Developing Capable Leaders Through Blended Learning

By Sally Hovis

Most leaders have little time to devote to learning. A blended learning approach with chunked learning content and assets can be a convenient and effective solution.

Poor managers have a real effect on business, damaging employee morale and productivity. Well-trained managers are a critical link in communicating your company's vision, and they ensure productivity and commitment across the organization. To maintain your competitive advantage, you need to capitalize on your human capital—especially now that organizations are challenged to do more and at a faster pace. In this environment, you need strong, capable leaders to achieve maximum employee engagement and productivity.

Learning has progressed to include a blend of approaches and technologies that are available on demand. While many organizations recognize the benefits of blended learning programs in developing effective leaders, few understand the decisions that drive successful program development. Blended learning can reinforce learning retention, save organizations money, and integrate effectively into an employee's daily life.

What it is

Author Jennifer Hofmann points out that among learning professionals the term "blended learning" signifies different things, lessening the term's meaning.

learning' is typically one topic, offered in numerous ways, or a hodgepodge of different training offerings under the same topical umbrella," she writes. Hofmann then offers a clear definition:

"What blended learning should mean is: Using the best delivery methodology(ies) available for a specific objective, including online, classroom-based instruction, electronic performance support, paper-based, and formalized or informal on-the-job solutions."

Why it works

Most leaders have limited time to dedicate to learning. A blended learning program with shorter learning assets and content that can be broken into chunks serves this population more effectively than methods that require them to spend hours at a time in a classroom. Video and instructional content that can be downloaded to portable devices and viewed offline also support today's on-the-go leaders.

SkillSoft customer GC Services, a teleservices and collections solutions provider, struggled with a leadership development program that didn't blend delivery options effectively. The initial combination of workshops and e-learning courses took too much time and got little use. When GC's organiza-

aligned e-learning courses with facilitated workshops that helped managers apply what they learned, their efforts paid off. The results saved the company time and money, significantly increased productivity, and increased managerial participation in the program.

Guidelines

Blended learning—especially when first introduced—calls for preparation. Let everyone involved in the program know the goals, program requirements, and prerequisites in advance so participants know what's expected of them and have time to prepare.

Make sure your learners, facilitators, program administrators, coaches, mentors, and anyone expected to use any of the technology-based aspects of the program understand how to do so. Build in up-front guidance—provide a participant guide (or learning map) that outlines all learning events, offers instruction or job aids on how to use the different learning technologies, and details all learning assignments and supporting materials.

Blended learning not only reinforces learning retention, but saves organizations money and integrates effectively into leaders' daily lives. But there is no "perfect blend" that solves every learning need. Carefully consider the three questions presented below to make the most out of each learning methodology

available and craft more effective learning programs.

What learning delivery options make sense for your organization? Your organization may have established preferences for particular learning methods. Consider all the options available to you when designing learning programs:

- traditional classroom
- asynchronous e-learning or self-paced electronic courses
- synchronous e-learning or virtual classroom training
- self-study (print, PDF, and referenceware)
- recorded audio, recorded video, and recorded PowerPoint presentations
- simulations
- hands-on labs (software, hardware, and specialized equipment)
- test preps and practice certification
- discussion boards
- performance support (job aids and help files).

Who is your target audience? What are your business goals? Keep in mind the basic tenets of instructional design. Analyze your business goals and related content, then translate those into objectives. Classify the type of learning for each objective—do you need to develop knowledge, skills, or attitudes? Can your learners achieve this objective independently, or do they need interaction or involvement with others? How can you best assess whether learners have achieved the objective?

What constraints do you need to address? Whether you're working to overcome time constraints, budget shortfalls, or cultural barriers, ask if the learning delivery method you're considering can help overcome that obstacle.

Each form of delivery provides advantages to addressing different constraints. Self-paced e-learning may be a great option for leaders with unpredictable schedules or workers spread across varying locations or time zones.

In *The Learning Advantage: Blending Technology, Strategy, and Learning to Create Lasting Results,* the authors point

out that widespread adoption and use of blended learning is rarely limited by lack of technology: "Often, full implementation of blended learning within an organization is not prevented by shortcomings of technology, but by shortcomings of infrastructure and budget." This becomes especially relevant as organizations consider how to add mobile and social learning into the mix.

Results

While instructor-led training has long reigned as the most popular training method, ASTD's *2011 State of the Industry Report* reveals that the organizations that captured BEST Awards decreased their total percentage of instructor-led training from 73.5 percent in 2009 to 67.4 percent in 2010. By comparison, the Global 500 companies delivered 63.7 percent of learning content via live classroom instruction. Thus, the best learning and development organizations are making a focused effort to use a more blended approach, applying techniques other than instructor-led training where they offer clear advantages.

Sally Hovis is vice president of learning design at Skillsoft, and a founding member of its management team; sally_hovis@skillsoft.com.

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