BRING LEARNING
UP TO SPEED

BY JULIE WINKLE GIULIONI AND KAREN VOLOSHIN

Today's business environment is all about the hustle. To be effective, learning has to adopt the same hurry-up mentality.

How many learning leaders have heard feedback like this:
"It was a great course, but I wish it could've been shorter."
"It was interesting, but I don't see myself using all of it."
"An entire day in training throws my week into chaos."
"Next quarter would be better. … I just don't have time to attend right now."
Even more of them are hearing it now.

It makes sense. Consider the work environments that learners step away from to participate in development activities — and then return to. Customers, supervisors and teams expect immediacy.

Cycle times continue to compress. Juggling multiple, often conflicting, top priorities is the norm. Emergencies emerge with no notice, throwing any semblance of planning out the window. No wonder many learners sit like coiled springs, waiting to fly out the door to address what's happened while they were away.

For learning leaders, this translates into pressure to constantly shorten development offerings. It's a natural extension of today's world. We have computers that look like phones and phones that look like computers. Coin-sized devices take our blood pressure and count calories. All of this has established the expectation that good things come in small packages. Organizations increasingly expect learning to follow suit.

Learning and development leaders have to respond to this growing expectation around skills development, knowledge acquisition and bottom-line results. It's no longer a matter of whittling down what currently exists, performing magic with minutes. Chief learning officers have to fundamentally rethink time and how they deploy it to create optimal learning and business outcomes.

Making the time warp work for, rather than against, a company means doing things differently. The following eight practices easily can be implemented by any learning organization.

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Make Relevance Non-negotiable

Today, every learning minute must be focused on the skills and competencies that matter most. No exceptions. At Advocate Health Care, one of the largest health systems in Illinois and operating more than 250 care sites, the learning function has made it a priority to be strategically aligned with business partners within the system. Learning leaders work hand-in-hand with those responsible for talent review and succession planning to identify organizationwide competency gaps.

"We're taking a laserlike, targeted approach to focusing on the 'have to have' competencies required to meet our strategic objectives and provide the best possible care," said Amy Schoeny, vice president of learning institutes at Advocate. "We have finite resources and can't afford to spend time on things that don't align with our organizational direction. We've done away with several open enrollment courses that people may have enjoyed but that didn't fit the 'have to have' criteria."

For instance, Advocate launched 2.5 hours of compressed learning to help leaders and associates understand myriad industry changes hitting health care and the implications for their functional areas. By striving for a critical mass of attendees at all levels, they aim to increase strategic thinking, industry knowledge and business acumen throughout the organization. What could be more relevant?

Make It Micro

Research continually confirms offering content in small chunks spaced over time is brain friendly. It's also organization friendly, fitting better into the cadence of work. Working memory plays a critical role in learning and can only hold a few items at a time. Cognitive overload occurs when we load up working memories with too much information at once. Employees essentially reach a 'tilt' state and processing ceases. So when it comes to learning, less really is more.

However, "it's not about taking existing training and just slicing it into 15-minute segments," said Karen Mathre, a global leadership and talent development consultant for Medtronic Inc., a global medical device technology company. "We have to look critically at the content, select one complete and relevant idea, and package it in the most actionable way possible."

This sort of focused microlearning is becoming a mainstay strategy in organizations that are mastering the learning/time challenge. It all comes down to offering learning bursts of information that can be retrieved in discrete, small chunks at the point of need for maximum receptiveness.

Give Them Some Space

Micro-increments also offer the benefit of spaced learning. Rather than batching days worth of information together with little hope that it will be remembered, spaced learning allows time for reflection, something that gets little attention in most learning interventions. Learners require time and space to digest, integrate and make connections. Otherwise, learning can be shallow, disassociated from the work world in which it will be applied. With reflection, skills, knowledge and capabilities layer to create depth and dimension that promote performance.

There are many time-effective strategies that can facilitate reflection development activity. Leaders can offer guided reflection assignments between sessions or events; provide an assortment of reflection questions from which learners can choose; or invite learners to journal and post thoughts on discussion boards.

Mix It Up

Even with the most ruthless editing, there's still more content available than the typical classroom can accommodate. As a result, it's critical for learning leaders to challenge what learning looks like in 2015 and beyond.

The options are endless. Current applications allow for rapid, efficient, inexpensive development of engaging learning in an ever-expanding array of media.

"We're getting terrific feedback on our podcasts," said Karen Huneycutt, talent management manager at Allsteel, an office furniture manufacturer. "Participants love the 10-minute expansion of content previously introduced and the flexibility of listening on their own schedules. While it was a strategy to reduce training time, ironically, it's causing members to come back and request more in-person learning."

Other organizations are mixing a variety of learning methods for a blended approach to deploy content chunks. Some of those methods include:
• Online communities, discussion boards, knowledge sharing and resource libraries
• RSS feeds
• TweetChats, or Twitter-style dialogues, that allow for short but intense real-time sharing of ideas and perspectives on a topic
• Learner-accessed playlists of curated internal libraries of short videos and podcasts
• One-page skill summaries
• Two-minute video clips followed by a two to three question comprehension check

Focus Attention Fast

The critical moment in any learning situation is when learners direct their limited capacity of working memory to a few selected items — in other words,

when they pay attention. Attention is in short supply in most workplaces.

Linda Stone, a retired Microsoft Corp. executive who also worked at Apple Inc. said today's brand of attention is continuous and partial. Essentially, we continuously scan the environment so as not to miss anything. She describes "continuous partial attention" as being in a state of high alert, a kind of constant, artificial crisis. Needless to say, this type of attention can be an obstacle for learning.

Learning leaders need to be able to quickly grab and sustain learner attention. For example, savvy instructional designers are combining efficiency with focus by creating participant introductions that do double duty. Consider the following scenario. Rather than just name, rank, and serial number, a branding workshop can quickly get into the topic by asking participants for the consumer brand that best describes them. It's fast, fun and focused. There are plenty of other ways to focus attention:

- Use novelty and surprise to allow learners to make connections using existing knowledge.
- Use engaging yet simple visuals that pop to reinforce key content.
- Tap into learner emotion and humanity with quick memorable stories and examples.
- Interject relevant, appropriate humor.

Give Them Some Air (Time)

When people get together virtually or face-to-face, it's important to focus less on content delivery and more on high payoff opportunities for interaction. Resist the temptation to cover more material during shortened timeframes at the expense of these activities. Participant airtime is often the first thing to go when training time shrinks.

Active participant engagement promotes active con-tent processing. Targeted conversation, real-life rehearsal and verbal commitments to action help learners create an "in their own words" version of content. This supports learners as they integrate new information with what they know so they can more easily retrieve and apply it on the job when needed.

Hit Delete on Deliverables

As learning structures and delivery mechanisms morph and compress, it's important to reconceive related deliverables. They must reflect the same efficiency as the experience. The participant workbook is, and should be, a casualty of this evolution. Learning leaders are no longer compelled to make extensive documentation available because they often slow the pace of learning with unnecessary reading and become little more than bookshelf ornamentation.

Today's lean, mean organizations don't need, and won't tolerate, a proliferation of paper. But taking old-school participant guides and uploading them to the Web is not the answer. Effective, new approaches to deliverables will trend toward usability. Less is more in this case, too. To-the-point resources, reminders, performance support tools and apps better align with the cadence of the workplace — and better support learning and behavior change.

Retrain the Trainer

Among the greatest challenges facing classroom trainers is changing up the tempo, replacing more leisurely learning rhythms with today's crisper cadence. Comfortable patterns for extended discussions, getting-to-know you exercises, and midsession energizers need to be recalibrated.

With fewer hours in the classroom, trainers are well poised to contribute in new ways, specifically helping organizations to embed and make connections to content. "We must constantly scan the horizon for how skills and training apply and relate to the business … and find ways to remind participants of that," Allsteel's Huneycutt said. Trainers are ideally suited to play that role.

Today's business environment generates pressure to continuously expand capacity, contributions and results. This hurry-up world demands more learning in less time than ever before. It all comes down to learning strategies that keep pace and deliver learning at the speed of business. **CLO**

Julie Winkle Giulioni is a learning consultant and co-author of "Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go: Career Conversations Employees Want." Karen Voloshin is an instructional designer and certified coach. Together, they lead DesignArounds, a bicoastal training, design and coaching firm. To comment, email editor@CLOmedia.com.