Forming a Training Mobility Strategy (Nov 11)

By Adam Smith

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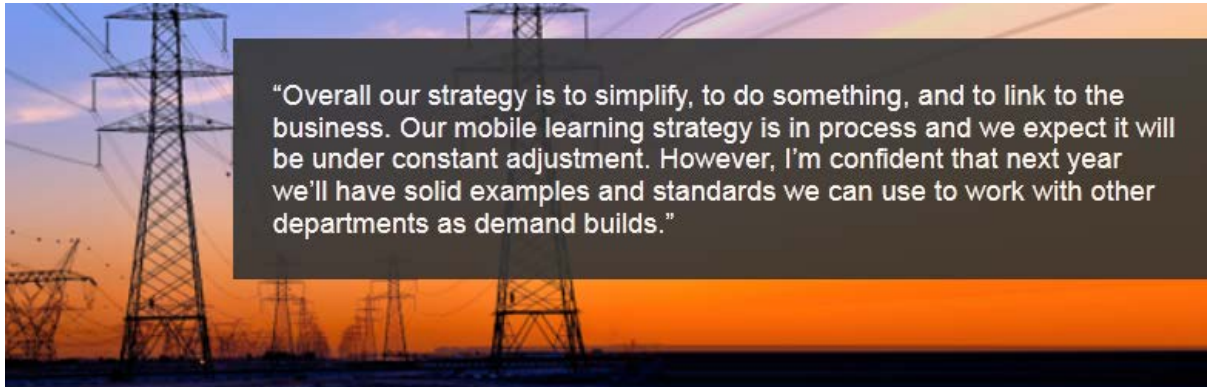
The current push towards using mobile devices for learning can feel like the first days of home computing. When home computers were first introduced, sales people would wax poetic about a household where children did their homework without complaint, mother kept her recipes in perfect order, and father kept immaculate spreadsheets of the family budget. The reality included children playing poor facsimiles of arcade hits while mom and dad fought about how they spent ten per cent of the family income on a toy. There appeared to be little strategy in home computing sales, just a belief that computers were the future.

Today, there are promises of employees learning on their smartphones while commuting, and a sales person learning everything there is to know about a product moments before meeting a client. Some of this is true, but for most businesses the real value of training mobility may be more complex.

Creating a learning strategy that works where our people work

I work for a large energy company, and we are currently creating a mobile learning strategy that differs from both the sales-based and the dedicated-commuter models just described. We are creating the strategy now because many of our employees, regardless of their position, use smartphones and tablets as part of their daily lives.

The company provides Blackberries so managers and advisors can be fully functional away from their desks; training shouldn't circumvent that strategy. More importantly, our operations are built to sustain heavy equipment, construction, and hazardous environments. Traditional training rooms in these environments are rare, yet access to compliance and to health and safety training is necessary. In these cases the learning tools must become mobile.

To start forming our strategy we looked for enterprise learning that may already be accessible on mobile devices. We recently changed our Standards of Business Conduct program to solve some accessibility issues from the previous year. This process also made all the material available through the Blackberry Web browser, allowing mobile employees to register their affirmation with the program more easily.

What we learned

The simplification of the program reduced support calls dramatically. We're unlikely to win an award for the program, but the internal client is happy with the results and the money spent on support is dramatically reduced. We didn't need a new application, we just needed to modify an existing Web interface to bring immediate value to the company by ensuring content was accessible on mobile browsers. This taught us one very valuable lesson about mobility. Simplify!

Another part of our discovery phase is to build excitement around the potential of training mobility. We worked with a vendor to create an iPad application for our learning advisors. The intention is for the application to act as electronic performance support related to learning design standards and existing projects. Initial feedback is that the application isn't deep enough to act as true electronic performance support but could be used to ensure continuity of work from one advisor to another.

This experiment better prepares us to consult with other business units on the required depth of electronic performance support. It's important to read what we can about mobile learning theory and technology, but real-world experience is integral to act as a center of expertise for the rest of the business. The lesson here is: do something.

What happens next

Now that we know a little more about how mobile learning can help the business, we are linking the mobile learning strategy to our corporate strategy. We are putting a required safety course on a tablet that we can provide to a contractor who arrives at the gate to one of our mining sites. This will allow us to provide training and grant the worker almost immediate access to the site, instead of sending the contractor to another location. We are unlikely to be asked about ROI because we are offering a solution to an existing problem. Our lesson here is to link our mobile learning strategy to our business concerns. Soft-skill courses may seem like a quick win, but safety and compliance-based training may be where we find more immediate business value.

Overall our strategy is to simplify, to do something, and to link to the business. Our mobile learning strategy is in process and we expect it will be under constant adjustment. However, I'm confident that next year we'll have solid examples and standards we can use to work with other departments as demand builds. We'll also be further ahead of those who are still discussing how to implement mobile learning.