most essential information up-front and then get the learner practising. You can feed in more 'nice to know' information as the learner begins to build confidence.

From the point of view of blended solution design, what really makes the most difference is the type of skill that needs developing. To inform your choice of methods, it helps to make the distinction between *rule-based tasks* and *principle-based tasks*:

Rule-based tasks are algorithmic and repetitive. As long as you follow the rules, you'll get the job done to a consistent quality. You know, tasks like replacing a punctured tyre, completing a form or operating a cash register. You can teach these tasks using simple instruction – learn the rules, watch me doing it, then have a go yourself.

The trouble is that less and less of the tasks we have to perform at work are rule-based. After all, if they were that algorithmic, it would have been very tempting to get a robot or a computer to do them, or to move them off-shore. More of the work we do in the developed world is heuristic – it requires us to make judgements based on principles. Principles are not black and white – they need to be experienced rather than taught. As we shall see later, with principle-based tasks, we're much better off using a strategy of guided discovery.

Skills can be analysed in another way, which will help us when we come to make decisions about delivery media. This time we're making a different distinction: with whom or with what will the learner be interacting?

Motor skills: In this case the learner is interacting with the physical world, for example lifting a heavy object, driving a car, using a mouse. While these skills can sometimes be simulated, such as with flying a plane, more often than not we have to provide opportunities for practice with the real object in a realistic situation.

Interpersonal skills: Here the learner is interacting with people, as they would if they were making a sale, providing someone with feedback or making a presentation. Again, interpersonal tasks can be simulated, but no computer can accurately provide feedback on a learner's performance. We're going to have to provide opportunities for practice with other people.

Cognitive skills: In this case the learner is interacting with information. Lots of our tasks at work are like this, requiring us to solve problems and make decisions. Examples include business planning, using software, solving quadratic equations, writing a report, or reviewing financial data. Cognitive skills lend themselves more easily to computer-based practice.

Of course, you're quite likely to find there's a need for a real mix of different skills – rule-based and principle-based, motor, interpersonal and cognitive. This is another powerful reason why blended learning can be so useful – there simple isn't one method or medium that meets the whole need.

ATTITUDE

When I first entered the learning and development profession, I was assigned a mentor, a certain Mr Ernest Knagg. Ernest had strong opinions on just about all matters of pedagogy and good practice and that included the issue of attitudes. "Clive," he said, "It's not our business to try and change people's attitudes. We can try and change what they do, but not what they feel about things."

There's a certain sense in what Ernest said, although time and time again I've encountered situations where attitudes are the major block to progress. I've checked this out with lots of other learning professionals and they agree. It's almost impossible to address issues of knowledge and skill when attitudes are in the way.

An attitude is a predisposition, a tendency to think, feel or act in a certain way without reference to the facts of the situation. Try getting past "I absolutely hate computers", "My job would be perfect if only there were no customers', "I would never give a job like that to a woman", or "E-learning is the work of the devil".

So, your first task in your situation analysis is to identify the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will be needed for a target population to perform well in their jobs. Next up, we'll take a closer look at the audience and the practical constraints that we'll be working within.

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