



Rapid guide
Podcasting Reviewed

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About this guide:

It's for: People in the learning and training community who are new or relatively new to podcasting and videocasting (vodcasting) and want to explore its potential as part of learning solutions.

It's by: Ufi/learnirect and Kineo, two organisations with experience in learning design and development including podcasting, who are keen to share their findings with the wider learning and training community.

It explains:

- What podcasting is
- What's in it for learning
- 8 steps to effective podcasting
- How some organisations are successfully using podcasting
- Where podcasting is headed

It's not: A technical manual for audio recording, editing, RSS creation or equipment purchase (though we include some tips and advice for those aspects too).

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To hear podcasting in action,
download the accompanying
podcast discussion with
Donald Clark, board member
of Ufi and one of the early
advocates of podcasting
and learning in the UK

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What is podcasting?

It's impossible to watch a TV show or listen to the radio without the announcer bombarding you with invitations to download the podcast or vodcast. Though the term has really only been around since late 2004, it's passed from geekspeak into the mainstream at incredible speed. Even Newsnight's Jeremy Paxman does it. So if he knows what it is, so should you....

So a quick definition: in its simplest terms, a podcast is an audio file, usually created in .mp3 format, which can consist of a monologue, an interview, a talk show, or whichever format works for you and your audience.

To get it out to your intended audience, you upload your audio file along with what's called an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) file to your website, intranet page, or wherever you're going to make it available.

Your listeners (you hope, anyway) subscribe to your podcast by adding your RSS feed to their 'podcatcher' software, such as iTunes. The podcatcher then looks for new episodes of your podcast and downloads them automatically when they're available, so the listener doesn't have to manually check your website for the latest episode.

Then the listener sits back (or jogs, or walks the dog, or whatever) and enjoys your latest masterpiece, via an mp3 player or their computer. Just to be clear: You don't need an mp3 player to listen to a podcast – a computer, podcatcher software, and some speakers or a headset are all you need. However, being able to listen while on the move is obviously one of the key advantages of podcasting. More about that below.

So that's what it is: an audio file that you, the podcaster, make available to your listeners using RSS. So what's that got to do with learning? Good question....

What's in it for learning?

Podcasting didn't come into existence to support learning. Its use has primarily been in entertainment, acting as a vehicle for Ricky Gervais, Russell Brand and their ilk. But learning professionals have long been in the business of examining new technologies and asking what's in it for learning – and podcasting has a lot to offer.

Audio is our most natural learning mode. We've been talking and listening to each other a lot longer than we've been using PowerPoints and e-learning. And while audio and learning have crossed paths before, there's not a long history of using audio effectively in training. We've had CDs and before that tapes, but they've mainly been confined to the 'learn Italian while you swerve across the M25' variety; beyond that it has been a relatively underexploited tool.

Why is it that audio has not been used more in training and learning? One reason is the means of production. Creating audio and getting it out to the masses has long been the realm of professionals with studios and access to broadcast channels.

Podcasting has shattered all of that. Now anyone with a computer, a microphone, and a few simple software applications can create audio for mass distribution. The key benefits of podcasting for learning include:

No return on investment required

Podcasting is easier and faster to develop than e-learning. It's cheaper than running a workshop. The single biggest driver for podcasting is that it's incredibly cheap and easy to do. No big ROI calculation is required, no degree in audio engineering, no knowledge of code. That should be reason enough to try it, but in case it isn't, here are a few more reasons why audio should be part of the options.

Purity and simplicity

Audio is about as close as it gets to pure content. No complex menu to navigate. No cluttered interface. No distracting flash animation. No quibbling about production values (as long as it's done to a reasonable standard). When done well, it's one of the most direct ways of getting a message straight into the listener's ear.

Hands free

Many of your learners do not work at desks. They're salespeople on the road, engineers in the field, and consultants at client sites. And even if they do work at desks, chances are they spend a fair amount of time in planes, trains and automobiles – often with an mp3 player (which many mobile phones are as well, let's not forget). Are there windows for learning when your staff are on the move? If so, what are you providing for that window? Podcasting can be a quick and effective answer.

Story time

Stories are probably the oldest and most effective form of learning. From Aesop's fables to the famous time when salesperson X lost the deal because he said the wrong thing on the way out of the door, stories are how we convey lessons that live on in the memory long after the learning objectives have faded. Story telling is intrinsically oral. You could write the stories down, but so much is conveyed by tone of voice, emotion of storyteller, that audio – depending of course on your learning preference – can do much more than the written word to get the point across. So why not consider what stories your organisation has to tell to your staff, and podcast them?

On demand, time shift

We're all time poor. The advantage of RSS feeds is that your learners don't waste any time wondering if new information is available, trying to remember where it is, and then going through the motions of downloading files. Podcasting makes access to audio learning easy and puts learners in control- they can catch the podcast at a time and place that suits them.

Blends well

It's easy to add podcasting to our blended learning. Most people don't look to make it mandatory, and quite right too. We think it's best to regard it as a complementary component. It could be used in a wide range of ways:

- In advance of a workshop or e-learning session, to communicate key messages and raise questions in the listener's mind before an in-depth session.
- Following up from a face-to-face session or e-learning experience, with key points, reminders and takeaways podcasted on a regular basis to sustain the message.
- As a way of motivating learners throughout a blended programme, for example, reminding them what should be completed by week 3, encouraging reflection and action on the job.
- As an ongoing channel for updates, success stories and lessons learned, encouraging listeners to post their own podcasts and contribute to the community.
- As a mechanism for just in time delivery of relevant content – for example, listening to tips for effective interviewing en route to a job interview, when few other learning delivery formats could reach a learner at the point of need like this.

In practice

Better to go soft with podcasting

It would be foolish to suggest podcasting is equally suited to all topics. As you make decisions about which topics are best to consider for podcasting, we recommend you focus on softer skills: coaching, management, leadership, negotiation, induction, sales all have conversational and story-telling dimensions which make them well suited for the medium.

In the middle ground is product knowledge: if kept to relatively light and digestible features, benefits, customer experience it can work well.

Topics that are typically unsuited to podcasting are those that require more dense or detailed procedural information, such as financial analysis, compliance topics, and IT processes. For these, the old adage that a picture tells a thousand words does hold true. Even the most auditory learner will struggle to keep track of a complex process described purely through a podcast.

So: it's quick, low-cost, portable, easy to access, great for conveying storytelling information and learning in its purest form, and a simple addition to the blend. In short, not to consider podcasting would be to miss an opportunity in blended design and delivery.

Let's assume that's reason enough to convince you to try it. What process should you follow, to design and deliver effective podcasts? That's the focus of the next section.

8 steps to effective podcasting

Let's assume you're interested enough in the potential of podcasting to try it in your organisation. Here's a simple set of steps to follow to make it happen.

1 →
Clarify audience
and objectives

2 →
Establish format

3 →
Set up hard and
software

4 →
Prepare the
interview

5 →
Prepare to record

6 →
Record

7 →
Edit and output

8 →
Set up RSS Feed

STEP 1: Be clear on your objectives and audience

Just like any other form of learning intervention, podcasting requires design. While it's easy to just turn on and start recording to see what happens, you're not likely to get great results – not without a lot of effort and editing. A little planning up front will help a lot.

As always, you need to keep in mind your typical listener at all times. Are they on the road or desk-based, or both? What do you know about their attention spans? What do you know about their preferences when it comes to audio? All card-carrying iPod fanatics, or are they new to the idea? Thinking these issues through and working with a user group can help a lot in your podcast planning.

It's unlikely that your podcasts are going to have learning objectives (unless perhaps they're audio tutorials which we describe below). However, they must have some kind of objective – be it to support a new product launch, deliver a three-point plan update from the Board, get to know the new CEO, provide ongoing hints on effective coaching to support a workshop event, or share success stories from last month's sales conference. Be clear on what that objective is and stay focused. Rambling podcasts are not helpful.

Finally, think about where and how listeners will access the podcast – will you market it as an alternative to other forms of content? Will it be an explicit part of a blended programme? Will you make it available to everyone or a limited number of people? Will you provide it to people outside the organisation: suppliers, customers, prospective employees? All of these questions influence your aims and objectives and how you make format and access decisions about your podcast.

In practice

State your aims

Make the objective of your podcast the first thing you say, for example "Hi, I'm X and we're here to talk to John Smith, head of data sales, about the new set of data services and how to position them to customers." It's the audio equivalent of the title page. Don't leave the listener to figure out what you're discussing as they may have downloaded it to their mp3 player without seeing any accompanying text description. Make it clear in the first five seconds so they can decide if it's relevant or not to them.

STEP 2: Think format, frequency, length

Once you're clear on why you're doing a podcast, and for whom, the next key point is to decide what kind of format you're going to follow.

Not surprisingly, most podcasting formats borrow heavily from radio (well, it has had a hundred-year head start). Scour around iTunes and you'll come across a few common formats for podcasts.

Format

The monologue

One person, one voice, broadcasting their message (think 'state of the nation' speeches).

The interview

Usually two-way: interviewer and interviewee.

The magazine show

May include some opening monologue, an interview with one or more guests, emails or voicemails from listeners, and music.

The documentary

Themed show focused on a specific topic, including interview clips from a variety of subjects, and a linking narrative.

The audio tutorial

Podcast designed with a specific learning objective in mind, e.g. "Today we're going to learn how to order food in Italian", or "Let's talk about tax code 99a and its exclusions".

Marketing/promotional podcast

Promotional material enticing learners to explore further, e.g. a teaser/taster for attending a workshop, accessing an e-learning course, listening to a longer series of podcasts.

Comments

Can be effective if the speaker is very engaging, has a powerful message, and is kept very brief – otherwise, difficult to pull off successfully.

Probably the most common form of podcast.

Effective for helping the interviewee convey messages in a friendly, conversational format.

Some preparation is required to get it right, which we cover later.

Can be very effective if produced to a high standard – but time-consuming to prepare, record and edit.

A variation on the above format, this is an increasingly used one, and one that Kineo has used it a few times in preparing podcasts for clients. Rather than just having one person's point of view, you have several exploring a theme and not always agreeing – it can lead to a more interesting output than the pure monologue or one-subject.

This can be a good addition to other learning interventions – but rarely relied upon to be the primary source of learning as dense technical information is not well-suited to the audio format.

Writing an audio tutorial is different from writing for e-learning or text book – you have to consider pace, use of repetition, allowing pauses for learners to digest information – in our view, podcasting is best if more informal and conversational in its nature.

Ufi/learndirect's view: "Marketing is primarily where we've used podcasting to date, can have a great impact in reaching our target audience and encouraging them to explore courses further. For us the great advantage is that it's a way of getting information out quickly, in a different format, livening up the message, and maximising the marketing reach. Building on this success, we're now exploring other areas for podcasting."

While there are other formats out there, these are the main types you're likely to come across and may want to consider in your podcasting.

In conjunction with your format decision, you need to think frequency - Is this a one-off, in support of a specific organisational event or objective? Or is this the first in a series of ten, looking at different parts of the organisation or following on from a blended programme as a takeaway? How often you do it may influence the format you decide to use. If you're keen to do a weekly podcast, think hard before committing to a multi-guest chat show style, unless you're prepared to commit the resources to decide on guests, prepare, record and edit it.

Then think length: Typically your podcasts should be no more than 15 minutes – closer to 10 minutes is better. So when you're prepping and arranging interviews, bear in mind that's what you're aiming for. Longer than that, in any format, and attention tend to drift. If you think you've got 30 minutes of golden material, think hard about the edit, or spread it over 2 or 3 podcasts.

In practice

Think pop song

Several people have drawn comparisons between podcasts and the three minute pop songs. To hold attention and ensure a memorable experience for the learner, it can be helpful to think about intro, verse, chorus – keep it short and simple, repeat the key points several times, and start and end strong.

STEP 3: Get the hardware and software in place

As mentioned at the start, this is not a technical manual. Here's the basic kit bag with some comments.

A decent microphone

An mp3 recorder (so you can do interviews away from the laptop)

Headphones

Audio editing software

Somewhere to upload the mp3s to

A means of writing RSS feeds

There are plenty of microphones for less than £100 that will provide quality that's more than adequate for podcasting – bear in mind you'll be compressing the output into quite small file sizes which reduce quality anyway, so a top of the range microphone is probably unnecessary

Some come with built-in mics – it's worth testing their quality before you decide if you need an external mic as well

You don't need anything fancy – but you will always need them with you when interviewing and recording (more on that later)

A commonly used application is Audacity, a free and effective editing tool:
<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

e.g. your server

Again there's lots of open source software out there to help make this easy. Podifier is one example:
<http://www.podifier.com/>

STEP 4: Prepare for the interview

As most podcasts are interviews in one format or another, let's concentrate on preparing the interview. Again, this is where effective design makes a difference. You need to think through what it is that you want to achieve in the interview, and ensure you achieve it. The key steps in doing so are:

- Always write questions in advance - don't wing it, even if you know your subject well. Respect their time and know what you want to get from the session.
- Research your subject – are you aware of their views already? Do you want to cover points they've already expressed in other formats, or explore new ground?
- Think listener – what will be engaging? Are there points of controversy to explore? What are the absolute core messages that you must cover?
- Keep your question list to 5-7 questions, allowing opportunity to ask follow-up questions to pursue a topic further if a particular question merits deeper examination.
- Always submit your questions in advance and get confirmation that the subject is willing and able to address them.

In practice

Asking good questions

Open questions are your best opportunity to engage a subject – here are five standard journalist questions you can nearly always ask to elicit answers that are useful to your listeners:

What's the biggest lesson you've learned in X...?

What's your key piece of advice on X...?

How would you explain topic X to a newcomer?

What keeps you interested in X...?

What drives you mad about X...?

And the catch-all bonus question:

Is there anything we haven't covered that you want to get across about X...?

STEP 5: Prepare to record

Again, staying with the interview format, the next step is actually recording the interview. We're not going to get into the details about sound levels, but a couple of points to bear in mind to ensure a quality outcome:

- Get there early to check out the recording environment.
- Check sound levels.
- Monitor noise variations.
- Air conditioners, traffic, phone rings, footsteps.
- Some ambient noise can be useful, too much is dreadful.

Ufi/learndirect's view

"Good podcasts are great – bad ones are just awful. Production quality counts for an awful lot, and if it's amateurish, it can be really off-putting to the listener. We're so bombarded with high quality TV and radio that we expect similar when we listen to podcasts, so they need to be of a certain standard. I've seen podcast platforms and applications that were good in theory - but very bad in practice. It's so important to adhere to standards in this area – it has to be the right subject matter, the right person, the right format for it to really work."

Kirstie Donnelly, Director of Products and Marketing, Ufi/learndirect

Kineo's view

"A crucial tip is to always wear your headphones when recording. The naked ear is used to tuning out air conditioners and paper shuffling. But if you're hearing it through the microphone you'll realise how incredibly loud some background sounds are. If it's unavoidable, e.g. traffic, you can work the environment into your introduction, e.g. 'I'm here, four floors above rush hour in West London, talking to...', which can be a nice way of placing your interview in situ anyway."

Stephen Walsh, Kineo

STEP 6: Record the interview

You're starting with your subject: a few key points to bear in mind:

- Check questions with subject and ensure they're ready and able to answer.
- Check your timing: do you have 1 hour or 10 minutes?
- Record a sample, stop, playback, check levels, make adjustments.

As you work through your question set:

- Start with an easy opening question.
- Switch off your agreement voice (saying 'yes, I see, ok, right...'; which are perfectly normal in conversation but are distracting when listening to an interview subject).
- Know when to stop and redirect (if you're not getting what you want, if the subject is going off track, if they're answering a different question).
- Don't be afraid to ask for another take – save yourself pain in the editing process by trying to get complete answers to questions on the day, rather than assuming it will be possible to stitch together four sentences from three different answers, as that's very time consuming and rarely sounds natural.

STEP 7: Edit and output

You've got your raw material – now it's time to edit it down, using a tool like Audacity. The basic functions you'll need to get to grips with are:

- Importing files
- Cutting and pasting selections
- Importing music onto a separate track (ensuring you're not violating copyright)
- Cross fading
- Normalisation and noise reduction
- Adding introduction and closing comments

We don't have the space here to get into the how-to's of using an editing tool like Audacity, but it's a free download with plenty of well-written tutorials and supporting information.

STEP 8: Set up an RSS feed

Finally, once your podcast is ready to be heard, you'll need to set up an RSS feed so that listeners using podcast aggregators (or podcatchers) like iTunes, Doppler, or Juice can find your podcast and any new episodes. The RSS feed itself is a piece of code (XML to be precise), but you don't have to be a developer to write it. Several free applications like Podifier can walk you through the process, or have a look at the iTunes site for information on how to assemble an RSS feed for more information.

Podcasting in the organisation: Case studies

So that's a quick overview of the process of podcasting, and the formats available. But how have other organisations made podcasting work? Here are some examples to get you thinking about how it could work for you.

Product knowledge chat show

A telecoms company was rolling out a new product and wanted to ensure their sales team was aware of the features and benefits. In addition to the standard datasheet materials, they created a podcast which consisted of an interview with the product's designers, and marketing team, discussing its traits, why it's different, and which types of customers would benefit.

While meant initially for internal use by a young, technically savvy sales force, the podcast chat show was also made available to customers, enabling them to hear directly from the product's designers on the new development, and is in the process of being turned into a series

Ask yourself: Could your customers benefit from a podcast about your product or service?

Introduction from new leadership

A financial services company with a globally distributed Learning and Development team of several hundred people hired a new head of learning. He was keen to communicate his intentions and objectives to the full team.

He used a podcast interview to discuss his goals, what kept him awake, which direction he wanted to take the organisation. While this was also done in email and face to face, the podcast had the advantage of conveying more about his personality than an email, and was accessible everywhere.

Ask yourself: What role could podcasting play in your induction programme? Could some of the key welcoming messages from your senior management be conveyed in audio?

Expert interview

Kineo conducts interviews with experts in learning on a monthly basis, to share their views on learning and technology.

To accompany this guide, we conducted a ten minute interview with Donald Clark, technology and learning expert and board member of Ufi, on his views of the benefits of podcasting.

Ask yourself: Who are the experts in your organisation? Could you help them deliver their messages through podcasting?

Expert phone-in show

Purina, the US pet food manufacturer, runs an advice phone-in show where pet owners ask questions of vets. It reinforces the brand image of being passionate about animals and provides a useful service to customers.

Ask yourself: Could your internal teams or customers benefit from an opportunity to ask questions of the experts? Could you assemble the experts and ask them the key questions, then record it and share with the broader community?

Site-specific induction

Several universities (e.g. Duke in the US, York in the UK) have podcast series welcoming students to campus, providing tips on study, nightlife, who's who and orientation to the campus itself

Ask yourself: Are your learners sitespecific? If so, would a podcast help new hires find their way around, physically and in terms of figuring the organisation out?

Ongoing coaching

Several organisations record their most effective coaches providing ongoing support and motivation as a follow-up available after a workshop – personality counts for a lot in making this successful, but it's a very cost effective way of providing some ongoing support.

Ask yourself: Could your best coaches extend their reach and impact through a series of podcasts to support workshop events?

Where is podcasting headed?

Video killed the podcast star?

The natural next step for podcasting is to take advantage of that other all-prevailing medium: video. Since podcasting became mainstream, it was quickly followed – some would say trumped – by YouTube and the potential of user-generated video as a means of communication. It seems that videocasting or 'vodcasting' could become just as pervasive as podcasting, if not more so, with good reason:

The hardware and software is there: More and more mp3 players can handle video. The iTunes store has a growing number of video casts in addition to podcasts, to which anyone can subscribe.

Again, low to no ROI: Cameras are cheap, and the editing process is relatively straightforward. The quality of a mini Digital Video (DV) camera is more than good enough for internal communication and training purposes. The barriers to entry for vodcast creation are low for a trainer.

Impact factor: Video provides more channels for communication delivery than pure audio – though we're also more sensitive to quality issues in video, so there's a note of caution here – poor quality video can be more of a distraction than a benefit.

So, will video become the new audio? And what potential does vodcasting provide for learning and training?

Ufi/learndirect's view

"We're very interested in the potential of videocasting. We experimented with this on our age discrimination site. While these aren't vodcasts in the sense of subscribing to an RSS feed, they're certainly an example of how video can enliven and balance the messages supporting a course such as age discrimination, with multiple points of view."

Kirstie Donnelly, Director of Products and Marketing, Ufi/learndirect

Kineo's view

"It'll be interesting to see what happens inside organisations when vodcasting takes hold. We worked on a series of vodcasts for a technology client, shooting short clips of a series of business stakeholders at a recent induction day, which will be used for new joiners who missed the session – a good pilot. But will people be able to resist the temptation of videoing the facilitator just talking, and putting it on the web? One to watch in 2007."

Stephen Walsh, Kineo

Take it further

What do you want to do?

Listen to the Donald Clark Podcast

Help is at:

www.ufi.com/home/section5/10_good-PracticeGuides/goodPracticeGuides.asp

www.kineo.co.uk/kineo-reports.html

