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Why Blended Learning Now?

After nine years with the same organization, Jenna had worked her way up from being a trainer to being the director of training and development. In her years with the company, she had seen a lot of changes. When she started, she and her two training colleagues mostly developed and led classroom-training sessions that ranged in length from two hours to five days, each with basically the same format: presentation of new material followed by some kind of interactive exercise.

In the meantime, the company experienced a growth spurt. The company had grown not just locally, but through the purchase of manufacturing plants and smaller companies. At first, these facilities were concentrated solely in the United States, but eventually new sites overseas were acquired as well. All of this had a significant impact on the training department.

As the company grew, so did the demand for training classes, and other trainers were added to the staff to meet the need. More classroom training sessions were held, and one of the conference rooms had to be converted to a classroom to accommodate the demand. Since the company had

become more widespread, this created quite a challenge, as training was now needed for more employees and in more locations.

Along with the continued growth came an increased focus on company productivity. Managers began to demand shorter classes; people were just too busy with their job responsibilities to sit in a classroom, no matter how important the new information was. As the years passed, the demands for even shorter sessions grew, and some managers became reluctant to send their employees to training at all unless it was mandatory.

Because of the drive for lower operating costs, the training budget originally remained stable, but it eventually was reduced. The training staff shrank, and Jenna and her staff found themselves being expected to cover the same amount of material in an increasingly shorter time. As they reduced the length of their classes, they found they were getting less than satisfactory results.

Training delivery had to change, and it did. Since travel budgets were tight, the trainers were not able to be physically available at each of the company's locations, so the various facilities were left to fend for themselves. Supervisors were expected to train any new employees, although many of them had no training expertise. In addition, most supervisors had to provide training on top of performing all of their other regular job responsibilities, which left them with limited time to prepare to train. Sometimes more seasoned employees were asked to train less experienced workers. When new corporate-wide initiatives were introduced, the training department was still held responsible. Due to budget cuts, however, instead of traveling to the various job sites to conduct classroom training, Jenna and her staff often used videoconferences (for those sites that had the equipment), Internet-delivered presentations using WebEx or NetMeeting, or technology-based training programs delivered via the intranet or CD-ROM.

Unfortunately, these alternatives were not always successful. Since the training function was sometimes delegated to those who lacked any training background or education, no formal evaluation was completed, and even the "successes" were measured only through word-of-mouth feedback. Other less-than-positive feedback was received as well. For example, the IT department, which managed the many desktop applications, decided to deliver technical training solely through computer-based training, buying

off-the-shelf training products for general application use. These computer-based training modules were state-of-the-art but, as IT soon discovered, quickly became outdated and, after the first few months of implementation, were largely ignored by the users. The intended audience members reported through informal feedback that the programs were boring, were not very applicable, and, in many cases, were simply too difficult to use at the workstations, especially since they had to compete with the employees' ongoing job responsibilities.

Due to the lack of effectiveness of the alternative training solutions, the pendulum eventually began to swing back, and the training department was asked to deliver more classroom training. This time, however, Jenna and her colleagues used the lessons learned from the past, created more effective classroom sessions, and augmented the learning process through a variety of coordinated learning solutions. For example, new employee orientation was delivered primarily as a classroom session, but the participants were also provided work-specific job aids, weekly e-mail reminders, and short discussion sessions scheduled at the participants' one-, three-, and six-month anniversaries. By carefully considering which training solutions would best meet particular training needs, Jenna was able to stay within her budget while effectively providing training to her organization. At the time, she felt that this mix of learning methods was most effective for her organization in a rigid economy. It wasn't until later that she learned that she had successfully implemented blended learning.

What Is Blended Learning?

The fast-paced changes that have occurred in the world of work have had quite an influence on the training profession. While classroom training was originally the typical method of delivering training, the 1990s introduced the use of technology, and many organizations jumped on the e-learning bandwagon. Mixed successes combined with continued workplace changes have led many organizations back to using the classroom as the backbone of their training programs. Despite the popularity of using computers for training, a recent American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) study

showed that while there has been an increase in alternative delivery methods, classroom training remains the most popular form of instruction in organizations (Sugrue and Kim, 2004).

However, the key to an effective training program is not to rely solely on any one method, but to use a variety of training solutions instead. No single delivery method is ideal for all types of training, so blended learning was developed to meet the changing needs of organizations. The term *blended learning* was originally used to describe e-learning combined with additional training solutions such as job aids, on-the-job training, or mentoring.

Blended learning generally means the application of two or more methods or solutions to a learning need. However, since the purpose of any training should be to meet a business need, we offer a refined definition:

Blended learning is the use of the most effective training solutions, applied in a coordinated manner, to achieve learning objectives that will attain the desired business goals.

Due to the widespread use of and knowledge about classroom training, in this book we describe the design and use of the “other” blended learning, which has traditional classroom training as its nucleus, combined with one or more additional training solutions.

Using this model, blended learning can take many forms. Some examples include:

- Conducting a new employee orientation in a classroom led by an instructor, following up with e-mails and electronic checklists that employees must finish in order to complete the orientation process.
- Holding traditional workshops or seminars in conjunction with ongoing e-mail dialogues to answer questions and encourage application of the principles taught in class.
- Providing classroom instruction on new computer software, followed by on-the-job training to demonstrate how the software is specifically used in each learner’s department and to ensure application of learning on the job.

- Offering traditional seminars on management skills for new supervisors, with mentoring provided afterward by seasoned managers.
- Teaching basic features of a new application via a computer-based training program, followed by teaching the advanced skills in the classroom.

Many business, government, educational, and service organizations have embraced blended learning. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), for example, has initiated a blended learning approach for its auditors and is inviting industry leaders to take part in this new approach to compliance training. A recent study conducted by Balance Learning, in conjunction with *Training* magazine (Blended Learning, 2003) found that:

- Over half of the 173 organizations surveyed in the UK are using blended learning;
- Half of those using blended learning deliver over 50 percent of their training this way; and
- Some organizations spend over three-quarters of their budgets on blended learning approaches.

While many organizations in the United States have been using some form of blended learning, they may not have been referring to it by this term. In the past, handouts, workbooks, or job aids have often accompanied classroom training. However, since the inception of e-learning, the term “blended learning” was coined to refer to the combination of e-learning with traditional methods. The concept has now broadened into a more robust, widely used, and effective solution to organizations’ training needs.

Advantages of Blended Learning

No single delivery method is ideal for all types of training; for one thing, different subject matter typically requires different training methods. Blended learning allows the training professional to address learning needs in the manner most

appropriate for the business needs being addressed, typically with classroom instruction as the centerpiece. A best-in-class approach to instruction combines the best instructor-led training with the best additional methods of training.

The benefits for you and your organization to using this approach include:

- Widened reach of training;
- Ease of implementation;
- Cost-effectiveness;
- Optimized business results;
- Meeting diverse needs; and
- Improved training responsiveness.

Widened Reach of Training

A single method of training delivery limits the reach of a training program in some manner. A classroom training program, for example, limits access to only those who can participate at the set time and at the geographic location. Offering alternatives to classroom training through other delivery methods allows those who cannot be physically present in the classroom to have access to learning.

Ease of Implementation

Many organizations have already been using some form of blended learning, so implementation could be as simple as ensuring that needs have been assessed and that training has been effectively designed and coordinated to meet those needs. In this situation, no formal rollout of a new program would be required. For organizations that have not experimented with combined training solutions, in this book we outline six steps for implementing blended learning. Chapters 3 through 8 provide the outline for the process; Chapters 9 through 17 describe the particulars for some of the major components of a blended learning program.

Cost-Effectiveness

Blended learning provides options for organizations, allowing them to use the solutions that best meet their organizational needs. When cost is a major consideration, companies can select from those training solutions that are most economical, which will help them manage to a budget.

Optimized Business Results

Organizations can realize exceptional results from blended learning initiatives. In a blended learning best practice survey conducted by the eLearning Guild (2003), 73.6 percent of respondents reported blended learning to be more effective than non-blended approaches. Travel is also minimized by applying additional training methods to the traditional classroom training solution, and reduced travel allows more time for actual work as well as lower travel costs.

Meeting Diverse Needs

Learning style theory proposes that different people learn in different ways; research shows that, while some people prefer to learn by listening, others prefer to read about a concept, and still others need to see a demonstration. Blended learning addresses these different learning styles by providing a variety of learning solutions and methodologies.

Blended learning conducted via the computer (e-learning) can provide training for a geographically diverse workforce, allowing them to participate in training on their own schedule. E-learning solutions also help to meet the needs of an increasingly more technologically savvy workforce. Additionally, adult learners typically prefer to learn by applying the new information to their own experiences, and a classroom-centered blended learning program allows them to do so effectively.

Improved Training Responsiveness

Combining training solutions provides the flexibility organizations need to address the ever-shrinking half-life of knowledge and the need for a faster deployment of information—particularly with a geographically dispersed workforce.

Organizations can choose the solutions that meet their needs and budgets. Learners have various delivery methods to meet their job-responsibility and learning-style needs. This combination yields a learning solution that is both responsive to and effective for all organizations and individuals.

KEY POINTS

- The field of training has changed a great deal in recent years in response to significant changes in the world of work.
- Blended learning is an effective way to meet new business needs.
- Offering a variety of learning solutions can increase the effectiveness of a training program while reducing or controlling costs at the same time.

RESOURCES

Blended learning: The here and now. (2003, November). *Training*.
eLearning Guild. (2003, February). *The blended learning best practices survey*.
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