"Millennial" Learning - On Demand Strategies for Generation X and Beyond

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Half of today's workforce is made up of Generation X and Millennial Generation workers. Among the many differences between these workers and their older counterparts is their unwillingness to stay put. Recent research reveals that nearly 40 percent of workers plan to look for a new job within the next year. The contrast with the "lifer" ethic of previous generations could not be more startling, and the challenges for employers are clear. They must compete harder to attract talent, and work harder to retain it.

The changing nature of the workforce has direct implications for learning and training. The good news is the technology and strategies are already in place to effectively train Generation X and Millennial workers; the secret to success lies in tailoring and blending these approaches to convince your workers that you understand their needs and are committed to their growth and success.

Indeed, while there are many reasons to consider a blended strategy - learning styles, budget considerations, content and format suitability, even scheduling and travel costs - the most compelling reason to consider a blended curriculum is the learning makeup of today's new workforce. It's simply not possible to offer Generation X and Millennial workers a meaningful learning experience without using a varied blend of delivery modalities.

Not only are today's younger workers more likely than their predecessors were to trade one employer for another, but long-term company loyalty can carry a reverse stigma in today?s new world. Those workers with extended years at one company are often perceived by recruiters as having out-of-date skills. To address dismal attrition rates, employers must play a delicate balancing act, offering continuing skill growth to keep retention rates high, without losing these well-trained, highly skilled employees to new opportunities.

According to the staffing firm Spherion, five core factors significantly influence whether employees stay or go: culture and work environment, compensation, supervisor role, and - the two retention drivers indicating employers need to focus on employee development - training and development, and growth and earning potential. Spherion's study indicates employers are scoring low with workers in these areas. Today's new breed of workers requires an adapted approach to employee development.

In order to build suitable training for today's learner, organizations must tailor training by addressing key characteristics of this new breed. Research reveals that today's younger worker values:

- Relevant development
- Rich experiences
- Flexibility
- Community
- Technology
- Instant results

How do these values translate into tailored learning programs?

Relevant development: This goal-oriented segment of your workforce is eager to learn and apply new skills. As long as they perceive the objectives as relevant, they're willing to go for it. Provide multiple channels to allow these learners to seek out more information. Make sure your instructors and course managers have the knowledge they need to keep your learners engaged.

Rich experiences: Confucius said, "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand." Learners must be engaged in experiences they can relate to, both within the learning environment and on the job. Activities, scenarios, feedback, storytelling, simulations and interaction enable learners to explore, have fun, and see for themselves the value of the training.

Flexibility: How do we tailor learning to fit a demographic that lives to multitask, and multitasks to live? It's no longer viable to gather a group of learners in a classroom for multi-day training programs. Learning needs to occur in smaller chunks of time, and, at least to some degree, be available at varying times.

Consider blending self-study modules, Web-based training, virtual classroom sessions and face-to-face workshops to provide a comprehensive, blended curriculum. Organize them in flexible modules convenient for serial multitaskers with many commitments.

Community: Today's employees want to feel like they belong to a community. Give your learners a chance to share ideas to facilitate learning and provide the sense of community they seek. Remember: collaboration can occur in virtual classrooms, face-to-face workshops and even online discussion forums. Even e-mail can be built into a curriculum for feedback and collaboration.

Technology: Younger workers grew up with technology, making them a natural fit for any blend of remote training. Whether it's mobile learning on a wireless phone or iPod, Web-based learning on your intranet, online discussion forums or remote virtual classroom experiences, these employees are ready to embrace it. Layers of content, interaction and fun are the secrets to using technology to its greatest advantage in a learning application.

Instant results: This is truly the on demand workforce. They value speed, efficiency, gratification and results. What does this mean when they're learning? They need a variety of activities and interactions and they need to move at a brisk clip. They want instant feedback and rewards, so be sure to let them apply new knowledge immediately, and let them know how well they've performed.

Theory to Practice

What does on demand learning look like? Consider a scenario for a national retail company's new hire training program. The challenge is to create a formal, performance-based learning program for new employees in the retail selling division. The retailer hopes to overcome inconsistencies in the "customer experience" from store to store, nationwide.

Keeping the new-generation workforce in mind, the curriculum is part-time, and much of it is self-paced. Training will span three weeks, using the following delivery modalities:

- Self-study learning guides
- Web-based training
- Web-based discussion forums
- Online workshops
- Mobile wireless courseware

- Face-to-face workshops

In our scenario, the company culture rewards sales performance with commissions. We want to build on that incentive, and ensure the newly hired sellers contribute quickly. With buy-in from store managers, we can manage a split between on-the-floor time and training for these new hires. That way, they're closer to selling, and can build on what they learn by applying it in real customer interactions.

Self-study learning guides. For our scenario, a mix of engaging reading material, simulations, online and in-store activities - supported with online collaboration tools and virtual workshops - delivers an interactive element to support the curriculum. This component provides scheduling flexibility for your dynamic learners. Once you've presented your subject matter in a workbook and encouraged reflection, send your course participants onto the sales floor for job-shadowing, observation and demonstrations with sales managers. Or send them online to a learning management system (LMS) for simulations, Web-based courseware, or a discussion board to share ideas with colleagues. Self-study does not have to be solitary and heavy on reading. Your learners want to explore new concepts and experience the value for themselves.

Web-based training. For our company's training program, let's consider cognitive apprenticeship online - a guided discovery enabling learners to employ strategic thinking to solve problems. This simulated environment offers learners a safe place to discover appropriate actions by applying new knowledge and skills to specific customer situations. Using this immersive, game-style learning, in tandem with more conventional, procedural Web-based training, facilitates the application of content in more detailed and realistic context, and effectively illustrates the value of properly executing the sales process.

Web-based discussion forums. We've identified collaboration as a key driver for today?s employee. An effective way to foster collaboration in our company's blended curriculum is to offer an online discussion forum. Virtual discussion boards offer learners optimum scheduling flexibility, and the time to reflect on concepts in threaded discussions before responding in their own time. The key to making a success of these boards is to include topics within your curriculum that contain open-ended questions and cues to stimulate discussion among participants. Learning facilitators should further influence participation with their presence in the discussion, and by their deliberate steering of discussion points to focus on the curriculum.

Online workshops. The learners in our new hire training will participate in a short workshop where they can apply what they've studies in a collaborative session with their peers. Make the session relevant to its preceding self-study modules by giving your learners the chance to apply some of their knowledge in a skill-practice session. Present a customer scenario and invite them to apply it to their knowledge of the sales process. In a collaborative session like this one, your facilitators can provide immediate feedback, and invite relevant real-time discussion among the participants.

Mobile wireless courseware. In our new hire scenario, learners are expected to contribute to the business while enrolled in their training. Consider a participant job-shadowing a seasoned customer sales rep on the shop floor. Between customer interactions, the participant can use her wireless device to access a short module on any element of the sales process just observed. As a refresher or a new examination of content, this is the ultimate platform for learning. Regardless of location, time or space, m-learning can be available.

Face-to-face workshops. To have the greatest impact on learning, even our hip, young, technology-infatuated workforce requires that your blend incorporates a face-to-face social learning component. For our scenario, we'll bring participants into a classroom for a full day on two occasions: once mid-way through the program, and again at the conclusion of the program.

Removing them from daily work and personal responsibilities means they can designate a full, uninterrupted day for learning and networking with their peers. The classroom experience should be rich and interactive: group activities, role playing, skill application, immediate and relevant feedback, and the camaraderie gained from bringing together individuals with common goals are what make this delivery format irreplaceable.

Our program culminates in a final assessment requiring each participant to successfully complete a sales interaction through role play. To further enhance the experience, our scenarios and exercises will involve wrenches and rewards. Also, by employing a team structure and a point system, high performance will be rewarded in the form of point accumulation. Motivate your learners. Create some healthy competition - make it relevant and fun.

Conclusion

An on demand business is engineered for change, so it can sense and respond to shifts in the marketplace, dodging traps and seizing opportunities without slowing down or wasting effort. A purposefully blended training strategy is a key part of achieving this. By keeping step with changing technologies and an evolving workforce, you can meet the training demands of your biggest asset - your employees. You can show them that you're committed to their growth and achievement. If you can accomplish this, your employees may not only stay put, but they'll be able to meet the on demand challenge, and find new ways to deliver value to your clients.

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