

Improving Learning Outcomes

with a Bite-Sized Strategy



BY PAUL TERRY

TO MAXIMIZE LEARNING, TRAINERS MUST STREAMLINE THE DELIVERY OF CONTENT IN A WAY THAT RESONATES WITH LEARNERS

A study by Ralph Burns found that the impact of a lecture is greatest in its first five minutes — after that, learners’ attention wanes and the effectiveness of the lecture drops. I’ve found that many traditional corporate training programs take a “data-dump” approach, either providing employees with lots of information and materials for them to review on their own time, or overwhelming employees with large amounts of information in long lectures. Either way, these types of programs make it difficult to retain course

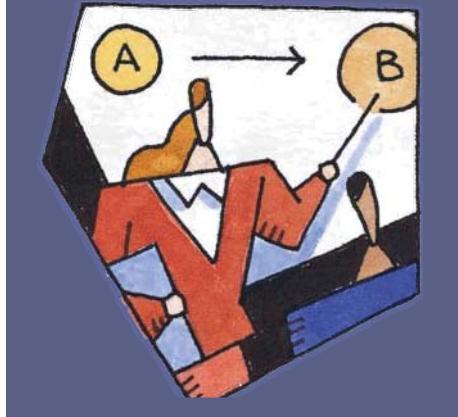
material, hindering their effectiveness and efficiency. Moreover, these traditional programs are outdated: they do not meet the needs of the next generation of employees—those who want access to knowledge all the time and right away, on their terms, or as I like to call them, “active learners.”

Cognitive psychologist George Miller argued in his 1956 Information Processing theory that short-term memory can hold from five to nine “chunks” of information, and that too much information given at one time is likely to be quickly forgotten. Rather

LETTING LEARNERS ENGAGE WITH CONTENT IN DIFFERENT FORMATS CAN HELP REINFORCE KNOWLEDGE AND INCREASE RETENTION

than continue with the ineffective approach of information overload, training departments should embrace a new strategy of learning, one that is more effective and efficient. A bite-size learning strategy involves identifying pertinent information, breaking it down into smaller pieces, and streamlining the delivery of the information. By giving employees “one bite at a time” over the course of a longer training program interspersed with days on the job, they will be more likely to remember important information and apply their new skills in the workplace.

So how can trainers turn existing curriculums into bite-sized chunks? They can start by dividing monolithic documents or lectures with overwhelming amounts of information, into snippets that are digestible, searchable, and easy to reference when the learner actually needs the information ... on the job. Take, for example, PowerPoint and other slide-sharing tools. While they can be a great way to deliver information, learners may lose focus during monologue-like lectures that feature dozens of consecutive slides. Trainers should try to shorten slide shows and use the slides to highlight the most critical information, grouping relevant slides together in separate presentations. To allow learners to access the information in



the future, trainers should offer digital copies of those slides after the fact.

But identifying pertinent information and creating digestible snippets out of that information is only half the battle. To maximize learning, trainers must streamline the delivery of content in a way that resonates with learners. Here are some ways to tailor training to increase learning retention and program effectiveness.

• Deliver “chunks” in multiple formats.

Letting learners engage with content in different formats can help reinforce knowl-

edge and increase retention. Trainers can combine “chunks” of content like videos, audio sound bites, games, performance tools, activities, chats and discussions, for more effective lessons. For example, a voice note can supplement a chapter, or a quiz can augment a blog post response. Infographics are a great way to combine several “chunks” of information into a more memorable piece of content. Pulling out the important data and combining it with useful graphics can help employees understand the material without getting lost in a list of names and dates.

• Learning is social; your training program should be too.

Outside of the office, employees are using social media sites, blogs, wikis, and document and video sharing, to share information instantly and collaborate with each other. Trainers can encourage collaboration and information sharing inside the office by taking cues from this trend. One way to do this is to use tools that mimic social media sites and Web 2.0 utilities we use outside of work, such as instant messaging, document sharing applications, and personalized web pages or blogs.

An added benefit is that training in and around social learning tools can help client-

ShoreTel: Integrating Training into the Business Workflow

The cloud division of ShoreTel Inc., a leader in business voice and unified communications, embraced social learning and integrated its training into the business workflow by melding sales training content with its Client Relationship Management (CRM) system. Training within the CRM incorporates social learning tools and Web 2.0 innovations, such as discussion boards, blogs and wikis, which enable collaborative, peer-to-peer learning experiences. Employees can also access

the training on their smartphones and other mobile devices.

“Business learning in America is failing because people think adults learn differently than children, but they really don’t,” said Heather Bennett, division vice president of learning at ShoreTel. “Project-based learning, collaboration and team building empower employees to embrace self-direction and utilize virtual, on-demand access to colleagues, experts and resources. As a result, sales reps improve their skills,

are better prepared to make and close deals, and increase sales.”



LEARNING IS NOT A POINT-IN-TIME EVENT; IT IS UBIQUITOUS



facing employees develop the skills needed to interact with, engage and better serve customers where they are frequently networking and providing customer service: on social media.

• Move training to mobile devices.

To truly deliver content in a way employees are used to receiving information, you have to give it to them on the devices they're using. In the culture of BYOD (bring your own device), employees are coming to work with mobile devices in hand. Capitalize on this reality by delivering training programs that are accessible on the go. By making bite-sized content mobile-ready, training departments can give employees access to courses and content in an engaging and intuitive way. It's an effective way to instantly enrich real-time teaching and learning, giving employees both the structure and flexibility needed to accommodate how people actually conduct business today.

• Integrate training into the business workflow.

Learning is not a point-in-time event; it is ubiquitous. Trainers should keep this in mind by integrating training content into systems employees use as part of their normal workday. Integrating easily digestible bits of knowledge into the business workflow is a great way to enable "active learner" employees to access information on their terms, when they need it.

For example, training courses delivered within Client Relationship Management (CRM) software enable sales reps to quickly brush up on products without leaving the CRM. Delivering presentations, interactive tutorials, social learning tools and other professional development resources within the systems employees are using, speeds up time-to-productivity. This model of on-demand learning allows employees to solve problems in real time as they arise, without departing from their normal day-to-day activities.

• Give your content a long shelf life.

Even with the most effective training programs, employees will still lose some of the knowledge gained during the training to time. That's why a system that allows employees to "reach back" for information while on the job can ensure critical information delivered during training is impactful when it matters most. Trainers should be sure to archive materials and content and make that content accessible to learners long after their formal training ends. As instructors update and enhance course content in subsequent months and years and new information is added, alumni of the training can access the latest materials and information to keep their knowledge and skills relevant and timely.

A knowledgeable workforce creates successful employees which, in turn, lead to an increased bottom line. Many organizations today are looking at investments with more scrutiny than ever, moving forward with only those most likely to help the bottom line. By building training programs using methods proven to maximize learning and minimize retention loss — like a bite-sized strategy — corporate training departments can prove their worth with an impact that is sure to please the C-Suite.

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Takeaways

Research indicates that training programs can be improved greatly by taking a "bite-sized" approach to delivering information. By breaking content down into small, digestible "chunks" of data and streamlining the delivery of content, corporate training departments can make their programs more efficient and effective. Here are a few ways to tailor training:

- Trainers should identify pertinent information and break it down into smaller pieces that are searchable and easy to reference in the future.
- Engaging with "chunks" of content on the same subject but in different formats can help reinforce knowledge.
- Trainers should leverage social learning — two-way, collaborative engagements — to encourage knowledge sharing.
- Employees are bringing their mobile devices to work — take advantage of it by giving them the ability to access training materials while on the go.
- Integrate easily digestible bits of knowledge into the business workflow by placing them in systems that employees are already using.
- Training programs that allow alumni of the training to "reach back" and view updated course information enable employees to stay current and access information when they need it most.