

Learning Technology Paves the Way for Change

Technology-enhanced learning will progressively evolve in the years ahead. We must be prepared to maximize that learning's impact in the workplace.

BY ROY SAUNDERSON



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It seems you can learn almost anything online these days: writing articles, video-recording, using new software, even designing e-learning courses. But are we really learning? Transfer of learning is hard to gauge after you’ve completed a video-based learning module or taken some traditionally authored e-learning course. Nevertheless, this is what is being demanded of us as Learning & Development (L&D) professionals in today’s workplaces.

TECHNOLOGY BOOSTS ONLINE LEARNING

A report from Global Industry Analysts predicts the global e-learning market will reach \$107 billion during 2015 because of technological advancements and the ongoing demand for additional skills.

Today, like never before, there is an appetite for bite-sized learning—often called micro-learning—and easier delivery methods. There is a hunger to segment the learning into granular, thin-sliced content, so you master one piece of learning before you advance to anything else.

This competency-based learning approach is emerging as a greater need than just taking a course and hanging our framed certificate on the wall. Now, L&D folks and instructional designers have to figure out ahead of time exactly what the minimum competencies required are to perform a skill at various levels and for different roles.

Research from the Clayton Christensen Institute indicates corporations “increasingly will recognize the value of competency-based programs” and “actively encourage employees to use tuition reimbursement to enroll [in] programs.”

In addition to competency-based learning, there is a need to learn, understand, apply, and then master the skill at hand. Mastery is a level of learning that can be achieved through many current e-learning offerings. Learning mastery for any subject or skill follows a ladder of step-by-step skill development that truly adds to the learner’s competencies.

We also will need better measurement of

current skills and learning. This necessitates finding ways to assess skills and how to measure individual progress. In the long run, corporations are looking for methods for calculating solid return on investment with this evolving state of learning and development.

BETTER APPLICATION OF LEARNING

There are many methods for assuring implementation of learning objectives and holding people accountable for applying their new skills and knowledge. At the ATD Conference this year in Orlando, FL, I came across a Provo, UT, company called Mobile Coach (<http://mobilecoach.com>). Mobile Coach provides a text-based coaching service using a smartphone or mobile phone for receiving SMS messaging follow-up. It helps customize conversational text interactions to remind, motivate, teach, and create accountability for the learner with whatever learning content needs to be reinforced.

Imagine finishing up a course on giving positive feedback. On whatever pre-determined schedule your company has established, you receive a text from a virtual coach indicating he will help you apply what you’ve learned from the course. You could receive a multiple choice question with accompanying A, B, C, or D answers, and you text back the letter of your answer. Using text prediction, you receive an appropriate response depending on your answer.

Based upon the learning content, you might receive another text using a Likert scale to rate how well your application of giving positive feedback has gone this week. This could be followed by a request for when you would like the “coach” to follow up with you again, and you would respond with a date in the near future.

This Mobile Coach process reports high levels of engagement because of using the ever-present mobile phone. The follow-up method is relevant, timely, and not super-invasive because it uses friendly text messages so familiar to all of us in our daily lives.

GUARANTEEING LEARNING IMPACT

Effectively designed e-learning can save a company time and money, as well as improve productivity and learning skills while boosting new knowledge and insights. Calculating the return on investment is all about figuring out the profitability through evaluating the business impact and net value of the learning.

The key, as Stephen Covey once said, is to “start with the end in mind.” What business impact do you want to achieve from a specific e-learning program? By determining the business goal, you can set a target objective for a desired outcome prior to starting any learning design. This allows for a competency-based design approach teaching the necessary skills and knowledge with an end goal of achieving a specific business result.

It is easy to go beyond Level 1 (reaction) from Kirkpatrick’s Evaluation model. Evaluation should move quickly through learning and application to determining the business impact made and calculating the ultimate level of evaluation: the

bottom-line ROI of dollars and cents.

You could try using a control group of non-learners and an experimental group of learners and look at results pre- and post-training, taking the learning content and comparing productivity metrics and other key performance indicators for the real difference. It then is much easier to

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extrapolate the benefit-to-cost ratios to prove the real business impact and ROI.

Technology is here to stay, and technology-enhanced learning will progressively evolve in the years ahead. It is up to us to become better prepared for these changes to maximize learning’s impact in the workplace. **T**

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