RAPID TALENT
E-LEARNING OFFERS MYRIAD OPPORTUNITIES FOR RAPID TALENT DEVELOPMENT.

BY JEAN ADAMS

There was a time when it was possible to anticipate critical skills shortages in advance, to launch organization-wide programs to close the skill gaps before threats materialized, and to monitor progress with an eye on future needs. But, that’s rarely the case today.

The need for rapid talent development has emerged as one of the major issues facing organizations in virtually all sectors of the economy. E-learning offers interesting opportunities for meeting this challenge. But, before workplace learning and performance professionals adopt this widely used technology, there are some fundamental principles that need to be understood.
There is a simple framework for strategically thinking about new ways to support your talent development initiatives, and this framework is positioned around the acronym AIM (alignment, interactivity and motivation), which directly targets blended e-learning programs to help you deliver the results you want at the speed you want.

Remember the days when it was possible to take a long-range view to staff planning and training development? In the 1960s, it was common practice to anticipate organizational training needs and develop appropriate programs and strategies—sometimes as part of a 10-year plan. That's rarely the case today. The 10-year plan has shrunk to a 10-month, or even a 10-week, plan.

As professionals, we are all too familiar with the frantic need to stretch resources to meet rapidly evolving skill needs and deliver cost-effective solutions. An Intelligence article in the April 2005 issue of T+D reported that Darel Hall, executive director of New Zealand’s Industry Training Federation, made the headlines when he predicted a severe skill shortage of 50 percent versus a global average of 28 percent.

That sort of shortage is becoming a reality in North America with the baby boomers set to retire or move on to new ventures within the next five to 10 years. Add to that the growing demand for concrete, measurable return-on-investment on training dollars, and it soon becomes blatantly obvious that it is no longer business as usual.

New learning solutions
New win-win learning solutions that meet organizational and employee needs are essential. If there has ever been a time when technology is needed, this is it. However, technology has let us down this time.

The early promise of e-learning to revolutionize training and development has, unfortunately, not materialized as quickly as we had hoped. In a 2003 DDI workplace survey of 139 organizations in 15 countries, 75 percent of respondents rated the effectiveness of their e-learning programs as less than five on a 10-point scale where 10 was highly effective.

Although most will agree that e-learning as a stand-alone solution has not been particularly effective, interest in e-learning as part of blended learning strategies is on the rise, and it's proving to be an effective delivery method. According to a 2007 Brandon Hall Research study, “The Real Story: Blended Learning,” more than 70 percent of survey respondents reported that blended learning produced better outcomes than face-to-face training alone, and almost 90 percent reported blended approaches offered better outcomes than e-learning alone. As well, blended learning is preferred by learners and instructors when compared to face-to-face instruction or e-learning alone.

Although interest in blending is growing, the large majority of training and education is not blended. Why? There are all kinds of reasons—from technophobia to tight resources to fear of failure to lack of support in the executive office. Scarce resources curb experimentation. So, before we know it we're cornered into doing what we've always done—even when we'd like to try new things.

What is blending?
Simply stated, a blending strategy is a highly unique mix-and-match approach to using a variety of training and development tools that are focused on getting the job done. As workplace learning and performance professionals, we’ve been doing it for years in various forms—mixing a short lecture with a video clip, an in-class exercise, a take-home project, or a short conference call with classroom or e-learning delivery methods. Try mapping as many of the options open to you as possible using the chart above as a guideline. Remember to include the technologies you’re using, as well as those that are available but not being used.

If your training and development programs are targeting Gen Y learners, you’ll be under added pressure to employ new technologies because the new generations grew up with technology and have been using it as an informal learning tool. Are you using classroom response systems for knowledge sharing or tablet-technology, which is another
emerging option that promotes real-time collaboration and right-brain learning through image creation? There are digital cameras, instant messaging, video snippets, gameware, brainstorming, and decision-making software. As long as the technologies selected advance your learning goals, almost anything can be added to your blended mix to create learning value.

Whatever you do, don’t get hung up on the definitions. Instead, make the term work for you. Use it to describe new initiatives. Use it to legitimize what you’re doing. See blending as a robust form of mixing and matching technologies to promote on-the-job learning and maximize impact. In other words, strive to make learning technologies work for workplace learning, not against it.

Use the AIM model
My exploration into blending started with a visit from a training and development professional who was mandated by her CEO to design and execute a leadership development program for senior executives without a classroom course. What emerged over a three-year
research period was the foundation for the AIM blending model: the interconnection of three important factors for thinking about learning technologies and how to tightly integrate them to deliver win-win value for employees and organizations.

**A is for alignment.** Alignment requires understanding the distinction between first- and second-generation e-learning. Blending the right e-learning is the most important factor in achieving your learning objectives. The different underlying assumptions about teaching and learning underpinning these systems will have a significant influence on what people learn and its overall effectiveness.

First-generation systems take a very controlled, step-by-step approach to content delivery. These systems support hard technical skills where there is a right way to proceed and a defined answer (for example, using software, solving a math problem, compliance to regulations). When your teaching goal is to help learners find the easiest, quickest path and eliminate deviations, wasted time, and possibly legal problems when dealing with regulatory or compliance issues, blending first-generation e-learning can be very effective.

Second-generation systems foster soft skills learning (for example, critical thinking, leadership, innovation) because of their flexible, open-ended design. It is the self-organizing capacity of these second-generation systems that enable people to quickly access exactly what they need when they need it for just-in-time learning on the job. When your teaching goal is to help learners develop their soft skills to improve daily job performance, blending second-generation e-learning can be very effective.

Aligning teaching goals with technology choices is absolutely essential. The question to consider in terms of alignment is: Are you teaching technical hard skills or more interpretive soft skills? **I is for interactivity.** The need for interactivity in the design of e-learning is widely acknowledged. But interestingly, research studies show that sophisticated technologies and interactivity can actually get in the way of learning. According to a 2002 study by Maryam Alavi, George Maracas, and Youngjin Yoo, simple email was more effective for collective learning than a more sophisticated group support system. Similarly, many of the bells and whistles used as eye-catching devices divert attention and sabotage concentration—we’ve all experienced very busy websites. No wonder pop-up blockers are so popular. Although designer intentions may be admirable, too much interactivity can be a problem.

When your main learning objective is to promote compliance or rule-based learning, learner and content interactivity is essential. Multiple-choice questions, drag-and-drop exercises, and simulations for tool manipulation are good examples of interactivity that is used to reinforce content retention through repetition and also to test for accuracy, which is ideal for supporting rote learning.

When your main goal, however, is to promote soft skills development and performance learning where application on the job is important, a learning triangle involving the learner, the content to be learned, and the context to which the learning is to be applied is essential for prompting learners to explore and reflect on relevance, implications, and specific application. The interactivity is designed to empower learners to find their own solutions, and pushes them to take ownership of their learning by relating the lessons to specific job contexts where learning gets adapted and transferred.

Integrating synchronous (conference calls, instant messaging, just-in-time coaching) and asynchronous (bulletin boards, blogs, reflective coaching) technologies is useful for enhancing soft skill development and performance-based learning. These collaborative technologies enable learners to explore ideas with others to deepen and broaden personal understanding. Lessons are internalized and learned by enabling off-the-job learning (in collaborative learning sessions) as well as on-the-job learning (through performance support systems), which in turn is shared in collaborative sessions where everyone can benefit from the experiences gained.

Remember, all interactivity is not the same. You need to consider some key questions:

- Is your main aim to promote compliance, or to create empowered learners?
- How important is collaborative discussion and collective learning?
• Will technology bells and whistles get in the way of learning?

M is for motivation. To create a win-win for organizations and individuals, it is important to think of motivation from the perspective of learning accountability loops (for example, firm, direct links between work and learning) to maximize job impact. (See sidebar on page 72.)

Learning as a course add-on that isn’t tightly integrated with the job will have minimal effect. The closer the links between learning and job performance, the greater the impact of the learning on the job. This seems obvious. But surprisingly, more often than not, links between learning and job performance are weak, completely overlooked, or left to chance. This is an area where blending offers significant advantages—especially the use of second-generation e-learning that supports just-in-time individual and collective learning.

Learning can now occur on the job and at the workstation, as well as in class. Recognition and reward structures must be designed with this in mind. Outcomes are no longer confined to theoretical application. There is more to learning than simply passing the test. Outcomes can be observed and quantified on the job.

Consequently, it is important to consider whether your assessment and reward structures are promoting, or blocking, rapid talent development and on-the-job learning by asking: Is your learning assessment strategy consistent with answers to the previous four questions? Are you walking the talk?

Blended for job impact

The good news is that we no longer need to settle for a one-size-fits-all learning strategy within or across organizations. Customization in ways never before possible is today’s reality.

Blending e-learning enables us to take customization to the level of individual learners. That means we can finally assess and reward on-the-job learning and continuous improvement that creates demonstrable value for employees and organizations.

We have the technologies. We just need to employ them using the AIM model to create a solid platform upon which to advance learning goals and meet the demands for rapid talent development.

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