Getting Results with Learner-Centered Technology

The latest technologies have created an enormous opportunity—and a financial imperative—to increase the impact of learning without taking people out of the workplace to participate in it. Our experience and research, along with lessons learned from the first wave of e-learning in 1990s, suggest these guidelines:

- The learner must remain central to any learning design, regardless of the learning technology employed. Ensuring that the technology culture supports the learner is an important, and often overlooked, aspect of achieving impact and cost-effectiveness.

- Technology needs to be appropriate to the learning outcome. Are people learning about, learning to do, or learning to be? Not everything can be learned by simply clicking through an online course; blended solutions are usually needed.

- Effective implementation of blended learning demands that we ask some important questions. We recommend taking these steps:
  1. Develop your technology culture—including digital fluency and infrastructure
  2. Match the method to the desired learning outcome
  3. Manage the implementation of blended learning

Step 1: Develop Your Technology Culture

Technology is widely used to increase efficiency. Consider the following elements as you prepare your organization to support technology-based learning:

Develop Digital Fluency

To learn or build something in collaboration with others, your employees need to be fluent in language and technology. Most people traveling to a foreign country learn a few phrases so they can order a meal, get directions, or make simple greetings. Similarly, most people successfully learn how to use technology in order to search for something on the web, send an e-mail, or create a document. But achieving an objective by collaborating with others requires much more than such a basic acquaintance with technology:

- Fluency. Intentionally develop the disposition and capability of your staff to adopt new learning technologies. The recent rapid expansion of technological capability and the range of options available are daunting to many people. There is also a significant generational gap in digital fluency and speed of adoption of new technologies. For these reasons, you should create a learning plan that equips people with the mind-set and skills to use a technology. Consider leveraging the enthusiasm and talents of “digital natives” to support the learning of “digital immigrants.”

- Culture. Non-hierarchical cultures may face fewer challenges in adopting new learning technologies. In today’s world the control of learning is in the hands of the learner. New learning technologies help the right information, the right people, and the right conversation to get to the learner, regardless of where the learner sits in the organization. These technologies do not necessarily challenge hierarchies as such; they put individuals more in charge of getting the learning they need in order to do their job.
Most Effective Learning Methods

create learning impact or else they can be “cost savers.” Virtual learning, while attractive as cost savers, must be directed learning, and synchronous or asynchronous use the right method to get the right outcome. Self-directed learning is cost-effective impact from learning means ensuring you understand about, to learning about something: concepts, facts, rules, policies, or procedures.

Security: Work with your Information Technology (IT) department to ensure that employees can download software and change settings on their computer. Many technology-based learning solutions require specific software, either full program suites or plug-ins, in order to run. If you grant employees permission to manage pop-ups, ActiveX controls, and client-side applets, provide clear instructions or training. Alternatively, work with your IT group to create a plan to equip/configure all employee systems with desired software and settings.

Support: Consider support resources in your organization, both technological (IT, Learning Management System) and content matter (subject-matter experts, vendor support). Even when delivering “plug-and-play” solutions, ensure that your technical resources distribute learning and provide support as learners access learning materials. In addition, because learners often have questions about subject matter, ensure that subject-matter experts (SMEs) or content vendors are available to provide content support.

Rollout: Plan how will you distribute, manage, and track access to technology-based learning. Establish a stable and reliable technology infrastructure, such as a Learning Management System (LMS). A variety of LMSs are available on the market. Select one based on the size/complexity of the learning solution and ongoing employee development plans. Consider also how well the LMS integrates with various learning components.

Take this important first step to assure you get the return on investment you are looking for.

Step 2: Match the Method to the Desired Learning Outcome

Guidelines for Choosing Learning Methods

Learning outcomes fall in a broad spectrum from learning about, to learning to do, to learning to be. Achieving cost-effective impact from learning means ensuring you use the right method to get the right outcome. Self-directed learning, and synchronous or asynchronous virtual learning, while attractive as cost savers, must create learning impact or else they can be “cost wasters.” Forum’s extensive research into the principles of workplace learning suggests some clear guidelines for matching learning outcomes to learning methods for maximum effectiveness.

Blended Learning Example

As technology has become more sophisticated, a blended approach to learning has emerged. This approach matches the right technology to the desired outcome. For example, when a large health-care company rolled out a radically new approach to pricing, senior leaders participated in a live webinar during which they provided the business case for the new approach. After the webinar, participants could view the recording of the webinar as well as supporting information about the implementation on their internal site (learning about). This was followed by a series of facilitated webinars that exposed salespeople to specific skills relating to positioning with customers, handling difficult situations, and negotiating (learning to do). Finally, salespeople attended a 1-day classroom session focused on skills and attitudes, in which they practiced talking about the pricing in typical and challenging situations, and received targeted feedback and coaching (learning to be).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome Desired</th>
<th>Most Effective Learning Methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning about something: concepts, facts, rules, policies,</td>
<td>Self-directed learning: podcasts, recorded webinars, presentations with or without audio, e-books,</td>
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<tr>
<td>or procedures</td>
<td>CD, online reference sites, electronic tutorials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to do something: new skills, new responses, or a</td>
<td>Asynchronous learning with some level of facilitation or collaboration: computer-based</td>
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<tr>
<td>change in the way a thing has been done</td>
<td>simulations or games, assessments, story-based learning, web-based collaboration, social</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning to be: changing the way people see the world</td>
<td>networking</td>
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<tr>
<td>(their customers, their employees, their organization),</td>
<td>Synchronous, facilitated learning: interactive webinars, conference calls, virtual practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>impacting underlying principles or beliefs that drive their</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>behaviors and attitudes—and their judgment in tricky or</td>
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<td>“gray” situations</td>
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People: Support and Accountability

To enable accountability, create formal and informal opportunities for people to share or teach what they have learned. In Forum’s experience, the active presence of others increases the impact of learning solutions, self-directed and otherwise. Learning professionals and peers, managers, coaches, or external learning facilitators can provide support and ensure accountability. For example, consider making SMEs available live or asynchronously to answer clarifying questions related to “learning about.” By putting opportunities and people in place, you can put...
learning in the context of the company as a whole (not just the individual), and help foster collaborative give-and-take relationships.

**Step 3: Manage the Implementation of Blended Learning**

Critical to the effective implementation of any learning initiative are the communications, systems, and processes that support it. They are especially important when you are implementing a blended approach that includes technology-based elements. Consider these questions as you develop your strategy:

- What learning technologies is my organization using today? What’s working and what isn’t?
- What is the optimal blend of learning methodologies for my organization?
- Who can help me develop an integrated and sustainable curriculum that addresses my needs?
- How will the learning be deployed, tracked, and reported?
- Who will provide support and advice to learners and ensure accountability?
- How will learning be integrated with other experiences to ensure maximum impact?
- How will individual initiatives or updates to the curriculum be communicated? Can they be communicated in a compelling way?
- What’s the plan for staying up to date with emerging learning technologies (for example, serious gaming and simulations)?
- How will learning systems integrate with talent management systems?

**Conclusion**

The latest technologies, including but not limited to Web 2.0, provide a dazzling array of opportunities for enhancing learning. Taking cost-effective advantage of these technologies requires making a careful analysis of the organization and its culture, individuals’ capabilities, and the technological infrastructure. The selection of technologies needs to be tied explicitly to the learning outcome desired: Are participants learning about, learning to do, or learning to be? Most learning interventions require a blended approach that combines several methods and media to achieve desired outcomes. Effective implementation, therefore, involves asking a comprehensive set of questions in order to identify the right blend of learning methods and ensure appropriate personnel and infrastructure support are in place.

Today’s learners want and need to take responsibility for their learning. They also require accountability, support, and encouragement from facilitators, peers, managers, and coaches—inside and outside the organization. When technology focuses on people, in the context and service of corporate strategy execution, then technology-supported learning gets results.

**How Forum Can Help**

**Design expertise:** A consulting, research, and training company focused on transforming performance, Forum has worked with organizations around the world to develop learning that gets results:

- We use learning as a key lever to help our clients accelerate execution of their strategy, by designing and delivering learning curricula as part of an integrated approach to addressing business issues.
- We see virtual learning and outside-the-classroom learning as essential components of a learning curriculum.
- We offer a wide variety of learning methods.
- Our designers are expert in determining the right mix of methods to leverage to achieve lasting behavior change and enable performance-based improvement.

**Facilitation in and outside the classroom:** For our facilitators are a crucial element of our design philosophy; they are integral to the effective deployment of our learning solutions. We don’t underestimate the personal and interpersonal challenges that effecting real behavior change presents; that’s why we extend the notion of “facilitation” to coaching, advising, and teaching in various ways inside and outside the classroom. Our facilitators’ business experience and sensitivity to the interpersonal challenges of effecting behavior change enable everyone, from frontline employees to executives, to stretch confidently into new territories.

**Four Delivery Approaches:** We adapt our extensive library of research-based content to various learning methods, depending on your needs. With any Forum learning solution, we offer four delivery approaches:

- **Traditional Classroom Learning:** People come together for several hours or days with an facilitator in a physical classroom to learn concepts and practice using skills and tools.
- **Coaching:** Individual leaders receive coaching in the course of 5 or 6 months to help them execute on strategies or improve skills; teams receive periodic coaching on learning assignments in the course of 3 to 6 months.
- **Virtual Classroom Learning:** Groups of no more than 20 participate in a series of highly interactive, facilitated, synchronous webinars to acquire information and discuss concepts, techniques, and tools.
- **Networked Learning:** Primarily asynchronously, members of groups of no more than 20 interact with one another (and with a facilitator). Leveraging live and
recorded presentations, written assignments, blogging, and wikis, they acquire information and discuss concepts, techniques, and tools.

Typically, two or more of these approaches are combined to create a blended solution—often with one approach serving as the anchor for the solution. In all cases, the facilitator is an integral part of the experience.

**Does Forum Provide E-learning?**

Some of our clients ask us about non-facilitator-led e-learning. Forum has experimented with stand-alone e-learning tutorials (in which the learner interacts only with a computer) for more than a decade. Although e-learning is effective for delivering facts and information or communicating policies (*learning about*), we have not found it to be as effective for changing behavior or instilling tacit knowledge (*learning to be*). Even when stand-alone tutorials are used only as preparation or reinforcement for classroom learning, usage rates tend to be extremely low and results are questionable. For these reasons, we build solutions that include face-to-face or virtual interaction with facilitators, coaches, and/or colleagues.

We have found that, when the goal is to convey information (*learning about*), simpler tools—such as recorded presentations, e-books, and reference guides—do the job perfectly well. These simpler tools also have the benefit of being far less costly than full-fledged e-tutorials.

When stand-alone e-tutorials may be an appropriate and necessary part of an integrated learning solution (for example, when technical skills or product knowledge must be conveyed), we work with a partner to either build custom tutorials or integrate the partner’s content into a client-specific curriculum.