

Blended Learning

Blended learning integrates seemingly opposite approaches, such as formal and informal learning, face-to-face and online experiences, directed paths and reliance on self-direction, and digital references and group connections, in order to achieve individual and organizational goals.

Blended learning Features

- Blended learning is devoted to learning and performance
- Blended learning takes many forms
- Blended learning addresses that nagging concern about transfer of training
- Blended learning relies on compelling assets and experiences
- Blended learning capitalizes on the resident smarts in the organization
- Blended learning promotes connections and conversations
- Blended learning guides, directs and tracks

Why blend?

Blended learning has a growing presence in workforce learning and performance. There is a wide-spread increase in use of blended learning in organizations and is considered the most effective and cost effective form of training. That others are doing it is interesting, but not conclusive. What might blended learning do for you?

Nurture a world-class and worldwide workforce

Globalization, offshore outsourcing, and franchising are changing the nature of organizations and the needs, location and experiences of their employees. Executives expect workforce learning to translate into performance, and to make contributions—big ones. Do they want their sales people in class or out in the field? Do they want consultants with each other or customers? Do they want knowledge acquired in class nine months ago or access to ideas and perspectives that reflect what is happening today? As organizations have shifted to customized and boundary less services, knowledge and expertise must follow and surround the field employees.

Provide consistent and updated messages

Instructors are a great resource during training, but their messages sometimes differ from one to another, and their smarts depart after class. Technology, on the other hand, can deliver standardized messages, instructional and otherwise, consistently, tirelessly, swiftly, repeatedly, patiently, around the globe. Online modules, knowledge bases, and archived presentations do not get jet lag.

Exploit technology

Dropping prices and increasing functionality mean that more people around the world are plugging in, with and without wires. The number of PCs is projected to surpass 1 billion in 2007, and the number of PDAs is anticipated to reach almost 60 million by 2008, with most boasting wireless email and web browsing capabilities. They can be used for mobile training, coaching, and performance support. Internet browser capabilities allow employees to access web-based databases or search engines through their cell phones. Short text messaging (SMS) can be used to send coaching tips, quizzes and knowledge checks, or to measure training transfer. And video clips can provide short examples of desirable performance in areas such as negotiation, managing meetings, or customer service.

Foster independent habits for learning and reference

Learners like choices. They can participate in communities and relationships, and enjoy interaction, guidance, and encouragement from peers, instructors, supervisors, and coaches. For those who are reluctant to turn exclusively to independent learning, blended forms anchored in the classroom can pave the way.

Converge learning and work

In the traditional instructor-led world, you are either IN class or AT work. Not surprisingly then, instructors and managers worry about transfer. That is less of a concern in a blended situation because it brings learning, information and support to where the work gets done. Got a question? You can look it up online. Got a problem? You can chat with your manager or share it with an online community. Eager to get better at personnel management? Fortunately, there's a course you can take and a pre-assessment that will make certain you're ready for that course. Every organization can capitalize on these benefits.

Improve performance and control costs

Studies report increased cost-effectiveness, and increased productivity for those using a blended approach as opposed to eLearning alone. In addition, online resources can be easier and cheaper to update and distribute. Less expensive solutions, such as virtual collaboration, coaching, recorded live events, and self-paced materials, can be used instead of more expensive customized computer-based content.

Live face-to-face (formal learning)	Live face-to-face (informal learning)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instructor-led classrooms• Workshops• Coaching, mentoring• On-the-job training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Group relationships• Work teams

Virtual collaboration (synchronous)	Virtual Collaboration (Asynchronous)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live eLearning classes • eCoaching, eMentoring • Instant messaging, SMS • Text chat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email • Online discussion forums • Polls • Bulletin boards
Self-paced learning	Performance support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online modules • Online resource links • Simulations & scenarios • Self assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online help systems • Online knowledge databases • Documentation • Performance support tools

What type of blending is appropriate?

Globalization, offshore outsourcing, and franchising are changing the nature of organizations and the needs, location and experiences of their employees. Executives expect workforce learning to translate into performance, and to make contributions—big ones. Do they want their sales people in class or out in the field? Do they want consultants with each other or customers? Do they want knowledge acquired in class nine months ago or access to ideas and perspectives that reflect what is happening today? As organizations have shifted to customized and boundary less services, knowledge and expertise must follow and surround the field employees.

Nurture a world-class and worldwide workforce

Most blends today are collections of separate, stand alone face-to-face and/or online components from which learners pick and choose. Direction is minimal; freedom is maximized. The scenario could be instructor-led workshops and web-based sales module training. After the basic training class, sales people may or may not elect to complete the modules. Likewise, some who completed the modules may not have attended the face-to-face workshop.

In a more directed blend, components are presented within a defined learning system. Integration might come from diagnostics that point learners to specific lessons, resources, or assessments that culminate in a certificate or other form of recognition. For example, students studying project management can take self-assessments that check their understanding of content from prerequisite courses, and point them to topic areas in preparation for the next course.

Blending is all about decisions. Managers must decide

- Which assets to buy, build or adapt, and how they will be maintained?
- How and when to leverage the precious human resource provided by experts and instructors?

- How much guidance and independence employees will enjoy?
- What kind of guidance system and support will be provided, if any at all, and whether assistance comes from the instructor, an expert, the manager, or an automated program?

Conclusion

Blending should be considered based on the audience and the perceived benefits of learning & training, keeping in mind the results and reality. Each organization can leverage internal experts and installed technology, to reiterate classroom messages, and to systematically stir treasured assets into the workplace and workforce. Ask your executives. Ask yourself. If it were possible, wouldn't organizations be strengthened by more pervasive learning experiences, knowledge, support and conversations in closer proximity to where the work gets done, where customers are served, and where problems are solved?

Perhaps most intriguing of all is the influence on employees themselves. Blended learning asks much of them, while it establishes and applauds skills and habits that favor continuous growth, collaboration, curiosity and reference.