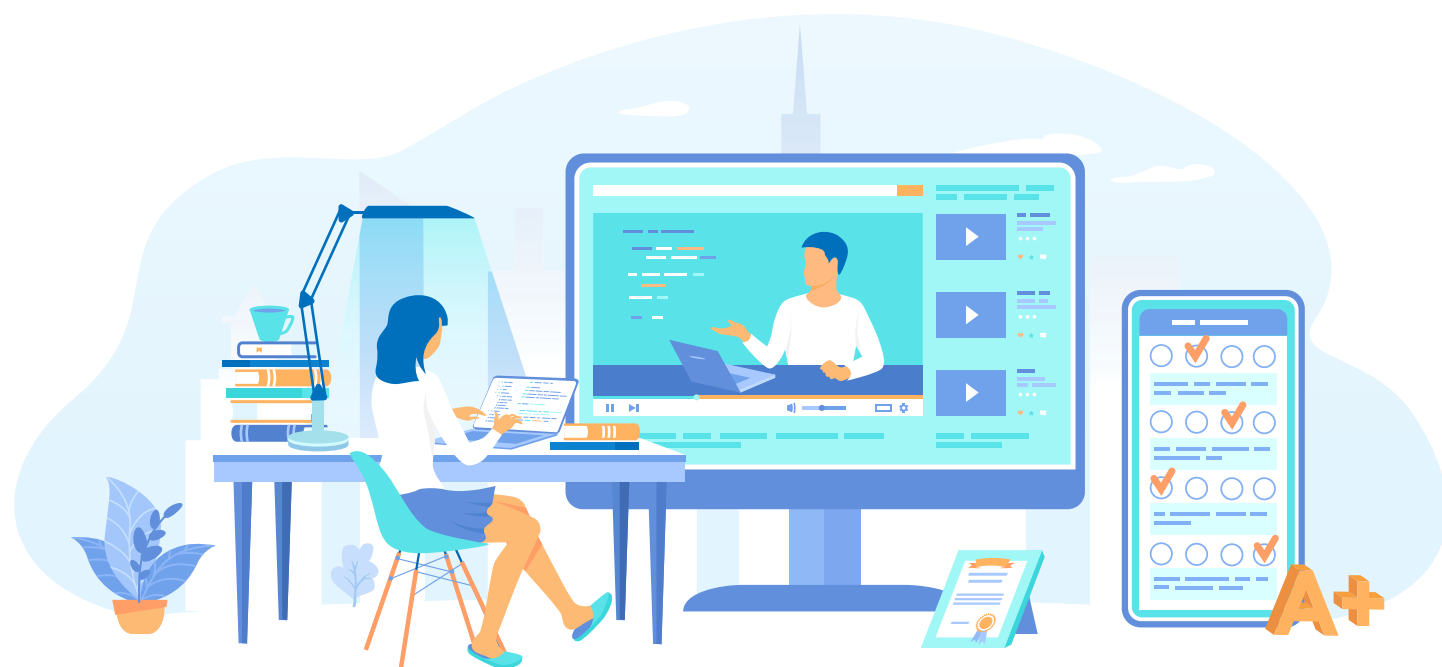# Achieving Success with Blended Learning

What impact would it have on your organization if you could launch new products in days versus weeks? What if you could give your sales and service staffs 2-4% more time each year to work with their clients? What if you could provide management training that is more personalized and effective than what you are buying today, yet far less expensive? What if your top performers could immediately leverage their expertise across the organization without impacting their personal productivity? These are some of the benefits that early adopters of eLearning are achieving with "blended learning" strategies.

If we take the long view, traditional physical classrooms have been the dominant form of knowledge transfer for at least 3,000 years. Even today, nearly 80% of corporate training is conducted in the classroom. The last universal technology in learning, the printed book, is over 500 years old. Yet in the past 10 years alone, over 10 major new technologies for learning and collaboration have been introduced. Early experience with these technologies has uncovered opportunities for

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profound improvements in quality, effectiveness, convenience and cost of learning experiences. It has also resulted in many disappointments. For example, self-paced course-ware has seen wide deployment but, on average, is effectively used by only 11% of its target audience. Only now are we beginning to understand how learning experiences will evolve to exploit "blended" combinations of both traditional and technology-based learning methods, and how blended learning can have a strategic impact on critical business processes.

Organizations today are looking beyond the automation of traditional training models to new approaches to knowledge transfer and performance support that are better aligned with business goals and deliver measurable results. By focusing on the specific business objective, rather than the learning technology, we are given the opportunity to fundamentally re-think how we design and deliver learning programs. This re-thinking also allows us to break free from the concept of a "course" and consider approaches that provide a continuous learning process with active participation by the entire organization in sharing, teaching and mentoring mission-critical knowledge.

This white paper shares cutting-edge research and thinking on Blended Learning as it explores: What is blended learning? Why blend? How do you blend? Where does one start?

What is Blended Learning?

Simply put, Blended Learning can be described as a learning program where more than one delivery mode is being used with the objective of optimizing the learning outcome and cost of program delivery. However, it is not the mixing and matching of different learning delivery modes by itself that is of significance, but the focus on the learning and business outcome. Therefore we propose to refine this definition to say:

Blended learning focuses on optimizing achievement of learning objectives by applying the "right" learning technologies to match the "right" personal learning style to transfer the "right" skills to the "right" person at the "right" time.

Embedded in this definition are the following principles:

- We are focusing on the learning objective rather than the method of delivery
- Many different personal learning styles need to be supported to reach broad audiences
- Each of us brings different knowledge into the learning experience
- In many cases, the most effective learning strategy is "just-what-I-need, just-in-time"

The experience of pioneers in blended learning shows that putting these principles into practice can result in radical improvements in the effectiveness, reach and cost-effectiveness of learning programs relative to traditional approaches. These improvements are so profound that they have the potential to change the overall

competitiveness of entire organizations. Before we share some of this research, let us look at some of the "dimensions of the blend."

Dimensions of the Blend

The original use of the phrase "Blended Learning" was often associated with simply linking traditional classroom training to eLearning activities. However, the term has evolved to encompass a much richer set of learning strategy "dimensions." Today a blended learning program may combine one or more of the following dimensions, although many of these have over-lapping attributes.

Blending Offline and Online Learning

At the simplest level, a blended leaning experience combines offline and online forms of learning where the online learning usually means "over the Internet or intra-net," and offline learning happens in a more traditional classroom setting. We assume that even the offline learning offerings are managed through an online learning system. An example of this type of blending may include a learning program that provides study materials and research resources over the Web while providing instructor-led, classroom training sessions as the main medium of instruction.

Blending Self-Paced and Live, Collaborative Learning

Self-paced learning implies solitary, on-demand learning at a pace that is managed or controlled by the learner. Collaborative learning on the other hand implies a more dynamic communication among many learners that brings about knowledge

sharing. The blending of self-paced and collaborative learning may include review of important literature on a regulatory change or new product followed by a moderated, live online, peer-to-peer discussion of the material's application to the learner's job and customers.

Blending Structured and Unstructured Learning

Not all forms of learning imply a pre-meditated, structured or formal learning program with organized content in specific sequence like chapters in a text book. In fact, most learning in the workplace occurs in an unstructured form such as meetings, hallway conversations, and e-mail. A blended program design may look to capture active conversations and documents from unstructured learning events into knowledge repositories available on-demand, supporting the way knowledge-workers collaborate and work.

Blending Custom Content with Off-the-Shelf Content

Off-the-shelf content is by definition generic – unaware of your organization's unique context and requirements. However, generic content is much less expensive to buy and frequently has higher production values than custom content you build yourself. Generic, self-paced content can be customized today with a blend of live experiences (classroom or online) or through content customization. Industry standards such as SCORM (Shareable Course-ware Object Reference Model) open the door to greater flexibility in blending off-the-shelf and custom content – improving the user experience while minimizing cost.

Blending Work and Learning

Ultimately, the true success and effectiveness of learning in organizations is believed to be associated with the paradigm where work (such as business applications) and learning are inseparable, and where learning is embedded in business processes such as hiring, sales, or product development. Work becomes a source of learning content to be shared and more learning content becomes accessible on-demand and in the context of the user's workplace need.

What should be evident from the above discussion is that many of the implicit constraints of time, geography and format that we accepted with the physical classroom are no longer valid. Even the fundamental organizing construct of a "course" can be transformed into an ongoing learning process or experience.

Ingredients of the Blend

Blended learning is not new. However, in the past, the ingredients for blended learning were limited to physical classroom formats (lectures, labs, etc.), books or handouts. Today organizations have myriad learning approaches to choose from, including but not limited to:

Synchronous physical formats:

- Instructor-led Classrooms & Lectures
- Hands-on Labs & Workshops
- Field Trips

Synchronous online formats (Live eLearning):

- eMeetings
- Virtual Classrooms
- Web Seminars and Broadcasts
- Coaching
- Instant Messaging

Self-paced, asynchronous formats:

- Documents & Web Pages
- Web/Computer-Based Training Modules
- Assessments/Tests & Surveys
- Simulations
- Job Aids & Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS)
- Recorded live events
- Online Learning Communities and Discussion Forums

Blended Learning – A "Real-World" Example

These concepts may be best visualized by contrasting a traditional, single-mode, lecture-style classroom program with a program that applies blended learning principles. Let's use a new employee orientation program as an example.

The traditional approach may typically involve a two to three week classroom-training course where all the new employees are introduced to company products, philosophy, vision, etc. This classroom-training course usually takes place in a contiguous block of time before a new employee is introduced to the actual work and performance expectations are set.

In contrast, a Blended Collaborative eLearning program (carried out over a longer span of time) can help balance learning and performance by creating a recipe that includes:

- Interactive online opportunities before the employee starts work to introduce them to learning resources and their team, and enable them to be better prepared for success
- A physical classroom kick-off event for acculturation and team-building
- A series of self-paced, online tutorials covering the company's product or service
- An asynchronous, online discussion forum created to allow participants to share customer case studies or scenarios
- A series of live, collaborative coaching sessions where the new employees talk with members of the management team
- An online, Web-based post-test that certifies the competency of new employees
- An online survey that allows participants to provide their feedback about the learning program for future improvements

Beyond the short initial kick-off session, the remainder of these events take place in the employee's work context over an extended period of time – minimizing the employee's time-to- productivity while fostering internalization and application of key learning in the job context.

The "Right" Ingredients of a Blended Program

Creating a blended learning strategy is an evolutionary process. You will need to explore the capabilities of your team, your organization's infrastructure, and your learners' receptiveness to new learning formats. For many, the first stage in their blended learning program initiative is to supplement their current programs, either traditional classroom or self-paced content libraries, with live eLearning activities (coaching, virtual classrooms or workshops) to extend the learning process and better integrate it with the work environment.

Once you have built experience and confidence using the key tools available to you, it is appropriate to invest more effort in a thorough redesign of your learning programs for maximum business impact. Here is a high-level process that can guide

you through some of the key decisions in this program design:

Every learning initiative should start with clarity on the program's business and performance objectives. What should the participant or learner be able to do upon completion of the learning program to advance your business?   With that goal in mind, you need to perform an instructional design analysis, but with some new twists reflecting the broader range of design options available to you.

Audience analysis is essential to determine which delivery options will be effective in achieving your performance objective. This analysis needs to consider several key factors, including but not limited to the following:

- **Base knowledge** – how uniform is the knowledge that they are bringing to the learning program?
- **Preferred learning styles** – while learning styles do vary by individual, different communities frequently share learning style preferences. Business users and sales professionals tend to respond best to learning formats that are collaborative, visual, verbal and non-linear. IT staff are generally more comfortable with formats that are linear, factual, tactile and individual. What range of styles will you need to support?
- **Location** – is the audience centralized or distributed?
- **Motivation** – what is the level of effort, inconvenience or cost they are willing to incur in order to obtain the learning you are offering?
- **Access** – which elements of the program does the audience view as a base competency to be achieved in advance of need versus a resource to be

accessed on demand

Content analysis will often guide you in the selection of the optimal delivery formats. You will have the most options with simple knowledge transfer programs, but should consider the impact on retention when adding interaction with both the audience and content. You now have options not available in most classrooms for access to diverse content and tools such as bidirectional application sharing, games and simulations. Some forms of content – e.g. intense behavioural modification, complex physical skills – might only be effectively delivered in face-to-face formats. It is also important to understand how dynamic the content in your program is.

Launching a new product will generally result in a rapid evolution of content as input from the field and customers is captured and integrated. Programs with this content behaviour generally need to remain in a live format to facilitate continuous content evolution and refinement.

Financial analysis of both your content development and delivery costs could play a significant role in deciding the delivery options. The primary financial advantage of self-paced content is its low delivery cost relative to live formats. However, producing a highly interactive and media rich self-paced training program may cost many thousands of dollars per hour of delivered content, and several weeks of development time. Content from traditional classrooms or live eLearning can be quickly and inexpensively developed. Studies have shown that, despite its higher delivery costs, live learning formats are generally more cost effective unless you have stable content to be delivered to audiences of several thousand or more.

Infrastructure may constrain your delivery options. Classroom capacity is frequently a constraint on the speed with which you can train a community. Mobile devices have different screen sizes and network access than PCs. Unless you are very fortunate, you will generally not have sufficient network bandwidth available for full-motion video. Luckily, the most popular eLearning technologies such as WBT and live eLearning are generally compatible with existing infrastructure since they can operate over very low-bandwidth network connections.

Why Blend? The Benefits of Blending

The concept of Blended Learning is rooted in the idea that learning is not just a one-time event – but that learning is a continuous process. Blending provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery type alone:

Improved Learning Effectiveness

Recent studies at the University of Tennessee and Stanford give us evidence that a blended learning strategy actually improves learning outcomes by providing a better match between how a learner wants to learn and the learning program that is offered.

strategies. Travel costs and time have been reduced by up to 85%. Acceleration of mission-critical knowledge to channels and customers can have a profound impact on the organization's top line.

Extending the Reach

A single delivery mode inevitably limits the reach of a learning program or critical knowledge transfer in some form or fashion. For example, a physical classroom-training program limits access to only those who can participate at a fixed time and location, whereas a virtual classroom event is inclusive of a remote audience, and when followed up with recorded knowledge objects (ability to playback a recorded live event), can extend the reach to those who could not attend at a specific time.

Optimizing Development Cost and Time

Combining different delivery modes has the potential to balance out and optimize the learning program development and deployment cost and time. A hundred percent online, self-paced, media-rich, Web-based training content may be too expensive to produce (requiring multiple resources and skills), but combining virtual collaborative learning forums and coaching sessions with simpler self-paced materials such as generic off-the-shelf WBT, documents, case studies, recorded live eLearning events, text assignments, and Power Point presentations (requiring quicker turn-around time and lower skill to produce), may be just as effective or more effective.

Optimizing Business Results

Organizations report exceptional results from their initial blended learning initiatives. Learning objectives can be obtained in 50 % less class time than traditional
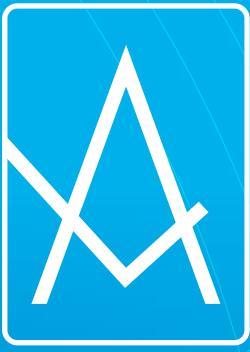
Achieving Success with Blended Learning

We'd love to hear from you

www.activelearning.biz
info@activelearning.biz