

Mix and match



Combining training methods can create a powerful learning platform, but the key to success is getting the blend right.

Eddie Kilkelly, Chief Operating Officer, ILX Group, plc.

There can be little doubt that recession is putting ever more pressure on learning and development organisations to do more with less. Consequently, many are re-evaluating existing training strategies and programmes. By adopting a blended learning approach – combining training tools and approaches such as e-learning, classroom training, coaching and mentoring – an organisation can significantly reduce training costs, while maintaining training effectiveness. In a period when redundancies often mean remaining staff have to take on extra responsibilities, blended learning also provides a cost effective and swift method to up-skill staff.

However, there is no off-the-shelf blended learning approach. Programmes are bespoke to each organisation and so require careful upfront assessment and planning. The investment in time upfront will pay dividends as a streamlined training department not only better equips the organisation to cope with recession, but also puts it in a favourable position to thrive when the upturn comes.

Learning style

Corporate culture is the biggest single barrier to adoption in any learning

programme and blended learning is no exception. It is therefore critical for the learning department to assess and understand the most appropriate learning style for the organisation, before embarking on a blended learning approach.

Despite the huge potential benefits of blended learning, an organisation may find that its culture is simply not conducive to anything other than traditional classroom training. This presents two choices. Either the organisation can concentrate its training resources on making classroom sessions as cost efficient as possible, although if the culture will not support non-traditional methods of learning, then their benefits will never be realised. Or it can look to make small incremental changes, such as making pre-course work or post-course work available online. This can lay the foundations for more changes later, if the business is amenable.

Several factors need to be considered when deciding which delivery methods to blend. The shape of the resulting blended learning programme will largely depend on the organisational challenge and the elements included. These vary greatly between organisations and include traditional workshops or seminars, mentoring, teleconferences, online

training courses, print, corporate intranet, videos, wikis, webinars, blogs, webcasts, podcasts and more.

The key is to consider the blended learning solution holistically to determine the structure of the programme that will best meet the organisational challenge, while using existing resources and complementing them with the most cost-effective additional components. Simply bolting on e-learning modules to existing instructor led training does not constitute a blended learning programme. This 'Frankenstein' approach is unlikely to engage learners or drive anticipated business results.

Delivery methods

Each delivery method should be chosen for what it can deliver best. E-Learning can deliver knowledge, but it is the practical application of that knowledge that leads to the attainment of skills. Think of learning to drive – it would be impossible to be an effective driver without both knowledge of the Highway Code and the skills to manipulate a car. Therefore, e-learning is very suitable to deliver knowledge, while more traditional classroom scenarios or on-the-job training turn that knowledge into skill.

Blended learning is also more flexible in terms of location, pace, timing, repetition and ongoing reference. This enables the organisation to choose whether to offer alternative delivery options for the same training course and can reduce travel costs and minimise disruption as staff

may not need to be out of the office to train. Learners have greater choice about how and when they learn, and the integration of on-the-job coaching and mentoring into training provides true skills transfer. Blended learning enables training to become a continuous process, rather than an isolated learning event.

A fully integrated blended learning programme is a rapid, effective and low cost way to deliver large scale training that is fully aligned to the working environment. It not only helps organisations cope with the short-term cost cutting initiatives necessitated by recession, but also prepares them to thrive when the upturn arrives. An organisation with a streamlined learning platform will be flexible and adaptable enough to capitalise on new opportunities when the recession is over.

Extra value

By identifying a variety of formats and elements that work for employees,

An organisation with a streamlined learning platform will be flexible and adaptable enough to capitalise on new opportunities when the recession is over

organisations ensure that all learning styles are met – visual, auditory and kinesthetic – and this leads to more stimulated and motivated learners. In the current environment, it is perhaps more important than ever to make employees feel valued and a training programme is an important tool.

By helping an organisation understand what learning approach is appropriate for its workforce, blended learning ensures that resources are not wasted trying to impose tools and methods where

they just won't fit. For example, take e-learning. In recent years, the received wisdom has been that e-learning is the panacea to all training problems, but in some instances non-technological approaches are more effective. The upfront assessment will help organisations determine these instances within their own business.

There is no recipe for the perfect learning approach as it depends on all the elements outlined here, including the audience, objectives and company culture, but there is a huge diversity among the learning experiences that come under the blended learning umbrella. An organisation will know it has the blend right when it successfully combines sustainable training benefits and cost savings into a blended learning programme that enables it to reach its business objectives.

Learning style

- **Company culture:** Is it considered acceptable for employees to train at their desks? Will they be constantly interrupted? Is the company attention span short or long? Do non-traditional training methods have the support of the business? Does e-learning have kudos?
- **Technical constraints:** Are there any technical barriers to adopting e-learning? Is the company a highly technical environment or paper based? What will the architecture at work support? What infrastructure is available to employees at home?
- **Flexibility:** Is home working the norm? Does the organisation have a nine to five office based operation? Is it possible or desirable to increase flexibility?
- **Approach:** Does the organisation have established corporate standards and procedures for rolling out and ensuring a good uptake of training so that staff understand the true value of learning and the positive impact on their jobs? Are there transparent processes in place to ensure that any regulatory and compliance issues are met?

Blended learning assessment

- **Audience analysis:** Which elements of the workforce need to be trained? Is the workforce distributed? What types of courses have worked well with this audience in the past?
- **Course content:** What content is already available? What needs to be developed? Is the content suitable to be delivered in a different way?
- **Learning objectives:** What is the business problem or goal? What skills are required to benefit the business as a whole? What areas of the business can be improved through enhanced skills?
- **Knowledge and skills:** Divide the learning into two distinct parts, knowledge & understanding and practical skills and attitudes, then identify the most suitable non-classroom medium for knowledge and understanding, and consider complementary methods for developing skills and attitudes.
- **Outcomes:** Will the course lead to certification? What incentives will be used? How can progress be measured?
- **Communication:** What is the most effective way to launch the programme? How can the benefits best be sold to the audience? Is there a feedback mechanism?