



MAKING BLENDED TRAINING WORK: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTOR-LED TRAINING AND E-LEARNING METHODS

By Stephanie Schottel

In today's business environment, organizations have more options than ever before for employee training. On one hand, there are traditional training modules—"old-fashioned" classroom instruction, on-the-job training, and various other types of face-to-face instructor-student interaction. On the other hand, there is e-training, which encompasses any number of electronic delivery systems used for transferring knowledge. As popular as e-training has become in the last decade, traditional instructor-led training still has a strong foothold within many organizations. For companies that are hesitant to abandon in-person training due to cultural values or the nature of the material being taught, finding ways to leverage the benefits of e-learning tools while maintaining traditional development styles presents a challenge. According to recent studies, however, many organizations are obtaining "the best of both worlds" by adopting blended training approaches.

Blended training combines multimedia and online training modules with traditional instructor-led classroom training. The concept seems relatively straightforward, but with the proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies, developing a blended training implementation model can seem daunting. Nonetheless, one approach—providing online content and knowledge assessments *before* and *after* classroom training—has emerged as an effective way of bridging the gap between traditional and e-training. As solution providers continue to fine-tune their technologies, companies and employees alike are reaping the benefits of this blended training strategy.

THE APPROACH

Companies are increasingly integrating e-training with traditional classroom instruction by providing online tools and content prior to live instruction events. "Pre-classroom" e-training often includes assessment tools designed to evaluate an employee's existing knowledge of the topics that will be covered during instructor-led training. Online offerings may also include content designed to standardize the knowledge each participant has upon entering the classroom as well as content intended to prepare participants for hands-on training that will occur during instructor-facilitated class time.

Incorporating online preparation and assessment into the overall training strategy allows instructors to focus class time on helping participants apply the information they received during their online prep work. Face-to-face instructor-led training remains an essential element in this approach because it provides participants with opportunities to practice new concepts in a real-world environment, ask questions of their instructor, and problem solve with their classroom peers.

After the live learning event, organizations can provide participants with online tools that assess the knowledge they obtained and identify gaps in the knowledge transferred during classroom training. Companies can then use this data to develop additional online content and/or instructor-led training that address remaining knowledge gaps.

INTO ACTION

One organization that has put the blended training model into practice is Target Corporation. In addition to providing traditional classroom training, the Target Technology and Training Services Department has adopted Articulate Presenter, a Flash-based e-learning software program. The new software has enabled Target to streamline employee training by supplying online content prior to live, instructor-led courses. In addition, Target provides its employees with on-demand reference materials that can be used outside the classroom. By incorporating a preparatory e-learning component and making just-in-time reference materials available to participants who have completed training, the Target Technology and Training Services Department was able to decrease time spent in class by 40 percent while continuing to offer employees dynamic and comprehensive learning experiences.

Target is not alone in its desire to optimize traditional classroom training by incorporating e-training components. Another proponent of this approach is the American Management Association, which provides instructor-led seminars for management professionals. When the AMA decided to develop a more comprehensive training strategy for its seminar participants, it chose SumTotal Systems, one of many learning management system (LMS) solution providers. The AMA is now offering program participants online prep materials, custom online content, and online knowledge assessments. By adding these new elements into its training process, the AMA aims to enhance knowledge acquisition, provide a more customized learning experience in the classroom, distribute on-demand online resources, and enhance assessment and feedback for seminar participants.

In addition, the AMA recently started offering eCoaching to complement its blended learning strategy. According to a September 2008 press release, the launch of eCoaching will give AMA seminar participants access to scenario-based video content and simulations. By supplying these types of resources, the AMA hopes that seminar participants will be able to more confidently apply what they learned in the classroom to the real-world challenges they encounter in the workplace. Web-based simulations and other performance support applications are additional ways in which organizations are utilizing e-training to complement the classroom experience.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

By providing participants with e-training components that directly complement their classroom experiences and assessing knowledge levels before and after live instruction, companies realize the following benefits.

- Time spent in the classroom is optimized and often minimized, leading to time and cost savings.
- Social learning benefits that are the cornerstone of traditional classroom instruction are maintained.
- Participants are better prepared to receive and apply knowledge during instructor-led training.
- Participants enter the classroom with common baseline knowledge.
- Companies are able to identify gaps in knowledge and correct them via tune-up classes, on-demand online references and resources, and supplemental technologies such as Web-based simulations.

According to anecdotal evidence, the type of knowledge being presented does not limit the effectiveness of wrapping e-training components around traditional classroom-based training. As the American Management Association and Target Corporation examples demonstrate, both soft-skill training and functional technological training can be enhanced through complementary e-training. This means that training procedures can be standardized across all subject areas.

Like any approach, however, the combined use of e-training and classroom learning has its limitations. Online resources and assessments must be part of a unified training strategy with identifiable outcomes. Without such structure, efforts to integrate online content and assessments with face-to-face training will most likely fall short of expectations. For this reason, blended training approaches work best for companies and organizations that have specific and measurable training goals.

Similarly, any strategy that blends e-content and assessment with traditional training is only as effective as that organization's interdepartmental communication. For example, in order to leverage data acquired from pre- and post-training knowledge assessments, IT departments, HR managers, and trainers must work together to provide trainees with appropriate and effective supplemental training. This includes deciding on the most appropriate delivery system to be used. Given the variety of possible solutions, collaboration among key players is crucial to the effective implementation of any blended training approach.

Despite limitations, for companies and organizations that support and value the use of traditional training but aspire to streamline and optimize the classroom experience, the implementation of online applications that engage participants before and after live events can be an advantageous approach.

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