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Blended Learning

What Works in Talent Development Series

Jennifer Hofmann • ATD © 2018 • 208 pages

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Take-Aways

- Corporate learners want to receive educational content using their preferred method, place and time. That's what “blended learning” delivers.
- Blending learning involves three program elements: “instructional strategies, instructional techniques and instructional technologies.”
- Learning programs must combine the correct content, location, timing and audience.
- To create your blended-learning program, start by conducting a “needs analysis.”
- Blended learning must focus on outcomes, not process.
- Quality instructional design is crucial to any successful blended-learning program.
- Technology is a crucial element of your blended-learning program.
- Conduct evaluations to assess the success of your program.

Recommendation

Traditional corporate learning is quickly evolving into “blended learning” due to developments in digital offerings and the preferences of today’s corporate learners. They don’t want “push training” about doing the same old things in the same old ways. Corporate learners embrace blended learning as a more engaging “pull” strategy that lets them learn on their own terms – however, whenever and wherever they want. Jennifer Hofmann, a blended-learning pioneer, explains best practices, offers useful tips, and provides worksheets and tools for planning, designing, implementing and evaluating blended-learning programs.

Summary

Corporate learners want to receive educational content using their preferred method, place and time. That’s what “blended learning” delivers.

Blended learning has become most organizations’ default setting for corporate education, training and continual learning. It’s an improved way for companies to deliver professional development content to employees. Blended learning involves sequencing different learning components, such as classroom instruction, self-directed learning and e-learning – including video, infographics and other resources.

“Modern blended learning is a major change in the way that organizations traditionally deliver content.”

Blended learning integrates learners, facilitators, producers and technology to address the modern learner’s core question: “Why is this important to me?” It involves formal curricula and highly structured activities, as well as informal learning that students complete outside an organized learning environment.

The primary purpose of blended learning isn’t necessarily to impart new information to learners but to enhance their job performance. Professional development must always be the primary objective of your blended-learning programs, though they usually do include new knowledge. Blended learning must meet learners’ needs and the long-term needs of your organization.

Blending learning involves three program elements: strategy, technique and technology.

The three primary elements of blended learning are:

1. **“Instructional strategies”** – Outline your approach to helping your learners achieve their goals. Examples include “game-based learning, social collaborative learning, problem-based learning, self-directed learning, case-based learning and task-based instruction.”
2. **“Instructional techniques”** – These methods include “simulations, curated learning environments, learning communities, gamification, case studies...discussions and lectures.”
3. **“Instructional technologies”** – To put specific instructional methods to work, choose among a variety of design, creation and delivery tools that enable you to offer material in a classroom, virtually, by video or by podcast.

Learning programs must combine the correct content, location, timing and audience.

Blended learning requires far more “complex choreography” than a traditional learning environment. You must coordinate producers, facilitators, learners and technology in such a way that everyone who takes part in the “dance” can perform independently while the information still flows with synchronicity. Done right, blending learning delivers:

- **Targeted content** – Effective content depends on quality instructional design.
- **Flexible location** – Learners can engage with blended educational content in their offices, on mobile devices and anywhere outside the traditional work setting.
- **Convenient timing** – Viable learning organizations help learners gain the knowledge they need when they need it. Blending learning helps learners apply what they’ve learned and offers help to the learner when he or she needs it.
- **Customized education** – Blended learning is never one-size-fits-all. “Block content” enables the creation of singular learning experiences based on each person’s capabilities and requirements.

To create your blended-learning program, start by conducting a needs analysis.

Before you develop your instructional strategy, conduct a needs analysis that links learning outcomes to business requirements. Your analysis should cover five areas:

1. **Corporate needs** – What are your company’s goals?
2. **Skill needs** – How can learning address and eliminate performance gaps?
3. **Employee needs** – What do your learners already know, and what do they need to learn?
4. **Appropriate solutions** – What are the most relevant learning and non-learning solutions?
5. **Analysis and reporting** – What data will you include with your instructional plan?

Blended learning must focus on outcomes, not process.

The digital revolution is bringing major changes to corporate learning. As opposed to the “push training model” determined by corporate needs, today’s “pull learning model” makes learning available in the way learners want to receive it, when and where it’s most convenient for them. This puts your employees in charge of their learning while keeping them in sync with the company’s quest for innovation, polished skills, peak performance and change.

“Modern workplace learning is more than technology. It’s about changing the way you think about how modern learners actually learn.”

Pull learning programs let learners to establish customized “learning paths” that better suit their needs and, ultimately, your organization’s objectives. This approach helps the company move away from silos and uniform content to customized, learner-oriented, decentralized learning that emphasizes results. Such top-quality blended-learning programs require serious strategizing, focus and deep pockets. Rollout can be time-

consuming. As you deliver learning over time, you will gain a payoff in results, but usually well down the road.

“Blended learning forces you to give up control of the learning process and be more concerned with learning outcomes.”

Developing a blended-learning program is an ambitious undertaking that rests on creating extended “learning campaigns” in which all the elements of your program synergistically support one another. Because blended learning extends beyond the traditional classroom, keeping your learners engaged requires the close attention of a learning professional. Learning experts who can manage all facets of a blended-learning program can achieve the personal transition from learning professional to “learning experience architect.” At this level, the learning experience architect is, in effect, a project manager responsible for “needs analysis, instructional design, content strategy, technology selection, pilot and evaluation strategy, and change-management needs.”

Quality instructional design is crucial to any successful blended-learning program.

Establishing your program’s learning objectives is an essential aspect of the design phase. These goals are likely to include providing job-related information and professional skills training. Your learning objectives and your employees’ learning goals determine your instructional design. They should learn to handle their tasks with new efficiency as a result of a blended-learning program. Then plan your specific educational content. Determine how you will sequence your material in “content blocks” that integrate lessons, activities, assessments and resources related to discrete learning objectives.

“A lot of careful thinking and planning goes into creating a balanced blend. You’re combining different content types at different times to meet different objectives for different people.”

Create a “static or interactive...course map” that visually depicts your unique blended-learning curriculum. Use your map to outline the sequence of your learning activities. In your map, integrate such factors as specific course topics, the amount of time for completing each topic, objectives, elements, methods and resources.

Professional-level blended learning depends on quality facilitation. The facilitator should make sure that your content and technology work well together to deliver a coherent program. The facilitator humanizes the blended-learning experience, serves as a necessary anchor for learners, and provides support and assistance. The facilitator also helps motivate learners to stay engaged and on track.

“It’s of paramount importance that facilitators minimize lecture time...commenting, elaborating and drawing on learner contributions helps dial up learner engagement.”

The elements of individual learning plans can include:

- **Curricula** – Educational units represent the actual knowledge that transfers to learners or the new skills they acquire.

- **Exercises** – Learners practice related drills to develop their professional skills.
- **Evaluation** – Blended learning should always be a collaboration between learners and learning information architects. Assessments indicate whether the learners and the designers of the learning experience achieved their mutual goals. Evaluations can take the form of tests or on-the-job observations.
- **Sources** – Performance support tools include graphic information, videos, podcasts, collegial communities and coaching.
- **Program assessment** – This final step enables you to make future informed decisions about the utility of your blended learning.

These elements are all important in setting out your instructional strategy and deciding which techniques to deploy under which circumstances. Instructional techniques are the “how you get there” aspect of your blended-learning campaign. Potential techniques include lectures, brainstorming sessions, role-playing, simulations like immersive learning (augmented and virtual reality), leader boards, case studies and moderated discussions. The learning strategies available to you and your instructional design team include:

- **“Task-based learning”** – Teach students, step-by-step, how to handle specific tasks.
- **“Game-based learning”** – Present lessons in the form of games.
- **“Social-collaborative learning”** – Learners coordinate with their colleagues to master specific learning objectives.
- **“Problem-based learning”** – Learning occurs through solving challenges.
- **“Project-based learning”** – This tactic resembles problem-based learning, but to complete their training learners develop a “specific deliverable.”
- **“Inquiry-based learning”** – Learners raise precise questions and discover the answers.
- **“Case-based learning”** – Real-life scenarios lead learners to “predetermined answers” by demonstrating relevant information along the way.

In some programs, learners earn badges based on virtual points they collect along the way.

Technology is a crucial element of developing your blended-learning program.

You need the right instructional technology to support your content blocks. First substantiate your learning objectives, then nail down your content. Determine your instructional strategies and techniques. Next, choose your instructional technologies. A producer should be responsible for how you use technology in teaching and should assist program facilitators so they are free to focus on content and education. In the best blended learning, a facilitator manages all content and instruction, and a producer manages all the technology.

“The digital revolution...is forcing learning professionals to develop new models and change their approaches.”

Technology plays an important role at every step of your program design and in your learning activities. Relevant usage can include drafting documents with Adobe InDesign or FrameMaker; setting up presentations with Prezi and Swipe; designing graphics with Tableau or Fireworks; preparing e-learning with Articulate and Lectora; making audio casts using Audacity and Just Press Record;

presenting videos with Adobe Spark and Camtasia; screencasting with Vittle and Jing; communicating through Google Hangouts and WhatsApp; broadcasting using Moodle and Yammer; having people and teams interact through Slack and Skype; conducting evaluations with Blackboard and Survey Monkey; using virtual or augmented reality with Star Walk and Google Cardboard; and curating content with Storify and Curata.

“Learners should be able to access job aids, worksheets, videos, recordings, and other resources when they are applying what they’ve learned and when things go wrong.”

The modern workforce is mobile. With blended learning, employees can access educational content on smartphones or other mobile devices as desired. Blended learning uses social media platforms, blogs, online forums and online communities; microlearning tools such as infographics; and augmented reality – think Pokémon Go. The best blended-learning programs evolve to serve critical business requirements as their organizations evolve.

Conduct evaluations to assess the success of your program.

Your learners will decide for themselves how well your blended-learning program works for them. Use program assessment and evaluation to determine whether the program accomplishes its learning objectives. To evaluate your program’s achievements, ask these questions:

- **How do you define success?** – Create metrics to quantify results.
- **At what point should you measure learners’ progress** – Assess early so you can improve the campaign as it continues.
- **What information do you need to gather** – Tie your data analysis to the program’s business requirements.
- **Which participants will you evaluate?** – Assess your learners, facilitators and producers.

Using “actionable measurements” that provide assessment data will enable you to demonstrate your campaign’s overall worth to senior executives and other stakeholders. This can help meet your learning experience architects’ need for approval and support from senior managers. Without executive support and a genuine learning culture, you may have a hard time building organizational momentum for your blended-learning programs.

If your senior executives don’t fully understand blended learning, create a brief “virtual lesson” that explains how it works and its benefits. Explain how executives can support their employees’ enrichment and how the company will know that “learning is happening.”

Then promote the program to learners in your organization. Develop an internal marketing plan. Stress the numerous benefits for learners.

“Engaging your learners takes more than content and technology. You need to know who your learners are; in effect, you need to design your programs with personas in mind.”

Although blended learning is becoming ubiquitous, it is still relatively new. Some learning professionals find it perplexing and even scary. Creating a blended-learning program can be a complicated undertaking. However, as learning professionals gain experience with the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of blended-learning programs – and in the process, evolve from learning professionals to learning experience architects – their concerns will dissipate. When learning professionals make blended learning fun, learners will adapt to it quickly.

About the Author

Blended-learning pioneer **Jennifer Hofmann** is founder and president of InSync Training, an award-winning virtual consulting firm specializing in the design and delivery of blended learning.



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