

Whither Training?

Less in the Classroom, More in the Workflow

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What is training? Think about it for a moment. What does it look like?

Most would conjure up a picture of a room, with an instructor up front, and students seated around and about. While the amount of engagement and technology would vary, roles, time, and place are pretty much set. If you were charged with planning, doing, or taking training, you would not expect a surprise.

Maybe you should.

Things are definitely changing. ASTD's 2005 State of the Industry report defined emergent forms for training, best characterized by a steady increase in technology-based delivery and a parallel decrease for instructor-led offerings. But it is not the technology itself that is so intriguing. What matters is the new ways we can enhance performance and organizational capability.

Today, employees increasingly reach for lessons, information, and guidance, as they need it, in the workflow. The ASTD report put it like this, "As learning becomes more integrated with work, the learning function's activities and impact are becoming more transparent and integrated with other performance improvement strategies." An increase in self paced, independent learning was also noted.

Think of it this way. The walls of the classroom are coming down. The instructor's reach is greater. His arms are longer. Her voice is louder, no matter if the opportunity is a new product, enhanced paper work, or improved management strategy. What experts know can now go beyond the classroom and into the workflow.

From classroom events to blended learning

Blended learning brings learning, reference, guidance, and support to employees through familiar experiences like classes and coaching, and through others that are not at all familiar, such as e-coaching, online communities, and performance support. With blended learning, the focus is on improving performance while employees spend more time where they are needed – at work, not in a classroom.

Rossett & Frazee (2006) note that there is more of everything in blended learning – more locations for learning and reference, more authenticity, more assets, more choices, more decision-makers, more technology, more freedom, more access to experts and expertise, and more potential. That turns out to be the potential for good – such as when an employees asks the computer to help her qualify a customer for a sale – and the potential for bad, which happens when resources are placed online and few turn to them.

When work and learning happen at different times and in different places, as is the case with classroom based instruction, there is cause to worry about transfer. Will the skills, knowledge, and attitudes picked up in class in March help with responding to customer inquiries in May? This is where blended learning contributes. Got a question? You can look it up online. Got a problem? You can chat with your e-coach or share it with the online community. Eager to hone skills in dealing with conflict? You can take a scheduled class, work with an e-coach, and use materials embedded in your Personal Information Manager to urge you towards new approaches.

Consider Tennessee football. What drew our attention was the Tennessee team's reliance on a bright orange card, a THINK card that is distributed to players before they even get their hands on a game playbook. Glier (2005) wrote in *USA Today*: "It is an orange card small enough to fit into their wallets. On the front it says, 'THINK,' followed by a series of questions designed to help the player assess his behavior and make the appropriate decision. On the back of the card are the home and cell phone numbers of the Tennessee coaching staff so players can call for help."

That orange card is performance support for the TN football player. Embedded in their lives, because it resides in their wallets, the card attempts to help players make better choices. Coaches and teachers can teach and exhort in the classroom and the locker room; only the orange card is there with them when temptations present themselves elsewhere.

Alas, the orange card has not been entirely successful. According to *USA Today*, there were at least 20 incidents, including shoplifting, assault, gun charges, and failing a drug test. That THINK card was good, but it was not sufficient. The players required a blended system that provided human and system support throughout their days and nights. Glier reported, "The Think Card is part of a safety net of counselors, tutors, and role models the university has been constructing since 1995 after eight football players had run-ins with the law in a one-year span."

Blending typically involves many approaches, such as coaching by a supervisor, participation in an online class, attendance at a workshop, guidance from performance support, breakfast meetings with colleagues, competency statements, reference to documentation, e-coaching by an expert, participation in an online community, and performance support tools. With a blended approach, the organization provides messages in many ways, and makes them available in many places, and, most interestingly, where people have to figure out what to do.

A sidekick in the work

Nobody would see classroom instruction as a sidekick in the work. Conventional training is good because it *prepares* people to do their jobs, and, when on point, training develops human capabilities just in case employees need them.

Performance support, on the other hand, is there just in case. It is an organizational resource for which individuals reach as needs arise. How do I approach this habitually tardy employee? How much does that product cost? How large a loan may that customer qualify for and why? How will the change in sales incentive system affect my pay? Am I ready for retirement? Are you?

This wide array of tasks is niftily supported by information, guidance, and advice delivered in the midst of work or life. Sidekick performance support is at our side *when needed*. The quick food cook reads the job aid as she creates the new food product. The quarterback glances at his wrist in the huddle. The writer pecks away and smiles at how Wikipedia sports a red line under it in this sentence.

Sidekicks vary in how close they are to the task. They might be next to the task, as is the case with the cook and quarterback, or thoroughly integrated into it, as in the spelling checker or software HELP system.

Now let us add the question of personalization. Is it guidance for everybody interested in the product or earthquakes or retirement, or does it know you and your situation and tailor messages accordingly? Table 1 shows the distinctions through two examples.

Performance Support	Standard	Tailored
<p>Sidekicks: They are with us in the work, as we act.</p>	<p>Here the customer and sales person look at a PC and examine a table that compares a recommended product to its competitors.</p> <p>+++++</p> <p>Families can go to the FEMA web site and examine a list of items that should be included in their family emergency preparedness kit. They can also print the list and take it to the market with them, with it serving as a sidekick in this important task.</p>	<p>When the customer picks a product configuration, the sales person identifies the customer and the system details what it will take to achieve compatibility with this customer's current installed base.</p> <p>+++++</p> <p>A web site could know that you live on a canyon, in Southern California, and that the area has been recently suffering a severe drought. Because you are in danger for wild fire, you receive guidance that is tailored to your needs and situation.</p>

Figure 1. Performance Support

Is the tool offering up a standard, consistent message OR one that is customized to you and your situation? Does the performance support care which mutual funds you hold, how old you are, how many children you must put through college, or what products you sell and in which geography? Does it reach out and nudge and remind you about your goals? The Yellow Pages and Technorati's searchable blog directory are standard, worthy, and passive resources. You go there to find information on mockingbirds or local veterinarians that specialize in farm animals. Those trusty resources wait and serve, but they do not customize automatically. You must know what you want and go for it.

Personalization is good, but is it as good as it costs? A single, standard message costs far less to produce and maintain. With the cost of personalization estimated at four or more times basic costs, Jupiter Research (2003) and respondents favored attention to usability over a tailored experience.

Into the flow

Work and the workforce are changing, as are the students that become the workforce. Ascione (2006) said this about students: "Today's students are 'digital natives' who someday will end up in digital schools. The question is what those digital schools will look like, what the rate of adoption will be, and what policy decisions will surround that process." Ascione's assumption, and one that holds true for many workplaces and homes in the developed world, is that technology and information, lessons, instructors, and events, not to mention music and entertainment, will be

ubiquitous. Generation Y, and the generations that follow them, as Judy Woodruff (2006) reported on public television, demand a technology and information rich workplace. They crave their lessons, information, and guidance at their sides as they go about their lives.

Work, learning, and reference are growing more identified and continuous (Tapscott, 1996). Responsibility thus shifts to the individual, student, or worker, who is expected to figure out what is needed, to take advantage of surrounding resources, and to go get them. There's the rub. Not all are ready for this independence.

The questions extend from individuals to their organizations. In the best of all possible futures, jobs are redefined, employees learn independently, performance management matches these realities, information assets are targeted and accessible, and managers are keen on employees who develop at work. Is that the reality in your workplace?

There are strategies to move this transition forward:

- Provide obviously useful content and clear guidance systems.
- Be explicit about how the resources advance personal goals.
- Be explicit about how the resources advance organizational goals.
- Be explicit about how these approaches change employee, supervisor, and expert roles.
- Configure support so that it responds to typical, important dilemmas and challenges.
- Remind users of all they already know and how their knowledge helps them use the support.
- Provide examples of how the performance support resources have contributed already.
- Provide choices in amount of support – from handholding by a tool that does most of the work, to a trusted advisor there for support, to a provider of very occasional tips and hints.
- Ask for reflections on the value of the support; ask for suggestions about how it could be more useful.
- Report on adjustments and updates to the tool, especially on changes derived from user input.
- Provide rationale for why information and guidance were directed to that user.
- Ask supervisors to encourage employees towards performance support by remarking on the support they themselves use and on ways that employees can do the same.
- Build the use of performance support into orientation, training, and coaching.

Blended learning and performance support are at the heart of this shift from instruction-centric training to performance-centric initiatives. They provide messages that are active and accessible. They go where the challenges are. It makes sense to move from knowledge in the classroom to knowledge everywhere, since that is where life and work happen... everywhere.

Interested in these ideas? Looking for ways to use performance support in your work? Eager to see examples of the uses of performance support and blended learning for sales, service, software, and retail? Concerned about the implications of the shift away from centralized command to knowledge everywhere? Take a look at Allison Rossett and Lisa Schafer's new book and web site: *Job Aids and Performance Support in the Workplace: Moving from Knowledge in the Classroom to Knowledge Everywhere.*

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