Paradigm Shift in E-Learning

By Christina Merl1

As mobile devices, such as PDAs, iPods, and mobile phones become more common, corporations are turning to mobile learning to improve employee performance. “The focus in learning should be on doing so that employees are able to apply concepts in practice”, says David Guralnick, e-learning design consultant and founder of Kaleidoscope Learning in New York City.

RDN: David, what is the current paradigm shift in e-learning?

David Guralnick: For companies, which is the primary audience I work with, I think right now the biggest changes are philosophical and strategic in nature. Companies need to move away from getting too excited about technology on its own, and focus instead on how they can improve job performance – which often involves the use of technology, but also a lot of strategic thinking. It is a rigorous process to determine what information, training, and technological support can help people perform their job better. The challenge is to design and develop products that present information in a structured way that enables people to find information they need when they need it, and to put it into practice. Strategically, this would mean that training departments would be integrated with their operations group, rather than being isolated departments focusing solely on “training”. Companies need to be aware that simply posting “content” to the web or a corporate intranet, without regard to content structure and deciding what is worth including, will not improve job performance.

According to a recent study, only 33% of workshop participants manage to translate into practice what they have learned in formal training. What are the implications of this result for learning?

HR people and CEOs will need to move away from large amounts of formal learning, and this move is long overdue; companies have continued to adhere to a “university” model of learning – classroom courses, multiple-choice exams, etc. – which is not an effective strategy. Companies need to look more at “performance support” such as providing information decision aids, and other systems that are available to an employee on a “just-in-time” basis. Formal training may still have its role, but still the focus should be on doing rather than the more abstract learning. While of course there are differences among different audiences and jobs, generally what matters is that employees will be able to do their jobs well, applying concepts in practice; training based on memorization and multiple-choice tests won’t help much there, but a learning-by-doing approach to training coupled with performance support, and sometimes process re-engineering, will.

Do learners need to have new or additional skills in this new world of e-learning?

If online learning is designed well, learners shouldn’t need any new skills just to learn or perform better – it is the designer’s job to make things easy to use and to feel relevant and connect with the audience. So I think the burden is on the learning design architect to design products that feel right to the learners, rather than asking the learners to adapt to the programs.

What is the difference between e-learning and mobile learning, in terms of application and output?

First of all, I do view this as somewhat of a temporary distinction – as broadband Internet becomes available

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anywhere, and new and powerful mobile devices continue to come out, the distinction between a computer and a mobile device becomes less and less. That said, right now there are significant differences between a computer and a mobile device; as far as what should be done via e-learning on a computer versus m-learning on a mobile device, it really comes down to your goals and audience and what your options may be. Mobile devices tend to generally be better for just-in-time performance support and information than they are for training, in today’s world.

What is the added value of m-learning compared to traditional learning?

Well, mobile devices provide different opportunities, mostly for just-in-time learning. For example, we worked with a large telephone company who is spending a lot of money to install fiber-optic cable for new, high-speed networks. The technicians they hired to do installation and repair are very experienced, but deal with literally thousands of different connectors and parts. So they generally would arrive at a particular job site, see what specific model parts were used, and then would have to call their home office to see what specific parts to use and what the best process was to make the repair. We designed a mobile system that includes photos and shows them exactly, step-by-step, what they need to do. That’s something that you couldn’t do on a computer, and formal learning simply wouldn’t help at all – no matter how long they sat in a classroom, people would never remember thousands of parts – and why should they?

What is the potential of e-learning in developing countries?

There’s certainly a lot of potential for e-learning in developing countries, particularly so for education regarding health issues and finance. E-learning can provide information and training that people in developing countries otherwise may not have access to. The success of this type of initiative certainly depends on several factors, including the availability and affordability of Internet access and also cultural issues. Mobile phones and newer mobile devices may play a big role here, more to provide what we call just-in-time information rather than larger courses.

What are the major challenges facing e-learning or m-learning in developing countries?

I would expect the availability of Internet access to be an issue in many areas, still. Also, cultural issues may play a big role. I think there is a tendency to want to take, say, a useful online finance program from an industrialised country, translate it, and roll it out in a developing country – this is not necessarily a plan that will work. Culturally, different groups of people often may prefer different styles of e-learning – and just because people have access to something, even something that would help them, doesn’t mean they necessarily will use it. We even see that effect here in the U.S. among different immigrant groups. So we will have to find inventive ways to reach these new audiences – maybe even by creating educational programs that run, for example, on a DVD player or a video game console – and we need to be very cognizant of the audience’s culture in all cases.

How can you measure the success in e-learning and m-learning?

This is always a difficult issue; the true success of an e-learning product for business should be measured based on improved job performance – do people perform better with the e-learning or m-learning product than without it? In practice, sometimes this is difficult to accomplish, since the e-learning or m-learning product isn’t the only thing changing in an organization at any given time. But the more people can evaluate performance, the better off they will be.

What type of organisational culture do you need for this type of learning?

To me, this question needs to be flipped around – you need to design a product for its culture, and sometimes you can even use a product to change the culture! Generally, I think it’s incumbent on the learning design architect to design the right type of learning product for the organizational culture. For example, years ago, before we rolled out a big information reference system at one of our retail clients, they viewed their intranet as pretty much useless – it didn’t help them to do their job-related tasks more easily; but we designed a product that suited its audience, and it resonated with them and became popular very rapidly.
Can you save costs by e-learning and m-learning applications? If so, how?

Yes, companies certainly can save costs and also even bring in more money thanks to e-learning and m-learning. Traditionally, cost savings in e-learning have been measured based on the savings from not needing to pay instructors or for people to travel to a training course. But that is just a small amount, relative to the return on investment companies can get from well-designed e-learning and m-learning applications which improve job performance. We had a client we built a performance-support system for, a retail chain whose store managers needed a fast, easy way to find information and advice. Before our system, they used a much more ad hoc system based on old manuals and often asking people. Having reliable, easy-to-find information saved approximately 5 minutes per 8-hour shift, which totals over $150 million in savings in the 8 years that this system has been in use. Page-turning e-learning sites and web-based PowerPoint presentations just can’t bring these savings.