Blended Learning: The way ahead for an always learning organization
Preface

With organizations realizing that no one mode of learning works effectively, the need to incorporate a variety of learning programs to engage learners has become pivotal. Blended Learning is an important approach to consider, and this paper goes in-depth on how organizations can harness the opportunities of leveraging blended learning through a Learning Management System (LMS). We also discuss the various learning tools which come under blended learning, together with diverse teaching methodologies and multiple channels needed to create an impactful learning experience for users.
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Introduction

Even as the corporate world is gearing up for concepts such as enterprise mobility, Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) and next generation cloud computing, corporate training methodologies are left way behind in classrooms. As an organization, how do you leverage the vast potential of eLearning? How do you incorporate social media and mobility into your training programs to empower your teams? How can your team collaborate in real time for seamless knowledge sharing?

Blended learning is the answer. Blended learning is no longer a combination of classroom training and eLearning – it is much more. It is a combination of powerful content, effective teaching methodologies, and dissemination channels, enabled by an efficient Learning Management System. Blended learning is the way forward for a learning enterprise to survive and thrive.
Redefining Blended Learning:
Leveraging the power of new channels

The scope of blended learning has been redefined in every way. It is no longer about putting together a mix of online and classroom courses to create a module. The delivery methodology took precedence in this style of learning, and the focus of the training team in a corporate organization was to disseminate learning to employees sitting in offices across the world.

Today, the learning objective takes precedence. What is the learning objective of the training program? This must be determined. The channel to disseminate the knowledge, and the collaboration required to fulfill this objective is decided next. Once the learning objective is aligned with the best delivery method, the first step to true blended learning is complete.

The growth of the internet and innovations in telecommunications have opened up a multitude of learning channels. The advent of social media and digital technology has extended the scope of blended learning, by paving the way for concepts such as social learning, micro learning and gamification. For optimal learning and knowledge sharing, it is imperative that Chief Learning Officers (CLOs) evaluate all these channels and put together a mix that helps fulfill the organization’s learning goals.

While the scope of blended learning has changed and is undergoing a paradigm shift, an organization needs a state-of-the-art Learning Management System (LMS) as a backbone for any learning initiative. A robust LMS can support the organization in implementing its blended learning strategy and execute it seamlessly across the enterprise.

Blended learning, backed by an able LMS, can extend the following benefits to a learning enterprise:

- Increased engagement with the learner; and thereby better learning
- Powerful collaboration in real time allowing knowledge sharing
- Streamlines the learning process and enables a wide reach
- Faster fulfillment of organization learning objective
- Reduced costs
Does technology-enabled learning spell the end of classroom training session? No, it doesn’t. A good LMS-based blended learning program can help redefine the way classroom training is conducted, making it much more effective.

Imagine a typical classroom session.

- The trainer uses learning resources such as a presentation and teaches various concepts to the class
- The learners are encouraged to ask questions after the presentation
- The session will end with a paper-based activity session
- Handouts of the presentation/study material are given to the learners

Now imagine this.

- The trainer shares a calendar with the session participants and ask them to complete online assessments before the sessions
- The trainer asks the learners to take a few basic courses which will help them have a better grasp concepts later explained in the face-to-face session
- The interactive presentation is tweaked based on the pre-session assessment results; topics are introduced/removed based on the learner profile
- The presentation has links to YouTube videos, and encourages all learners to play a five-minute game on their systems
- Polls and assessments during the face-to-face sessions help the trainer understand how well the class has grasped the topic
- Assignments can be finished online, when the learners are back at their workstations

The learner, the training and the topic all remain the same. However, the way knowledge is shared and disseminated, and the learning outcome, has been completely transformed. A Deloitte University Press article on corporate learning says that the global traditional employee training market is valued at $130 billion, but very few organizations are aware of how this money is spent, and the result of this spend. With technology enabled Learning Management Systems, it is possible to ensure that every penny spent is accounted for, and learning becomes a measurable outcome.

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- A Deloitte University Press article on corporate learning
As much as companies are trying to introduce learning and development initiatives for their distributed workforce, they face challenges in meeting their learning objectives. According to an ASTD report: The Global Workplace: Learning Beyond Borders, only 32 percent of learning professionals indicated that global learning initiatives have been successful to a high or very high extent. What is the underlying reason for this? The typical challenges in executing learning and development activities for a dispersed workforce include:

- Cultural differences: translation challenges, and the lack of understanding cultural sensitivities
- Local laws and procedures: Lack of awareness about local laws and mandates leading to non-compliance of content
- Accreditation differences
- Lack of technology infrastructure to support learning initiatives

The challenges outlined above can be suitably addressed through an LMS-based blended learning program. While organizations can hire local experts to conduct training sessions, the distributed workforce could participate in the corporate programs through virtual sessions online. The LMS software can not only address the translation and cultural sensitivity issues, but also verify the accreditation requirements for the particular region. Some of the immediate benefits achieved through an LMS-based blended learning program include:

- Customized content in local languages
- Better collaboration through various features such as live chat and discussion forums with peers and mentors
- High levels of learner engagement driven by flexibility for the learner
- Reduced costs for the training department

As organizations dissolve geographical borders and work seamlessly across regions, a good learning initiative must work the same way too. Irrespective of the global footprint, every training program in any region that the organizational workforce is present in must reflect the organization’s learning objective. A comprehensive blended learning strategy can help an organization achieve this.

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Social Learning: 
The new piece in the Blended Learning pie

As training and development becomes more learner-centric, and newer tools and platforms emerge, it is a good practice for an organization to re-engineer its learning strategy from time to time. Especially with the emergence of social learning in the corporate environment, it is important to understand its strengths and harness it for optimal learning. According to an ASTD Research Report on Transforming Learning with Web 2.0 Technologies, nearly 87 percent of respondents felt that in the next three years their organization was most likely to use Web 2.0 technologies in the learning function.

A traditional learning environment cannot support social learning, and thus will not be able to leverage the informal, yet powerful learning this medium offers. A modular blended learning program, however, can be augmented with social learning components for better impact and reach. Here are a few ways in which social media can be woven into a blended learning program to enhance its effectiveness:

### Supplement formal learning methods:
Introduce social media tools within your classroom sessions and online sessions, so learners can know more about what others are saying about these topics. Links to videos, blogs and articles help learners understand different perspectives and gain a better insight into the topic.

### Create communities:
Social media offers a wonderful platform to connect with people who have an interest in the same topics, so that they can share ideas and spin off discussions. This can help build a culture of continuous and engaging learning.

### Encourage collaboration and sharing:
With social media as the route, learners now have a wide range of resources like webinars, group case studies, facilitated discussions and so on.

The bulls eye strategy to embrace social learning is to make it a significant part of your overall blended learning program, gain the consensus of the organization leadership and encourage learners or employees to participate in large numbers.

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Leveraging Blended Learning 2.0 for the Gen C workforce

A new definition in culture and commerce has emerged for content and product consumers who are “empowered by technology to search out authentic content that they consume across all platforms and all screens, whenever and wherever they want” (Google Think Insights). While statistics indicate that sixty-five percent are under 35, this Gen C spans the generations, including millennials.

How can you develop a blended learning program that covers all the touch points that this Gen C workforce uses? What blended learning strategy can ensure optimal learning?

Gen C learners come from diverse backgrounds, are constantly connected through technology, always on-the-go, and digitally literate. A Blended Learning 2.0 program can perfectly complement these characteristics, because it incorporates emerging web technologies like social bookmarks, vodcasts, podcasts, blog posts, VOIP solutions and interactive PDFs into the blended learning model. Blended Learning 2.0 is also about exploring more engaging forms of learning dissemination, which cater to this Gen C’s desire for visual, varied and exploratory learning preferences. Today, this involves:

**Mobile learning:** Using a smart phone as a learning tool brings in heightened interaction and flexibility to the learning program. Tips, summaries of the sessions, quick quizzes and trivia related to the sessions accessed through the mobile device helps increase the overall learning of a subject.

**Social learning:** An effective platform for knowledge sharing, a learner can use blogs, Skype, and chat groups to learn further. Discussions on forums, and interactions on similar groups can help learners understand the latest trends and gain a wider perspective on the topic.

**Gamification** through eLearning and mobile learning: Game-based training has gained popularity among corporates as an effective learning medium. Many organizations are successfully using games both as an independent learning tool and as part of a blended learning program. Simulated modules, games based on the session created with various levels and goals can help the learner enjoy the learning process and it can tremendously impact the overall learning.
Measuring the effectiveness of a new age Blended Learning program

An LMS-backed blended learning program can help transform the learning landscape within an organization, but how do we measure the learning effectiveness? How can the leadership get a bird’s eye view of how blended learning is positively impacting learning, business performance, and employee engagement?

An effective Learning Management System that lends itself to measuring the outcome of blended learning programs should ideally offer the following features to understand how much a learner has benefited:

**Assessments:** Regular online self-assessments can help learners measure their understanding of concepts from each session and then repeat a course if the assessment results are not satisfactory. Assessments can also help learning managers understand strengths and weaknesses of individual learners and groups, and these insights can be used to make appropriate changes to the syllabus, if required.

**Surveys:** Surveys on the quality of learning programs, resources offered, trainer and medium effectiveness can help learning managers understand the overall effectiveness of a training program and identify areas of improvement.

**Learner feedback:** Soliciting learner feedback can help assess the effectiveness of a program and modify learning programs to meet a learner’s individual goals or a group’s collective goals. Today, feedback can be gained from structured feedback forms or short questions delivered at the end of modules, or unstructured sources like social media channels which often give learners a platform to air their views.

In addition a management information system (MIS) and reporting mechanism offering detailed reports can help:

- Measure and monitor learners’ systematic progress effectively
- Help the organization take swift decisions through accurate reporting
- Identify regional learning requirements that may need to be addressed using specific training programs
- Highlight preferred learning mediums and types of content which can be referred to during future learning program development.
Conclusion

Without a shadow of a doubt, it is time for organizations to re-engineer and restructure their learning strategies. With Web 2.0, enterprise mobility and the pervasiveness of the internet, corporate learning must be a blend of various learning methodologies and resources delivered using high performance Learning Management System. With the employee increasingly becoming an equal partner in the learning process, training teams will find it imperative to run effective learning programs that foster development, growth and performance. As more millennials join the global workforce, blended learning programs offer the perfect combination of flexible learning methodologies and engaging learning experiences that can be delivered to this group of digitally literate and community oriented individuals.
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