THE BUSINESS CASE
FOR MOBILE LEARNING

How do you justify the initial investment in mobile learning and ensure it is aligned with bottom-line goals? Here is Jon Drake's no-nonsense guide to building a compelling business case to managers and senior executives.

Mobile learning, applied to the right problem, in the right way, can deliver enormous efficiency and efficacy gains to an organisation. Here's how to prove it.

Traditional instructor-led classroom training or virtual training delivered via a learning management system is still effective in teaching new skills. But it comes at a high cost in terms of time. There's the time to travel, time off the job, or time tethered to a workstation. This adds up to several working days, just to achieve compliance in some cases.

Mobile breaks these chains to allow for 'untethered' learning when it is most necessary or convenient – on or off the clock. The very nature of how people use mobile

devices tells us that the device is always on, always in-hand and always connected. The explosion of Smartphones and tablets means employees can access the information needed to do the job anytime, anywhere, even without internet access.

Convincing your senior management team to implement a mobile learning system requires a clearly defined business case. Developing a laundry list of potential benefits is only the beginning; it must then be applied to your particular business situation. A business case will offer a clear statement of the business problem(s) and your proposed solution(s), as well as provide measurements of success. In essence, it describes your organisation's current status

versus the desired status, and how the organisation can achieve its goals.

The target audience for your business case will most likely fall into two camps – business unit managers and senior executives – the people who will ultimately give your proposal the financial support it needs to succeed. Consequently, it is important that your business case is aligned with their goals and 'pain points'.

BUSINESS UNIT MANAGERS

Business unit managers own the problems that training solves. They are pragmatic; their overriding interest is in getting the job done – and soon. Until you know what your business unit managers are trying to accomplish, you can't talk to them about potential results. The manager is usually training's primary sponsor. The 'right client' is the decision-maker who understands the end goal and has responsibility for the organisational area in which the problem occurs.

When you're working with the right client in your organisation, measuring results is not difficult. Start with the business problems and work backwards. The most important step in measuring performance is to pin down the business manager's answer to the classic question, "What's in it for me?" Don't skip this step. Without it, meaningful tracking is impossible. First, gain agreement on the problem(s) to be solved and the value of solving it (them). Then go on to outline your proposed solutions. Establish a baseline measure of current performance and clearly indicate how performance will be tracked and reported.

Determine what your project sponsor(s) will accept as persuasive evidence that the programme produced the agreed-upon result, then make your case logically by linking learning to business results. Establish a causal (not casual!) link between a particular skill deficiency and a particular business outcome. Build a compelling logical argument based on the unit manager's metrics, performance requirements and the metrics that would indicate the return on the mobile learning investment.

The process of tracking learning results starts before any learning takes place. It begins with an agreement between the training manager and the line manager on the value of solving the problem. A joint examination of the problem will clarify the gap between the results desired and the results you're actually getting. Then determine what major skill gaps and learning deficiencies are holding people back and estimate the expected financial value to be gained by eliminating those factors. Again, make sure you get agreement on the expected outcomes, how they will be measured and what constitutes good performance.

Throughout the process, help the managers answer questions about why skills matter and what on-going good performance looks like. You are focusing sustained attention on solving business problems and adding and identifying tangible values for each skill to be taught. As a result, you're forging a partnership with the business unit manager based on the core concern: maximising performance without taking the employee away from the job.

SENIOR EXECUTIVES

No organisation has the resources to do everything. Senior executives are forced to choose where the company's top priorities lie, what comes first, whether initiatives should be completed in-house or outsourced, and which will yield the greatest return. A good business case shows expected consequences of the action over time and, most importantly, includes the methods and rationale used to quantify benefits and costs.

Executives focus on two things: strategy and outfoxing the competition. They will be interested most in information that discusses sales, revenues and profits, as well as what will increase the company's market share. Consequently, they are looking for you to convince them that your mobile learning initiative is worthy of the organisation's time, effort and money. To clarify their analysis, distil a complex business alternative into a three or four page business case to provide a tool that supports planning and decision-making. Include information about which vendor to choose and when to implement.

From a senior executive's standpoint, business cases are generally designed to answer the question: What are the likely financial and other business consequences if we take (or don't take) this or that action? Creating a case that is deeply ingrained with the insights of the business unit manager will help you in labelling that person as a trustedadvocate for further consultation with the senior executive.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT FROM MOBILE LEARNING

Your CFO and/or executive team has probably already asked you to justify your training investment in terms of financial payback. Being able to produce an accurate and defendable return on investment has long been the holy grail of the training industry. Much has been written on the topic but, in the end, every calculation has some element of subjectivity.

However, there is still a lot to discuss with your executive team to justify the investment. Financial calculations can be based on the reduction in time taken to complete tasks, the abilityto carry out activities that were not previously possible, or the increase in the quality of activities. Here you can refine your persuasive appeal for the desire of every executive: mobile learning will increase the company's speed to money.

We've described several different aspects of building a business case for mobile learning in your organisation. A strong case will justify the initial investment and align mobile learning with your organisation's business goals. In this way you will win the financial and business support to move your initiative forward.

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The growth in mobile learning is driven by...

- Rapid user adoption
- Significant cost savings
- More effective presentation of training content
- Reinforcement of on-the-job performance
- Immediate access to job aids and resources
- No necessity to congregate in one location
- No necessity to remain seated in front of a computer.

Employees pull out bite-sized training only when it is needed, thereby increasing the value, potential and return on the investment. They retain more knowledge when the information is relevant – maximising performance without taking the employee away from the job.

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