Learning for a Workforce of One

BY SUSAN M. CANTRELL AND DAVID SMITH

By customizing learning at the individual level, organizations can reap business benefits, such as improved performance, more motivated and loyal employees and reduced overall learning costs.

Organizations have a long history of assembling learners in the same room at the same time and force-feeding them information — as though each had identical prior knowledge, learning styles and knowledge needs.

But because everyone has different prior knowledge, different learning styles and different rates and timetables for learning, this assembly-line approach fails to maximize learning investments. Learning structure should not be built around the provider, but rather around learners and their unique needs and preferences.

According to research presented in the book Workforce of One: Revolutionizing Talent Management Through Customization, leading organizations are effectively creating scalable, manageable learning environments that meet the highly diverse and ever-evolving needs of individual employees. These organizations are no longer treating their workforces as single, monolithic entities by creating generic, standardized training programs — nor are they merely offering prepackaged e-learning content that may be customized in terms of pace, timing and learning style, but that often misses the bulk of the learning that occurs through informal means. Instead, these organizations are developing a holistic learning strategy that encompasses not only customized formal learning, but individually relevant informal learning as well.

The rewards for this customization include improved performance; more motivated and committed employees; and the ability to cut ineffective spending, since scarce organizational resources are no longer wasted on teaching something that is already known by an individual or on learning approaches that don’t capitalize on how an individual learns best. (See Figure 1.)

Four Learner-Centered Strategies

Companies can take a customized, learner-centered approach by engaging in the following four activities.

1. **Segment the workforce.** According to scientists such as Howard Gardner and David Kolb, people have distinct learning and thinking styles, such as visual vs. verbal or converging vs. diverging. Companies such as Hallmark Cards are segmenting their employees based on individual learning style and providing tailored management training programs accordingly.

   Technology makes this kind of segmentation easier. Companies can now provide an online assessment of learning style that employees can take on their...

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**FIGURE 1: END USERS WANT TO DIRECT THEIR OWN LEARNING**

Employees respond to the question: “At an organization where what, when and how I learn is based on my unique needs, preferences and learning style ...”

- I would be more likely to be attracted to and remain at the organization.
  - 73%

- My performance would improve.
  - 70%


N=577 U.S. employees in large to midsize organizations across a variety of industries.
learning portal; the portal can then guide employees to learning vehicles based on their learning type.

Other companies are segmenting their employees based on generation or geography. One division of a global consumer products company, for example, only targets younger generations with podcasts. Another found that while formal lectures work well in places such as Germany, Americans prefer a more collaborative, active approach to learning.

Segmenting by workforce or role is also a natural way to tailor learning to the needs of a diverse workforce. British Telecommunications, for example, created a learning portal complete with real-time access to relevant knowledge, training, simulations, networks of experts and collaborators; progress on critical performance metrics; process methodologies; and productivity tools customized to the unique needs of its call center employees. According to a 2006 Accenture study, agents report that the confidence these employees have when performing their jobs has improved by 23 percent, and resulting efficiencies in handling calls have led to a savings of $6 million.

Many companies are getting creative with respect to how they segment. One consumer products company bases curricula not only on general type of role — administrative, manager or function head — but also on length of service, skills the individual would like to attain and other criteria. According to Natalie S. Griffin in a 2003 Harvard Business Review article, Nationwide Financial even experimented with segmenting its leaders by character assessments, such as workaholics, reluctant leaders, unknown leaders and arrogant leaders — and offering tailored development and training programs for each.

2. **Offer modular choices.** Organizations also can allow employees to choose types of learning based on their needs and preferences. For example, call center employees at Coventry Building Society, a U.K.-based financial services institution, can choose from classroom training, self-development activities, computer-based training, structured visits to other key customer-facing departments and more. After offering these varied learning modes, call center capture rates improved from 78 percent to 94 percent, the average number of sales leads and calls answered increased, and staff turnover decreased, according to a 2007 Accenture research report.

Organizations also can break down learning content into much smaller, modular components, thereby enabling learning to be mass configured at the highly granular level of the individual employee rather than merely by workforce or skill family. These can include short videos, simulations, games, traditional e-learning, podcasts and virtual classrooms. For example, learners at news service Reuters can custom configure learning on the fly by choosing from a selection of 10- to 20-minute learning components, as reported by Kay Baldwin-Evans and Charles Jennings in a 2007 Strategic HR Review article.

To help employees navigate an often overwhelming sea of learning choices, new technologies that use collaborative filtering and “smart push” narrow down the pool and present only the most relevant options, which are based on such considerations as previous learning choices and skills inventories. The U.S. Navy, for example, developed an interactive system that allows sailors to take a pre-test that will give them credit for what they already know and presents options for creating a personalized learning plan based only on what they don’t know, according to a 2005 article by Gary Kirchner in Training.

3. **Facilitate peer-to-peer learning.** Instead of defining a one-size-fits-all linear learning curriculum from on high, organizations instead can allow employees themselves to create learning content and dynamically pull and push it to one another on an as-needed, highly customized, collaborative basis. Instead of turning to a book or a course if there’s a tech problem, for example, an employee may look up friends on a corporate version of Facebook, locate a friend of a friend who has knowledge or experience in that area, and instant message him or her with a question. Or the employee may post it on an online threaded discussion group of like-minded people in a community of practice, post it on a blog or wiki, or initiate a chat group. Alternatively, the employee may search for a video online that captured a person working to solve that particular technology problem or troll for knowledge that has been codified and posted by another employee and ranked in terms of usefulness by others in an online knowledge marketplace.

Many companies are now working hard to facili-
tate this kind of informal, peer-to-peer learning. For example, Microsoft gives many of its employees the tools to create, capture and share their own learning content with one another using blogs, wikis, online bulletin boards, Sharepoint, and YouTube-like applications that can be delivered on a device of choice. Microsoft also uses technology to mine sources of content — such as e-mail, content repositories, tags on Web pages, blogs and instant messages — to dynamically and organically uncover individuals with particular areas of interest or expertise.

At a few companies, peer-to-peer learning even occurs across organizational boundaries. Advertising company Wieden+Kennedy, for example, facilitates learning and innovation by bringing in design professionals and artists — graphic designers, museum professionals, poets, writers, dancers and performance artists — to share its space in Portland, Ore. The premise is that employees are likely to learn from those in the other arts and design organizations that share the building.

4. Encourage experience-based learning. Increasingly, employees are learning from their own experience. On-the-job developmental activities can be used to help facilitate this, as can learning through direct observation. At Men’s Wearhouse, for example, managers will demonstrate effective sales approaches and then coach employees in a highly personalized way. Tom Hennigan, former chief operating officer for Victorinox Swiss Army Inc., pairs people up and assigns them joint responsibility for a project or role — that way they are forced to learn from one another. And at technology research firm Forrester, not only do novice researchers pair up with experienced researchers, but also everyone works in a completely open, transparent physical work environment, with no office or cubicle walls to hinder the shadowing and learning process.

Today, experience can just as easily — and sometimes more cheaply and safely — occur in cyberspace, through virtual worlds or simulated games. In a 2007 article in Government Executive, Anne Laurent writes that the U.S. Homeland Security Department offers experience-based learning through private online virtual worlds where the goal is to kill and avoid being killed.

Challenges and Solutions
Although there can be big payoffs from ensuring learning is highly relevant and tailored to the needs of each employee, this can require organizations to navigate some tricky territory. For example, an organization may risk oversimplification and even stereotyping when it assigns people to large, generalized segments based on statistical averages or logical assumptions. Just because an employee is older, for example, doesn’t mean he or she doesn’t prefer learning with the assistance of technology. To avoid such stereotyping, an organization may want to enable employees to self-segment or segment based on criteria other than generation or geography, such as learning style or workforce. And although providing modular choices avoids such issues, it comes with its own challenge: Too many choices can quickly become overwhelming. To avoid this, organizations can present only those choices deemed most relevant.

Peer-to-peer and experience-based learning offer the advantages of being less expensive and more timely than learning content that is defined centrally. But when using wikis, blogs or experience-based simulated games, organizations risk employees contributing information that is neither accurate nor appropriate. And it becomes harder to document things, such as how many employees completed how much training on a particular topic.

However, companies are quickly learning how to address such challenges. SAP is considering creating software, for example, that looks at employees’ Microsoft Outlook calendars to see whether any appointments, such as a meeting with a mentor or a coach, constitute a “learning event.” And according to Ed Frauenheim in a January 2007 Workforce Management article, Plateau Systems tracks any employee searches on external blogs or podcasts to show executives how and what employees are learning. A host of other control mechanisms and safeguards can be instituted, too — including filters, approvals, monitoring and peer policing — to help ensure content is copacetic.

Although relevant, customized learning may come with its own set of challenges, the business benefits that result from providing learning experiences that are highly relevant to individual employees have led many executives to increasingly adopt a more sophisticated, nuanced and undoubtedly more complex learning model. Ultimately, treating your workforce as a workforce of one capitalizes on differences to contribute to a strong bottom line.

Susan M. Cantrell is a research fellow at the Accenture Institute for High Performance and co-author of Workforce of One: Revolutionizing Talent Management Through Customization. David Smith is the managing director of the Accenture talent and organization performance practice and co-author of Workforce of One. They can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.