

Tips for building mobility into your learning strategy

A study of executives using digital tools during an MBA program reveals some of the keys for using mobile technologies to enhance learning and performance.

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"Paper or plastic?" was the common refrain in supermarkets as shoppers became more environmentally aware and opted for the greener choice. Now, another trend is sweeping the business world, where the common refrain is fast becoming, "Paper or iPad?"

This is particularly true in the field of business education, where course participants are frequently handed reams of case studies, readings, notes, handouts and other course material numbering several thousand pages.

With so many people shifting their everyday lives to personal mobile devices, why would executives expect any less when it comes to their professional training and development activities?

What's more, many such courses involve collaborative teamwork and simulated learning experiences, something that digital technologies can facilitate.

To test to what extent mobility solutions can enhance learning experiences, IESE's [Evgeny Kaganer](#), [Sebastien Brion](#) and Marco Tortoriello, together with Gabriel A. Giordano of Ohio University, conducted an [experiment involving 124 participants](#) of an Executive MBA program.

The students were divided into two groups: half were given binders with printed copies of all course materials; the other half were given iPads with all course materials installed, including

apps for cases and a social collaboration tool.

Both groups' learning progress was tracked over the term of the program, using surveys and interviews, to measure their team dynamics, communication flows, collaboration levels and overall satisfaction.

The findings — published in *Communications* of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) — hold implications, not only for educational institutions, but for any organization looking into the training and development needs of their increasingly mobile workforce.

No quick payoff

While users are comfortable with tablets and appreciate the access, portability and productivity of using digital content, there are short-term downsides.

We still inhabit a hybrid world: People are adopting mobility, yet they have been trained to think, work and learn in ways that pre-date mobile technologies.

As such, different team members opted for different forms of engagement: some relied exclusively on the iPad, some exported the materials to a PC or laptop, while others still printed everything out.

It needs to be recognized that there is still a steep learning curve, and until new habits become entrenched, there will be ongoing tensions between digital natives and digital immigrants.

Managers need to help guide and support their employees through this period of disruption, always mindful that there will be some short-term frustration and dissatisfaction along the way.

However, managers also need to keep everyone's eyes fixed on the long-term view that mobile learning technologies are the future.

Focus on quick wins

Where support is concerned, the focus is all too often on troubleshooting and helping the individual master the functional features of the technology itself.

The real issue, according to the authors, is supporting the collaborative effort of the team, rather than holding the hands of specific individuals.

Managers should focus on quick wins. In other words, employ mobile learning technologies in instances where everyone can reap immediate benefits — such as team interactions around a case collaboration — and in this way build up goodwill that can be leveraged to push for broader adoption.

Among the MBA students, the cases that had the most success on the iPad were those that were qualitative subjects, related to entrepreneurship and human resources. The cases that were more quantitative, such as those in corporate finance, led to frustration, because the constant flipping back and forth between exhibits, appendixes, tables and spreadsheets was harder to do on an iPad versus printouts.

Another way to encourage uptake of mobile learning would be to document the best practices as discovered by learners, and feed it back to the teams.

In addition, some gaming solutions can be used to harness competitive dynamics within teams. You could measure each team's performance on key learning indicators, and then disseminate that information to the broader community. Making the "winning" measures transparent to the entire community can serve to spur the rest to match or beat them.

Rethink your design

Simply replicating the traditional "analog" experience on a mobile device is not a long-term solution. Instead, entirely new types of content need to be designed into courses. It's not about turning a piece of paper into a PDF for viewing on an iPad, but rather creating short videos, interactive graphs and interactive question-and-answer sessions.

Managers need to review the key assumptions behind the design of the learning process and the course content, and really get to grips with what a mobile platform can and cannot provide.

This requires a profound rethink. Organizations need to develop a road map that takes account of the cultural change for learners, as well as detailing the support mechanisms to ease this transition and guide both individuals and teams.

As the authors conclude, "Organizations that manage to do so will be the places where people strive to work and study, redefining the idea of personal development."

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