

What Are mLearning's Benefits, Challenges, Future? (May 14)



by Bill Brandon

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I recently interviewed Peter Phillips, CEO of Unicorn Training Group, in the UK about his thoughts on mobile learning and where it is taking businesses and professional development.

Mobile really does change the game

Bill Brandon: *Peter, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about the business benefits of mobile learning. The website for Unicorn Training Group covers an impressive range of solutions, including mobile! Tell us about your company.*

Peter Phillips: Unicorn started 26 years ago as a face-to-face training company. We've always been interested in how to apply technology to enhance learning, but from the perspective of being a training company, not a technology company getting into the learning market. We really are all about how to make the learning experience better and more effective.

Probably 80 percent of our clients are in the insurance, banking, and financial services vertical. We work with professional bodies, particularly in the UK— such as CII (Chartered Insurance Institute) and the CFA (Chartered Financial Analysts) (who are bigger in the US than in the UK). Most of what we do is mainly specialist areas and technical training for the financial sector including continuing professional development (CPD) and compliance.

We are a solutions company. We have an enterprise learning-management platform called SkillsServe, which we're very proud of. We provide a range of off-the-shelf content, most of it directly relevant to the financial sector. We also build custom content for our clients and generally deliver solutions that involve some combination of custom and off-the-shelf. The custom content is likely to be hosted on our platform.

Increasingly, mobile is a big factor in what we do. It's interesting—you can see it partly just as a natural evolution. Mobile brings all sorts of new opportunities and challenges—it is actually changing the game, and perhaps to a greater extent than some of those evolutions of the past.

Web-based or native?

Bill Brandon: *Are you developing web-based solutions or native apps for mobile?*

Peter Phillips: We're very much on the web-based solutions side, for several reasons. Of course, it's much cheaper and easier to develop web solutions. We do have a couple of native apps, but most of our clients and their learners are still at their desks on PCs. It would be premature for many of our clients to be delivering on a mobile app. Certainly in the States and the UK most of our learners have online access most of the time, when they're at home or travelling, as well as at work.

It's also really important to be able to sync back to the LMS; the nature of our clients is that they want the content tracked and reported, to allocate training to learners and so on, so that they know that competence gaps are being filled and that they're meeting their compliance requirements.

Benefits of mobile learning

Bill Brandon: *What do you see as the particular strengths and benefits of mobile for learning?*

Peter Phillips: At the Learning Solutions Conference in Orlando this year, several speakers addressed the forgetting curve. It's not enough to just douse people once a year with compliance training, on money laundering or the like, and expect that everything will be all right. In fact, in 30 days or so they probably will have forgotten nearly all of it.

If you want to make sure your training is continuously effective, and that you don't get compliance issues down the road, which of course for a bank is incredibly expensive with fines of millions and millions of dollars, you really need to be reinforcing your learning on a regular basis. Mobile is a very good way of doing that.

With mobile, you can push short chunks of learning, little texts, little assessments, little case studies, to people on a spaced basis. These short, sharp, spaced interventions have actually proven much more effective in some of the research that Will Thalheimer has done. Mobile is ideal for delivering them.

Portability is another very obvious one—the fact that people can sit on the train and learn on the way to work, or can do a little bit of learning at home. They don't have to be at their desktop. That's a big core advantage of mobile, by definition.

The real benefits are yet to come. I think the Experience API (xAPI) has got great potential and has only scratched the surface so far. The opportunity to report learning experiences across a much wider range of activities than just eLearning is really quite exciting. eLearning has been almost in a silo—companies did their eLearning “here” and their face-to-face training “there.” Now it's more about learning than eLearning—everything is going online or has an online element to it and begins to link across different types of experience. To collect information on experiences, using mobile platforms, is going to be a real game changer in the long term.

More and more of our clients want diagnostic testing, so they can focus on where their needs really are. By finding out up front about gaps between the competency required for a job and the competencies that an individual currently has, an organization can then focus the learning to fill that gap. Mobile can deliver the testing, deliver quick interventions, and xAPI can capture relevant related experiences.

Another big benefit of the mobile revolution is user-generated content and collaborative learning. People out in the field who know their job really well can pass on some of that information to others in the business. They can record something (information, example, demonstration), publish it as a short video on YouTube, and post that into their learning group. These things weren't possible just three or four years ago.

Gamification is the other hot trend of the moment. I'm not quite sure where that will lead us. Gamification gets support from the fact that we now have smartphones and tablets and we all play games on them. I think this changes people's perceptions: now when they go into an eLearning experience, they can be hopeful that it might actually be amusing or interesting or entertaining as well as supporting learning. It's going to be less and less possible for instructional designers to get away with the boring, text-heavy page-turners of the past. People will expect to be genuinely engaged. Mobile has a big part to play in opening up new possibilities and in changing mindsets.

Factors that reduce organizational resistance to mobile learning

Bill Brandon: *What drives adoption of mobile learning?*

Peter Phillips: There are verticals where there are dispersed workforces, branch networks, retail operations, and large numbers of employees out in the field. In those situations, mobile has been adopted much quicker than in banking and insurance.

Even so, those in the boardroom, who have been the first to demand the latest up-to-date tablets and smartphones drive a surprising amount of the demand. When they get those, they want there to be something on them they can do. They are often the ones who have pushed the reluctant IT departments to enable mobile. Many organizations have sales teams who rely on mobile to support their calls on prospects and clients. And finally, everyone also has their personal tablets and smartphones, and they bring them in to work.

The short answer is that organizations are being pushed from the roots to not resist mobile.

Impediments to mobile learning you may not have considered

Bill Brandon: *What would you say are important impediments to implementing mobile learning?*

Peter Phillips: Change management is a bigger challenge for some groups than others. We often have better luck with L&D than with departments that focus on compliance.

Mobile is a different mindset, isn't it? In our case, we are very often dealing with, not HR, but compliance directors and compliance officers. They can be particularly challenging, because they want everything tied down and recorded and controlled from the center. It requires quite a change of mindset for them to accept that learners are responsible people and that they can have an input to their own learning.

Another factor is organizations that are still on IE7 and IE8. Anything you design for HTML5 will not work with the older browsers.

Bill Brandon: *Is security part of the concern that your clients have about apps?*

Peter Phillips: Yes, very much so. And not just with apps, but with mobile platforms generally. The big banks, which are very security conscious for obvious reasons, are quite reluctant as you can imagine. It's not just paranoia; security of data is very important to them. It's very important that learner records are secure and behind the firewalls. So they have been quite slow to allow bring your own device or to issue iPads or other tablets to their staff.

Security has become a bigger and bigger issue. We have to do penetrating testing and security audits on our platforms and systems on a regular basis. This has definitely held back the pace at which mobile has become a platform for learning in the corporate sector.

Dealing with resistance

Bill Brandon: *Do you find that referring to that strategy of using mobile for reinforcement is effective in dealing with the reluctance of the compliance officers?*

Peter Phillips: It's helping. Compliance officers are not the easiest people to get to change. Just think about the nature of their job. If L&D can measure the effectiveness of the training, that makes it much easier to go back to the compliance officers and say, look, we can show you that if you do it this way you're going to get better results than if you just do the once-a-year refresher. It's a slow gradual process of persuasion.

To be fair, it's easy to generalize. There are some financial companies, particularly the smaller ones, which are lighter on their feet and way ahead of the pack.

Authoring tools

Bill Brandon: Which authoring packages are you using to produce mobile learning?

Storyline has become our core tool for conventional eLearning, which is still most of what we do. It enables us to convert Flash courses to run on mobile platforms and still have engaging, attractive, high-quality graphics and animation. In developing for the iPad, by using templates and themes, we can build in Storyline very quickly to meet small budgets and tight deadlines. If a client wants something a bit more clever, creative, or innovative, it's got the power to do that as well, and we've produced some really nice stuff for those clients. You can deliver it onto mobile platforms, with some limitations. Articulate gives responsive support and has a strong user community. I do think Storyline is less appropriate for mobile phones.

There are other tools that we use as well. Certainly if we're building a native app we wouldn't use Storyline. We use PhoneGap and HTML5 for those. Captivate is a very good tool, and we use Lectora where the clients have wanted us to. We rather like iSpring for the PowerPoint conversions.

Bill Brandon: Peter, thank you for your time! I hope to see you at future eLearning Guild conferences!

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