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Building Extended Learning Systems That Deliver

BY ED EMDE

Research indicates that only a fraction of learning is used back on the job. Developing an integrated system to extend learning can boost performance and achieve long-term results in the process.

We did a lot of communicating ahead of time, and we got great feedback on the program. Participants all signed on to an action plan. But three months later, it's like it never happened. What did we do wrong?

So, what did go wrong? Most learning professionals will recognize this familiar scenario — a stand-alone event in which too much money is invested for too little return. Most estimates suggest that only about 15 to 20 percent of learning investments actually result in performance change, and only about 35 percent of new skills taught are still being used at the end of 12 months. Yet, almost everyone in the industry has observed how often training dollars continue to be wasted on ineffective practices, despite their known shortcomings.

In finding a solution to this problem, there are three key questions:

1. What components and approaches are critical in making learning stick?
2. What challenges prevent the right approaches from being used to ensure consistent business results?
3. What does it take to increase the likelihood that the best extended learning approaches will be adopted and effectively implemented?

What's Critical?

To answer the first question, a review of recent research on learning transfer reveals the key components that can have a significant impact on performance. If implemented in a coherent and systematic way, these components can significantly improve results.

What does work is to combine the most critical components required for learning into a comprehensive, extended learning system. Such a system lays a foundation for the learner, establishes the why and the how for learning and provides application support to make sure newly acquired skills and knowledge are used on the job.

What Are the Challenges?

If experience and research tell us that this approach is necessary to deliver learning results, why isn't it used more consistently? Why hasn't it become the norm in the industry? The answer is that implementing an extended learning system can present daunting logistical challenges, as well as demand too much time, energy and commitment from too many people. Overly elaborate plans and implementation requirements can overwhelm the system and turn off managers and others whose involvement is crucial. This discredits the approach and discourages repeat attempts, causing the system to die of its own weight before it ever gets off the ground.

How Can You Effectively Implement Extended Learning Approaches?

Answering this question requires both the right mindset and the right tools. To be successful, you must do two things. Pick your targets and leverage the few activities that will have the biggest payoff, and view learning as a continuous process, not a single event or series of events.

On the surface, these may seem obvious. The key is putting them into practice in the right way so that they lead to a learning system that is efficient, less



burdensome and more likely to produce significant, measurable and visible business results.

Pick Your Targets

Training efforts often fail because of doing too little, or even too much. To avoid the “too much” pitfall, keep things simple and focus on the few key factors that can make a real difference, while staying highly conscious of the limits on everyone’s time. So, what makes the difference? Out of all the elements contributing to learning effectiveness, three have the greatest impact: learner readiness, manager involvement and peer support.

Learner readiness: Learner readiness is an obvious

but often overlooked factor that is taken for granted or treated in a perfunctory way. In fact, it is a critical prerequisite for success to make sure learners are truly ready to learn. Recent studies by Wilson Learning Corp. show that readiness can increase the transfer of learning by as much as 70 percent. Preparing the learner can begin with the first messages associated with the launch of a learning initiative. Engaging learning activities can be used to actually demonstrate relevance to individual jobs and career goals rather than just sending out the typical communication about the purpose and objectives of a learning experience.

Such activities can serve a dual purpose, helping individuals gain both clarity about what they will be

EXTENDED LEARNING CHECKLIST

Check how closely current learning initiatives reflect the best, most effective extended learning practices. Ask the following questions:

- Do we know that the learners are motivated and confident? If not, what can we do to enhance their readiness?
- Are we making it easy for managers to be fully involved in an effective way?
- Do they understand how this initiative will enhance their ability to achieve their own key business goals?
- Are they grounded in the content and do they fully grasp the skills we are asking them to coach?
- Are they willing partners, or do we have to twist their arms to get them to take part?
- Are we involving peers in supporting the learning?
- Are we optimizing technology to take the burden off of training staff as well as managers?

learning and confidence in their ability to master and apply the new concepts and skills. Don't overlook the challenge of learning something new, especially if it involves new technology or a major change in one's normal way of operating. Learner readiness is all about building confidence and commitment.

Manager involvement: No one disputes that getting managers involved in reinforcing learning is important. It is critical to keep managers involved in supporting every step of the learning process to get the best outcomes. But how? Most managers are already maxed out meeting other demands placed on them and have no tolerance for extra work. The challenges are to demonstrate how a specific learning experience is linked to their critical goals and to be realistic in terms of how much time and energy you are asking them to contribute. Make clear what's in it for them and make it easy for them to do their part in sustaining learning outcomes. Even a little focused activity from the manager goes a long way. Suggestions for making it easy for managers to be involved and effective include:

- **Ground managers in content and skills.** Managers need to understand the content and objectives of the learning experience and see the relevance to their business success. Learners' performance increases significantly when managers possess the specific knowledge and skills they are trying to coach and reinforce. This is in marked contrast to general coaching and encouragement by managers who lack a complete grasp of the skills. Managers need exposure to the content to be fully effective as coaches.
- **Ensure managers buy in to the benefits and payoffs.** Addressing the benefit to managers can be done with efficient and effective communication about the relevance and purpose of the learn-

ing experience and its value and potential impact on their business. This might be done by e-mails, webcasts or in-person meetings. Secondly, managers should be provided with quick reference aids and other shortcut tools that save time and fit naturally with activities they would normally do with their team. (A ride-along checklist of specific new skills is an example for sales managers.) The goal should always be to save managers time and keep them focused on their role in seeing that new learning is actually put to use in the work environment.

Long-term involvement turns managers into willing partners, rather than reluctant participants who must be cajoled and persuaded to get involved. Organizations begin to align naturally to support learning efforts and the much desired learning culture develops organically based on the self-interest of leaders who see the value of learning based on business results.

Peer support: This third element in an effective learning system is not often used to full advantage. Yet, studies on the transfer of learning show that the involvement of peers has high impact. Wilson Learning research shows that peer involvement can increase learning effectiveness by as much as 33 percent. Whether learners are members of a work team or peers in high-level management positions, sharing a learning experience and supporting one another in a structured way can have a powerful effect. The motivation and help provided by a peer can greatly increase the likelihood that there will be sustained changes in behavior that improve performance. The key to successful implementation is to provide structure and planned opportunities to share success stories, address problems and support application. Without such a framework, peer involvement often boils down to a mere exhortation to "support each other" in making the learning work.

An extended learning system lays a foundation for the learner, establishes the why and the how for learning and provides application support to make sure newly acquired skills and knowledge are used.

View Learning as a Continuous System

Although many initiatives make a good faith effort to include pre-work assignments or follow-up activities, the workshop, seminar or e-course is still seen as the main event. As a result, the pre- and post-learning activities are viewed as extraneous and less important and may be ignored completely or treated with less than full commitment. The perception? A lot of extra work for little apparent payoff. In contrast, a truly integrated extended learning system provides a seamless flow of new and valuable information, knowledge and skills that is seen from the start as directly applicable to important work and business objectives.

It can be difficult to build this kind of system without overloading learning staff, managers and other stakeholders. The secret weapon for creating an effective yet efficient extended learning system is to integrate information and access to learning activities into the normal work environment. Some methods for achieving this objective include:

Use available technology. Take advantage of available technology to create a push-pull effect. Messages with links are pushed out and people are pulled into a learning experience from the moment they receive the first information about a new topic or skill set. They embark on a continuous learning process that starts in the workplace rather than in an off-site location or isolated conference room.

To achieve learner readiness, messages are sent providing links to activities and tools such as videos, podcasts or online assessment instruments. As they access these activities and information, participants are learning about the value and importance of the learning for their individual work and career aspirations. Automated messages eliminate logistics challenges by being automatically triggered on a prede-

termined schedule, saving time and eliminating extra work and intervention by learning staff. At the same time, managers receive parallel messages keeping them informed, prompting them to provide support and guidance at appropriate times and making it easy for them to do so.

Automate follow-up and reinforcement. To reinforce and motivate the use of new skills and knowledge on the job, the flow of messages continues with content tips and reminders, short quizzes, stretch assignments and tools such as planners and tip sheets. The automated system also generates opportunities for feedback from managers as well as from customers and peers. The feedback loop can be set to refer back to an initial assessment to further stimulate a desire to learn and improve performance.

The Payoff

By selectively focusing on the few highest impact components and viewing learning as a continuous process, companies can achieve the business results they expect from their investment in learning initiatives. The use of technology to automate communication and continuous learning processes makes an extended learning approach practical and achievable, avoiding overload and burnout of critical resources. Most importantly, success breeds success. There is no need for special initiatives to produce organizational alignment around learning or promote a learning culture when corporate leaders can see the results of new learning in measurable improvements in key areas of the business. **CLO**

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