

How the blended learning trend is shaking up workplace training

16th-21st of May marks Learning at Work Week across the UK, an annual event during which employers and employees are encouraged to embrace new ways of maximising the impact of internal training.

Temps de lecture : minute

19 May 2022

This year, there's one particular trend making huge waves in the waters of workplace L&D: blended learning. And, as a Learning Experience Designer, I can't help but feel excited that this impactful approach is finally getting a moment in the spotlight. But nailing a blended learning programme is a tough gig for employers and their HR teams, demanding meticulous planning and best-in-class tech tools.

Keen to harness the benefits of blended learning for your team? Read on to discover what it actually means, why it's suddenly trending, and how it can be effectively deployed across your organisation.

What is blended learning?

As the name suggests, blended learning is the seamless and flexible integration of several different methodologies in a way that delivers the maximum benefit to learners.

This includes traditional face-to-face teaching, e-learning content, immersive virtual training and on-demand simulations, with learners encouraged to cherry pick the best features of each.

There is no set formula for delivering virtual learning, but the rule of thumb is that the mix of methodologies must be highly personalised to meet the unique needs of individual learners, organisations and their resources.

Why is it going viral right now?

There's nothing new about the idea of blended learning; in fact, it's a concept that's existed ever since digital technology became embedded in training and education. But as L&D tech has become more sophisticated, and the sheer volume of options for workplace training delivery has exploded, experts have become increasingly focused on how to crack the 'perfect combination'.

This conversation has become relevant as we move through the post-pandemic work transformation: employees value upskilling more than ever, but also want to access development opportunities on their own terms - whether that be at home, online or with colleagues. Blended learning is a means for businesses to design L&D programmes that really align with what their staff value right now.

What are the benefits?

When implemented properly, blended learning can deliver 'best of all worlds' benefits for learners and employers:

- Improved engagement in training

Empowering learners with more flexibility and variety in their training is a proven way of increasing engagement. More engagement results in faster knowledge acquisition and improved knowledge retention. This means that training does not have to be repeated as frequently, saving time for learners and saving money for the organisation.

With options including gamified videos, one-on-one mentoring and interactive micro-assessments, we can finally say goodbye to the era of the deathly dull powerpoint presentation.

Harnessing the power of data

In-person training can provide some unique insights into your workforce - strengths, weaknesses, engagement levels, etc. Acting on this data immediately is what the best in-person trainers do, but capturing this data over longer periods of time is difficult.

Conversely, online training platforms can provide great objective data and store large amounts of it, but with little context. Aligning this data with improvements in performance, morale, and teamwork is often difficult and time consuming for organisations who are keen to measure ROI.

Blended learning approaches combine the best of these two areas. The latest technologies, such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) can capture both objective and subjective data, and feed this into a more complete picture of both an individual's talents and competencies, as well as an organisations, at a more aggregated level.

Harnessing data this way allows organisations to streamline their L&D efforts, and focus on what their organisation is most in need of, offering the best opportunity for maximising ROI.

The best blended learning approaches will use aggregated data from their online training platform to host in-person sessions that target specific skill-gaps, where individuals with similar abilities for that particular area are grouped together.

Hyper-personalised training

There's no one-size-fits all solution for workplace training: people are individuals, with unique learning needs, goals and schedules. However, offering on-demand access to a range of bitesize training opportunities is the best way to support the largest number of people in your organisation - and importantly, to ensure that remote, hybrid or office workers all have equitable access to learning.

For example, if delivering a communication skills training programme, organisations could run an optional office-based role play training session, but also offer immersive training to remote workers via a *virtual reality platform*.

How about the challenges?

I often hear a reluctance from employers to follow a blended learning approach on account of a perceived high cost. "Surely", they argue, "investing in several technologies and delivery methods will cost us more cash than sticking with one?"

But the reality is that, although some up-front investment will be required to procure the appropriate tools and materials, the cost is very much on a sliding scale. Blended learning can be carried out cost effectively, especially when the emphasis is placed more on digital programmes that can be scaled quickly and iterated easily.

As mentioned above, pace and scalability of blended learning programmes - and the improvement to staff retention - come with their own associated savings. This means that, overall, blended learning is likely to save organisations much more money than it costs them.

Where should your organisation start?

The first step should always be an honest assessment of your current training practices, informed by learner feedback and all the impact data you can get your hands on.

Next, use these insights to shape a blended learning strategy that targets your organisation's L&D pain points (boring content? Huge costs? Lessons quickly forgotten?), whilst ensuring that any existing strengths are not hindered or diluted by the adoption of new practices and technology.

Remember: a reliance on quick-fixes, or expectation of rapid results, will threaten the success of your efforts. Do your homework. Ask your team what they really want.

Transitioning from the status quo always takes time, patience, and courage. Implementation should be seen as an opportunity for learning, by testing out what does and doesn't work for your own organisation, as mistakes will no doubt be made along the pathway to success. It will be the organisations that adopt a mindset of patience, and who are not afraid of embracing cutting edge new technologies, who will ultimately build effective, sustainable blended learning strategies and empower their people to thrive.

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