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A Better Blend of E-Learning

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Most of you have e-learning; in-person classroom instruction; live Web sessions; and maybe even training via mobile devices. How can you use these multiple forms of delivery to create the next generation of blended learning?

By Margery Weinstein



Your employees are probably old hands at blended learning by now.

E-learning modules, followed by live, classroom time; on-the-job practice; and on-demand support for just-in-time updates. Yada, yada, yada.

But companies are catching on that blended means more today than merely having the various modes of delivery in place. It means taking blended to the next level, including better integration and organization of learning offerings.

E-volving Approach

At Cisco Systems, the blended approach to learning has evolved steadily over the last five years, says Director of World Wide Learning Michelle Marquard, beginning with the launch of the company's initiative, Cisco University. The program allowed the company's decentralized training structure, in which each department had its own training function, to organize to enhance the curriculum. But there was work to do. "The university allowed for all of the functional communities to come together under one aggregated umbrella," Marquard explains. "But while the [centralized] corporate environment provided some technology services, we didn't press far beyond a Web 1.0 experience."

The problem was the blended offerings didn't follow any overarching learning strategy, she says. "Cisco University was a Website that acted as an aggregator," Marquard points out, "but it didn't deliver with it a point of view about how learning should be constructed." In other words, courses in the early days of Cisco University didn't go beyond traditional, prerecorded e-learning modules and standard class time. Then something began to change. The company began adding learning tools such as Safari Books Online, an electronic repository of books in which employees can search not only for specific titles, but particular nuggets of information.

The company also is revving up its blended regimen with the addition of social learning platforms. In February 2009, Cisco will offer employees an interactive Intranet portal called "My Learning Network," which Marquard describes as a corporate learning parallel to the Website, Facebook. "You might go into this network, and you might look for an expert," she says, explaining how the new tool will work, "and when you find that expert, you also would find the things they've put on their own bookshelf. You start to take advantage of the people who participate in the process, and so learning becomes a social space that may be inclusive of traditional learning, but that's not how it's defined."

Indeed, the latest blended learning offers a mix of traditional, structured training and spontaneous moments of learning, says Dennis Kilian, vice president and learning evangelist for Safari Books Online. It is those unplanned-for moments, when you suddenly realize you need the latest information about what you're working on, that modern blended learning must address. "When people are looking for something that's cutting edge, when you go to an e-learning course you might find a six-month, or even a year-long, lag between the time the course is developed and when it becomes available," says Kilian. "So, it's the more immediate information, and it's the blend between formal and informal, and how to merge the particular advantages of both so it works to your benefit."

In addition to using modern social networking tools for on-demand support, the company is trying to be more innovative in its approach to structured courses such as its management education series, "Management 101," a foundational program for management development that "represents a fundamental transition in the way we approach manager development at Cisco," says Marquard. The company used to offer managers seven courses that were kept separate from one another. Now the curriculum is bundled into one overarching class, filled with smaller, connected pieces. "We've transitioned to an integrated approach," she notes, explaining that each week for the first nine weeks of the course, a different piece of what managers need to know is covered online. But the e-learning includes mastery tests to ensure knowledge retention has occurred, multimedia exercises, case studies to participate in, and weekly facilitated online dialogue. And that's just phase 1 of the program. Phase 2 features a four-day residency program in which participants are together in a live class to reinforce and build on what they learned during the first nine weeks. Phase 3 brings the manager's leader into the mix, with the manager learning with in-class participation from his or her supervisor. At the conclusion of the program, the manager is given a 360-feedback evaluation. "Once we've gone through the data gathering and analysis, we work with them on the interpretation of that 360, and go forward toward a development plan," says Marquard. "So part of the embedded message here is when you step into a management role at Cisco, while we have a program solution, we're asking you—even as you exit that solution—to be organizing around a

development strategy that's year-long."

With in-house corporate social networking in the works for early next year, and multifaceted, updated management training already underway, Cisco still sees room for blended improvement over the next few years. "There's an opportunity," says Marquard, "where the learner sits at the center of this universe, and a combination of social networking practices, social learning theory, and traditional learning live in an environment that is cooperative and integrated."

"New-Fangled" Approaches

Heading in a new direction to offer a richer, more diverse learning program sometimes means forcing employees out of their comfort zone. Such was the case at Gilbane Inc., a building and development company. Its workforce was more than happy with good, old reliable classroom lessons, and saw no need to add multimedia glitz to the mix, says Diane Fasching, director of Gilbane University. She says that when the company conducted a needs analysis and learning methodologies survey in preparation for the launch of its university eight years ago, its employees' preferences were clear. "It came back with, 'We love instructor-led learning, and don't give us any of these new-fangled approaches,'" Fasching remembers. "We struggled with that."

It took an initiative from the CEO that mandatory sexual harassment prevention training must be online for the company's workers to take a stab at e-learning. "People realized it wasn't as ominous as it sounded," she says, "it was interesting, and we actually had a lot of offerings online. That sort of propelled us to use various tools." Those various tools are a long way from the blended basics the company started with, says Don L. Michaels, an instructional designer at Gilbane. By 2004, the learning professionals at Gilbane, and their learners, were so accustomed to the online/classroom mix that the company decided to design its own online modules to accompany a new course in change management. The eight-hour, in-person class, which details how to use J.D. Edwards (JDE) project management accounting software, features a two-hour online prerequisite module on the principals of change management. The live class puts those principles in action by giving employees hypothetical project management scenarios to work through using the software. Gilbane also added what it calls "hover help," a performance support system to guide users of the software through their data entry. "It helps them understand why they're doing something, or what they should do," says Fasching, "so after the class they can refer back to it." That means "every time they go into the application," says Michaels, "is a learning opportunity because the hover help is there."

And that was just the company's blended learning "Renaissance" era, says Michaels of the launch of its self-designed change management training. Today—or what Michaels refers to as Gilbane's modern era of blended learning—Webinars, which often take the place of in-person class time, round out the training equation. The use of these live Web sessions, which the company is enabled to host due to the partnership its Learning Management System (LMS) vendor, Mzinga, has with Web conferencing provider iLinc, has prompted an update of many of the company's classes. Introductory courses such as "Introduction to Project Administration" and "Introduction to Contracts" now deliver part of the curriculum via interactive Webinar. "You get a chance to apply some of the knowledge you learned," says Michaels, "to ask questions, and really to just process everything."

The use of Webinars as yet another piece of the blended learning pie also gives a boost to newer training initiatives. When the company needed to train dispersed teams of workers on how to conduct constructability reviews in which Gilbane brings a builder's perspective to the architectural design, it turned to Webinars. The company presented workers with a series of four Webinars, requiring in the middle of the series that teams of learners complete an offline simulation of a constructability review. After completion of the exercise, the employees returned online to discuss the results. For ongoing support, the company launched a constructability review portal for workers to post future review results, "which provided for continuous knowledge sharing," says Michaels. "Any time they did a review for real, after they did the training, they would

post the results, so the other teams in the other geographic regions could leverage it."

The high-level, multifaceted approach Gilbane has grown into mirrors a transition being made by an increasing number of companies. Christopher Crosby, CEO of learning provider TMA World, notes that the companies he works with want to deliver more than just pre- and post-classroom e-learning assignments. "We're seeing many more interventions in the form of action-learning projects and team-based assessments where the learning is based around an intact team that's working on a specific project," Crosby says. The key, he adds, is thinking about the delivery tools you've been relying on in a new way. "In the e-learning component, try to think of elements other than pure instruction," he advises, "things such as learning aids, job aids, and other resources that can be built into the e-learning environment, whether that's in an LMS environment or in another application that's delivering your learning."

As up to date as Gilbane's blended learning regimen has become, the company doesn't forget it isn't about technical bells and whistles. "Decide on the delivery method that best serves your learning need," Michaels says, "rather than just running with something because it's the latest thing."

Improvement Impetus

For fresh food company Chiquita, raising the ante on blended learning was part of a push to improve its performance management, says Director of Talent Management Jennifer Creed. "We needed to launch a new performance management system within Chiquita globally, and at the same time we were trying to improve the communication on our new strategy," she explains.

The company, which partnered with Root Learning and Advantage Performance Group to make the necessary changes, introduced learning maps, designed by Root, to its workforce along with accompanying e-learning modules. The first map, Creed explains, visually represents the company's strategy so employees are able to see the business opportunities that need to be developed for Chiquita to reach its goals. The second map focuses on the new performance management system, Perform to Grow, a process that outlines how employees can contribute to achieving the aims of the strategy.

In addition to e-learning modules that allow employees to practice the tools and steps within Perform to Grow, the online component of the program features an interactive tool kit. The tools, which include, for instance, a sample performance review, can be called instantly to the screen to aid a stumped worker, or can be downloaded and printed out for ongoing support as job aids. Onscreen visuals in the e-learning replicate the learning maps, and employees also are given a miniature, laminated fold-out job aid to take back to their cubicles or offices after the session is over. "We're trying to restart our learning and development globally," says Creed, "and we knew going at it from a blended perspective would be the right way to do it because of the flexibility and scalability we needed, and the variety of learning experiences we wanted to provide."

That said, "the more you integrate blended learning, the more complex it does become," Creed says. Namely, she says you need to carefully evaluate the IT infrastructure across your organization to ensure it has the capacity to deliver your new and improved blended learning program.

Chiquita needed to accommodate offices in Central America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe that don't have the technical capabilities of its North American or European offices. To get around the slow Internet connections these employees work with, Creed and her team burned the "Perform to Grow" e-learning and tool kit material onto CD-ROMs for them. The company also was challenged by its lack of an LMS. To get around that difficulty, it signed on with a software-as-a-service provider that hosts a learning platform for the company.

The performance management improvement process encompassing all these changes, "Perform to Grow," represents the company's first foray into custom e-learning. Already practiced in delivering off-the-shelf solutions, Chiquita felt that to offer employees a sophisticated blended regimen, it required something designed especially to meet its needs—and that of its workforce. So far the response from the 1,500 workers

globally who have experienced the maps and accompanying e-learning has been positive, Creed notes, "We've gotten fantastic feedback."

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