On Demand: The Googlization of Learning

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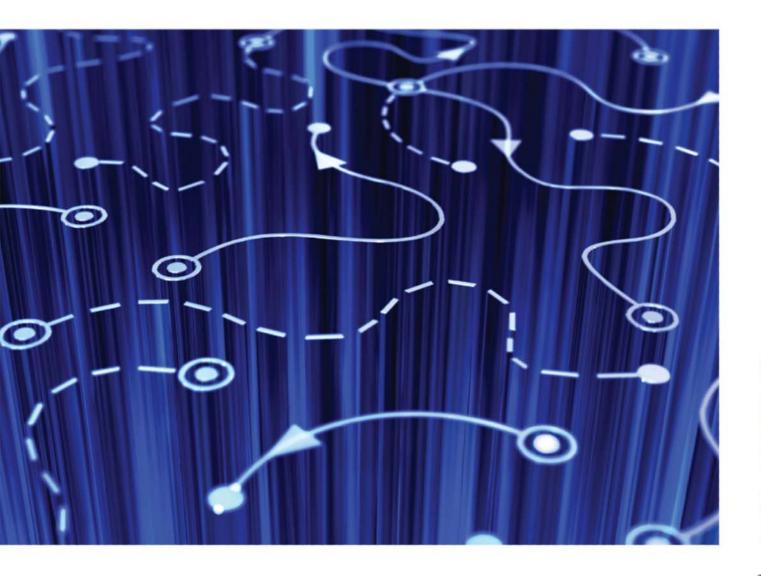
Just a decade or two ago, people thought of learning as a one-way communication, typically held in a classroom setting. Employees would leave their jobs for a while to attend training. Today, of course, most learning organizations realize that instructor-led training is no longer enough. Numerous studies have pointed to the shortcomings of traditional classroom settings for gaining and retaining knowledge. According to a report by the Research Institute of America, 33 minutes after completion of a live course, students retain only 58 percent of covered information. By the second day, only 33 percent is retained, and by day 30, all but 13 percent of the information covered in the course is lost.

in practice:

UST Global: Opening Employees' Eyes to New Learning

One of the most important requirements for learning is accessibility. Any efforts to make development programs informative, up to date and engaging will be all for naught if users can't even find them in the first place.

UST Global, an IT services and outsourcing company with employees around the world, has been challenged with keeping learning accessible to the entire workforce since it was founded about a decade ago. Although the organization's primary market is North America, it has two large development centers in India and another in the Philippines, as well as sales offices around the world.

"Since it started, the company has had a heavy focus on training," said Manu Gopinath, head of HR for UST Global's North American operations. "In our largest centers in India, we bring in a lot of fresh talent from the schools, train them, put them through our boot camp and give them the ability to provide services to our customers. In that model, we've given a lot of classroom and boot-camp training, especially in technology and soft skills.

"However, we've realized that in the growing-business model and also with our dispersed and diverse workforce, it's very hard to confine all of our training to classrooms. It's not possible, and it's not a scalable model. That's why we looked at multimodal training programs and e-learning."

In early 2006, the company implemented a learning portal that included virtual courses in technology and business provided by SkillSoft. Logins to this new system were supplied to all employees, but they weren't entirely on board with it from the beginning, Gopinath said.

"When we first opened this up to the company, people were confused," he explained. "We thought it would be phenomenal, where everybody took several hours of training. But, we found that no one was doing anything. We did surveys internally and realized that people were confused as to what they should learn and didn't know where to start."

Because of this perplexity, the company sought some best practices around how this system was implemented in other companies. "We came back with a more focused approach," Gopinath said. "In the past 12 months, we've clocked around 14,500 hours of training with SkillSoft alone. The other thing we did was ensure that employees picked up the right courses. We have an annual goal-setting process at the start of the year, and we use a scorecard approach for that. We have four quadrants, and one of those is learning and growth. They have to set courses they want to take for the year, and those have to help build key competencies and improve their potential."

Additionally, a search function has helped employees find the courses they're looking for on this platform, he said. "The home page has a search box. That search feature is very effective. When you're searching for something, it brings up pretty much all the courses you could be looking for. The way the courses are arranged is fantastic: It's logical and easy for people to find what they're looking for. It's by the relevance to the keyword the user puts in."

Because of this new learning infrastructure, UST Global is in a better position to expand its operations overseas from a talent perspective.

"One of the key challenges we face is that in technology, things keep changing," Gopinath said. "We're supposed to provide cutting-edge technology in all parts of the globe. Teams in different parts of the world might not have the right kinds of information available. With this system, we know the information is authentic, credible and distributed equally to our operations around the world. It provides a level playing field in terms of information for our employees, which they can use to provide the best solutions to our customers. That's something I've seen in the evolution of our training."

— *Brian Summerfield, bsummerfield@clomedia.com*

To combat this problem, many organizations have invested in libraries of training materials. However, these are of little use, unless they are easy to locate and even easier to consume. Regrettably, as a learning industry, this is one area where not enough has yet been done.

Faced with a dearth of easily accessible learning assets, employees may turn to traditional algorithmic search engines to glean the information they need to perform day-to-day tasks. These are the same search engines we use on Friday night to look up the telephone number of the local pizza joint. However, since consumer search engines sometimes do not distinguish good content from bad, accurate content from flawed or serious content from satirical, relying on consumer search engines can lead to an inordinate amount of time spent sifting through irrelevant information before ever finding useful data. Is someone searching for "Java" and "Ajax" in need of information on coffee and cleanser or programming techniques?

Not only is this a waste of time, it offers endless distractions for employees, who are easily pulled from the task at hand by links to advertisements and irrelevant content. And worse, the learning organization has no visibility, no data and no opportunity to intervene with trusted, relevant training assets.

In fact, employees spend 12 hours a week on information-gathering tasks — often to no avail. According to a study by Accenture, managers spend more than a quarter of their time searching for information, and half of what they find is of no value to them. IDC research shows that knowledge workers spend 15 percent to 30 percent of their time gathering information, but these searches are successful less than 50 percent of the time. Moreover, the sheer volume of information is overwhelming. The amount of new technical information is doubling every two years. Users need a way to parse this information and access what will best help them accomplish their mission. Equally important, users need an easy way to search rich-media assets, such as videos or training simulations. These learning assets have diminished value if they are not readily accessible and easily searchable.

Additionally, today's workforce has expectations for the learning experience that are much higher than their predecessors. These emerging learners grew up with the Web, PCs and BlackBerrys, and generally eschew rather than embrace live classrooms as the

preferred way to learn. The retirement of baby boomers is revealing a pent-up demand from younger learners for more self-directed, technology-based learning and resources.

Evolution of Learning

Today, progressive companies are rethinking their strategies. Learning is no longer a discrete "event." Training doesn't just happen once a year. Learning organizations are expanding their scope to better serve the realities and ongoing information needs of individual employees. This means learning must become as natural as e-mail — arguably the most ubiquitous of all business tools — blending content in meaningful ways.

The most successful organizations are weaving learning into the fabric of their employees' daily lives, making it an inherent part of the workday. This includes giving employees a means to tap into the right amount of the right resources at the right time. This means making a variety of learning assets — from mentors and knowledge bases to instructor-led training and simulations — more easily discoverable and consumable in ways that are consistent with the mission of the learner. This approach is paying off. Individuals who continue to learn and develop their skills are often the most successful in their careers.

Looking to the Future

Corporate learning is evolving on numerous levels. Businesses have traditionally focused on providing basic learning resources for their workforces, but today, learning departments are focused on becoming more strategic. By enhancing employees' business acumen, companies are gaining a distinct competitive advantage. According to a recent report by the Aberdeen Group, businesses that embraced a best-in-class training approach were 95 percent more likely to improve customer satisfaction, 77 percent more likely to improve employee performance and 65 percent more likely to improve workforce turnover. These organizations were characterized as those that had a learning and development strategy with buy-in and support from senior management; alignment with the organization's overall strategic plan; active promotion of programs to those who could benefit from participating; and integration of learning with both performance management and assessments.

One important training best practice involves achieving the right balance between formal and informal learning. Formal learning, where most money and effort has traditionally been spent, only addresses a small fraction of the learning spectrum. Most learning in the workplace occurs where the least support is available. Research from the U.S. Department of Labor shows that 70 percent of workplace learning occurs through informal learning modes, whereas 30 percent of workplace learning occurs through formal learning programs. To maximize learning effectiveness, organizations must enable users to access answers as soon as questions arise. Studies on learning have shown repeatedly that information gleaned at the highest point of need is most likely to be retained.

Likewise, organizations are seeking ways to weave learning into how employees work naturally to make it less ominous. "Bite-sized" nuggets of targeted learning content, such as a relevant chunk of a course, a job aid or a section of a book, are a more palatable and effective way of consuming information. However, it's equally important to provide learning structures that can blend content in meaningful ways. To that end, organizations are now integrating easily consumable bits of knowledge into business workflows. This model of on-demand learning allows employees to solve problems in real time as they arise, without departing from their normal day-to-day functions.

By applying this methodology, learning becomes the connective tissue between the corporate mission and the employees charged with carrying it forward. This connected learning methodology requires a robust portfolio of content and an array of learning tools and technologies that go beyond the capabilities of a traditional learning management system. Content and technology can no longer be viewed as stand-alone components: The value of the content comes not only from its inherent qualities, but also from the management, delivery and customization tools that are used to provide it. For example, a large network computing firm created a learning portal, federated with a whole host of vetted repositories of information that the company has licensed or approved. Employees can conduct a search and receive a list of key sections from trusted books, wikis, blogs, courses and other learning assets, ranked by relevancy. By bringing valuable context to information, along with an easy way to access it, the company has improved upon the use of learning assets.

A large storage system provider took this one step further. The company found that while instructor-led and Web-based training were useful for driving a common baseline of skills, they left a gap when its sales team needed to find an answer right away. The organization decided to distill training materials into the

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most salient points in an easy-to-digest format — from eight-page summaries of top business books to quick insights into the best business practices. By providing smaller bits of information right within sales processes in a variety of formats (audio, HTML, etc.), the firm gave sales reps a powerful means to access key information effortlessly.

This type of blended learning environment has proven extremely effective. In fact, a July 2006 study analyzing how blended solutions affect on-the-job performance within corporate and academic organizations revealed astounding results. The primary goal of the study was to determine if there were significant accuracy and time-performance differences on real-world tasks where one group received blended learning, one received e-learning alone and one received no training at all. As a result:

- Those in the blended learning group retained knowledge and performed better on the task than the e-learning group and control group.

- The group that received blended learning performed with 30 percent more accuracy than the e-learning-alone group.

- The group that received blended learning performed real-world tasks 41 percent faster than those who received e-learning alone.

- The group that received blended learning performed tasks with 159 percent more accuracy than the control group.

- The e-learning group performed tasks with 99 percent more accuracy than the control group.

In order to achieve this vision of blended or connected learning, organizations need:

- A large library of ready-to-use, high-quality content that can be used to support structured and unstructured learning needs.

- Tools and technologies to develop new content and tailor existing content.

- Tools to organize and aggregate learning objects into formal and informal learning programs.

- Virtual classroom technology to support the needs of distributed collaboration and live learning events.

- A competency management application to analyze employees' existing skills, identify gaps and target appropriate learning interventions.

- A learning management platform to deliver e-learning, manage resources and track learning performance.

Insights for Improved Learning Opportunities

One final observation is the payoff for learning organizations when they successfully implement a learning strategy that is optimized for connecting content and learners. All this just-in-time usage can be tracked, measured and leveraged by the learning organization when the learning infrastructure provides the "pipes" to distribute these learning nuggets across the organization. Organizations are viewing this capability as a critical new business intelligence tool. They can apply this tool to recognize learning trends; pinpoint topics of highest interest to the organization; analyze search string sequences; and construct a rich perspective on the overall formal and informal learning needs at the individual, departmental and enterprise levels of the organization.

For example, a leading global computer maker has more than 300,000 employees using millions of minutes of learning assets a month. Yet, until recently, it had no understanding of which online assets were in highest demand. Today, the company has this data, and it can align its instructor-led course investments more cost-effectively to augment those.

Similarly, a major storage system provider uses this new level of business intelligence to justify and re-prioritize learning investments based on the most commonly searched terms. The firm tracks usage of sessions, books and HTML pages, gaining an understanding of important trends in online learning. This is just one of the practices the firm has employed to drive improvements in human capital. The firm was already recognized as one of the industry's top 100 training organizations. In the past three years, the company has earned numerous industry awards for its innovative approach to educating its workforce.

Conclusion

Today, employees are overwhelmed with immense volumes of information. "Searching" is much less productive than "finding." Traditional search mechanisms are too time consuming and ineffective. Learning organizations need to bridge the knowledge gap by providing users with critical information as they are performing day-to-day activities. Organizations combining formal and informal learning, blended into the way that users work, are much more likely to produce a cadre of high-performing, knowledgeable business professionals. Additionally, by gaining insight into the use and relevance of training resources, organizations can make more informed decisions about investments in future learning assets. ■

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