A Pragmatic Approach to mLearning

A case study from BMC Software demonstrates how to make the leap from talking about mLearning to going live with an effective program.
BY JESSICA AUDRONIS

Jessica Audronis
has spent the last 13 years helping organizations develop and facilitate global training programs to improve employee, partner, and customer success. She currently oversees Enablement Operations at BMC Software. Prior to joining BMC, Audronis managed learning and development programs at Cisco Systems. Audronis' key areas of interest include mLearning, gamification, virtual instructor-led training, and social learning.

With the dramatic rise of mobile device adoption over the last five years, training professionals are facing increasing pressure to offer mobile learning to employees. How do you make the leap from talking about mLearning to going live with a mobile learning program that works for your organization?

The following case study outlines a practical approach on how to get started. While your organization may have different resources, tools, and priorities, you'll see how just a few steps can get you moving toward your own mobile learning launch.

THE COMPANY: BMC SOFTWARE

BMC Software delivers software solutions that help IT transform digital enterprises for the ultimate competitive business advantage. Some 82 percent of the Fortune 500 rely on BMC for innovative and industrialized IT solutions.

BMC's Enablement Team is responsible for providing educational programs and resources to accelerate the success and professional growth of more than 2,000 sales and customer success employees and 500 partners worldwide.

THE CHALLENGE: INCREASING DEMAND TO LAUNCH MLEARNING

In 2014, the BMC Enablement Team hosted a summit to which it invited BMC sales leaders to share their top training priorities for the year. Mobile learning far and away topped the list. Sales leaders needed a way to be able to reach their mobile sales force with compelling sales training quickly and on any device. BMC was evolving, and sales reps needed to know the latest information on strategy and product messaging.

BMC had a learning management system (LMS) from Cornerstone OnDemand that offered a mobile app, but the team didn't have the tools, knowledge, and support it needed to develop mLearning courses that would play effectively on the mobile app. The IT department was hesitant to deploy a mobile app that was not yet proven to work. The BMC Enablement Team needed to find a way to work past these challenges quickly in order to respond effectively to the sales team's needs.

THE FIRST STEP: SET REALISTIC GOALS AND GAIN IT SUPPORT

Members of the Enablement Team realized they couldn't snap their fingers and convert all of their existing training into mLearning. In fact, even if that were technically possible, that wouldn't offer their learners the best possible mobile experience. Mobile learning is most effective when it is short in duration, and most of the courses were more than an hour long.

Instead of converting existing content, the Enablement Team decided the goal was to launch the next new sales training course in a format that would play on Cornerstone OnDemand's mobile app.

As Enablement Operations manager at BMC, I led the mLearning implementation effort. I felt it was important to engage IT early in the process to gain their support and input prior to launch. I met with IT to present the business case for mLearning, and IT offered practical suggestions on how their team should test, launch, and support the mobile app.

IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET MOBILE DEVICES

The BMC Enablement Team also needed to decide which mobile devices to support for the launch. The Cornerstone Mobile app supported a wide range of mobile device types and operating systems, but IT advised the Enablement Team to focus efforts on one device type. It would be difficult and time consuming to optimize and test courses for every type of mobile device Cornerstone supported.

Designing a course optimized for a smartphone requires a different approach than creating content for a tablet. Depending on the nature of the training, a smartphone's smaller screen size may be too limiting. As such, BMC decided it would start with optimizing the sales training course for iPads in order to offer up the best user experience. After launch, the team would consider expanding support to include smartphones with larger screen sizes.

SELECT THE RIGHT MLEARNING TOOL FOR THE JOB

The next step was finding the right tool and process to develop a course that played well on the Cornerstone mobile app. The majority of the Enablement Team's course developers were using Articulate Presenter '09, an e-learning authoring tool that didn't support mobile-friendly courses. They needed to upgrade their software or find another tool to meet their needs.

The Enablement Team evaluated several mLearning tools, including Articulate Storyline, Adobe Captivate, and Lectora Inspire. While the other tools were in some ways more powerful, the team achieved the fastest results with Articulate '13. It was also the most cost-effective solution, so the team decided to move forward with purchasing upgrades for users.

DEVELOP YOUR FIRST COURSE

After developing their first mLearning course in Articulate Presenter '13, the Enablement Team had to make sure it would play well for users on the Cornerstone mobile app. They invited their internal team to test the content and identified several performance issues on the mobile app. In some cases, the app would crash or embedded videos within the course wouldn't play properly.

Patience and persistence were key to resolving the issues. Troubleshooting mLearning courses can be a challenge because it's difficult to determine the root cause of the issue. Issues may be caused by the mobile app, the course, or the end-user's device or network. The Enablement Team worked closely with the LMS vendor, authoring tool vendor, and end-users to diagnose and resolve these issues one at a time.

After resolving issues with the first mobile course, the BMC Enablement Team began developing additional courses in the new format. They documented what they had learned on an internal wiki so others on the team could learn how to produce their own mobile learning courses.

MOBILE LEARNING PILOT

Once the Enablement Team had completed internal testing, they engaged champions within their sales team to gain input on which groups should participate in the mLearning pilot. They started their first pilot with a more technical group, which was able to provide detailed information and screenshots of the issues they encountered, making it easier for the Enablement Team to troubleshoot.

After addressing issues seen in the first pilot, the Enablement Team launched a second pilot to a group of less technical employees. This group had more challenges navigating the mobile app interface and understanding how the system worked. To address these challenges for future launches, the team developed a mobile app Website that included a short tutorial video and frequently asked questions (FAQs).

The Enablement Team completed a series of four pilots. As new courses were produced, they were made available to all pilot participants so they could provide feedback on the courses, as well as the mobile app platform.

LAUNCH, ADOPTION, AND RESULTS

Once the pilots had been completed, the Enablement Team met with IT to obtain approval on the formal launch. By launch day, the Enablement Team had produced and tested more than 20 new mobile learning courses. It was easy to market the mobile learning app as a way to quickly gain access to the latest sales tips and strategies. The team spread the word about the mLearning launch via e-mail, the intranet, and internal social media tools.

The BMC Enablement Team now has more than 110 mLearning courses and is exploring expanding the program to include more professional development courses.

BMC has received positive feedback from employees about the mobile learning. Sales reps have shared that it is "great to do training on the road" and that the flexibility the mobile app offers them can be a "life-changing experience." Mobile learners are completing an average of up to 8 percent more training than non-mobile learners. And employees have indicated they want all future courses to be mobile friendly because it gives them the ability to choose when and where they complete training. ∎