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Stephen L. Cohen, Andrea Deege & Uneeda Brewer-Frazier

Blended learning is not really new: We all have used audio and video tapes, programmed instruction, etc. What's new is the advent of e-learning and the continuing advancement of the technology surrounding it. The opportunity to incorporate a variety of online learning methods has allowed for more robust learning experiences, yet there are both good and poor blended-learning solutions, just as there are for any stand-alone learning experience.

While the business case for using e-learning as part of a performance improvement solution is generally strong, at least on the cost side, there are many poorly engineered solutions too costly to justify their return on investment. It seems reasonable, then, to begin establishing some best practices for creating blended-learning experiences that live up to the early hype and minimize their potential pitfalls.

What is Blended Learning?

To start, let's just say blended learning is an experience involving a variety of learning methods in a seamless and purposeful manner, such that instructional outcomes are only achieved through their integration. None of its components could stand alone and accomplish the overall instructional outcomes of the complete blended experience.

For the purpose of this article and perhaps the future definition of blended learning, one of those methods includes some type of e-learning modality, which could include not only online or Web-based mediums, but also CDs, webinars, weblogs, satellites and other electronically enabled formats.

Why Use Blended Learning?

The No. 1 business reason typically cited for using a blended learning solution or, for that matter, any e-learning approach is reduction of training costs.

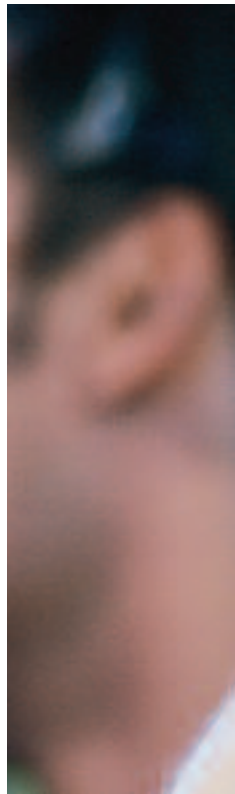
Scaling back on instructor-led experiences typically yields reductions in travel expenses and costs associated with facilitators, audio-visual equipment, food, facilities, etc., as well as the opportunity costs gained by reducing learners' time off their jobs.

And although there are off-setting infrastructure and ongoing maintenance costs, it appears that most applications of e-learning to a performance improvement or training challenge are likely to reduce overall long-term costs.

Surely this isn't the only reason to employ a blended solution, though? We would hope the decision to use a blended approach is driven much more by its long-term effectiveness than its short-term cost savings.

The good news is there are enough instructionally sound reasons to justify its use such as the opportunities to cater to different learning preferences to optimize individual outcomes; establish a common knowledge and skill base across learners while allowing individuals to move at a self-regulated pace; and mix the appropriate instructional method with the specific learning message.

A blended learning approach affords an opportunity to expedite the learning time and process with potentially more effective



Technical Learners



results because individual learners are able, and even encouraged, to assess and focus on their own development needs, not the lowest-common denominator of their fellow learners.

When to Use Blended Learning?

The following conditions offer suggestions for when blended learning solutions can reap their greatest advantages.

- Foundational training content in a self-paced, Web-enabled format offering learners the “basics,” allowing them to complete the training when and where they like, based on their individual preferences, jobs and schedules.
- Large amounts of information that first need to be digested and then applied, using online learning formats in bite-size portions to deliver it.
- Information critical to an employee’s everyday functioning and needed as an ongoing resource with a readily accessible online repository to which to refer.
- Highly technical information for which participants are at different points on the learning curve. Allowing learners to work at their own pace on e-learning modules helps avoid slowing down quick studies or embarrassing relative “newbies” by their slow uptake. Subsequent face-to-face discussions can further enable the content acquisition once all learners have a common knowledge base.
- High-impact, high-consequence work situations for which rewards for success and risk of failure are equally great. Blended approaches offer the chance to “fail for free” in that newly learned information, and skills can be practiced in a safe,

in practice:

Johnson & Johnson: Developing Tomorrow's Leaders

Stephen L. Cohen, Andrea Deege & Uneeda Brewer-Frazier

Chairman Bill Weldon said, "The most important responsibility all of us have is to develop the leaders of the future. It is the greatest challenge we have and the most important legacy that we can leave behind."

With this type of top-level support for leadership development, it is no wonder Johnson & Johnson decided to focus on developing its key "manager of manager" position as the "bridge between strategy and execution" throughout the enterprise. And given limited time availability of these critical managers and its interest in embedding a sustainable "leaders developing leaders" skill set, mindset and tool set, Johnson & Johnson decided a more comprehensive, ongoing, blended-learning experience would best suit its needs.

Phase 1: Online Pre-Work

This phase includes a welcome packet, introducing program structure and components; official webinar kickoff experience with class peers and facilitators; a personal learning journal to use during the online work; courseware requiring a seven-week investment of 30 to 60 minutes per week including four Web-based leadership briefings on the foundational program topics and a fictional case study positioned as part of a plausible "new" business in Johnson & Johnson, providing near-real-world opportunities to begin applying information from the briefings. An interview protocol tool for "action learning" interviews with current or former managers of managers to learn more about the role firsthand and a 360-degree, behavior-based assessment related to the four leadership briefing topics are also included.

Phase 2: Classroom Workshop

This three-day event deepens participants' knowledge and application of the concepts, models and tools presented in the Phase 1 online work by practicing and testing ideas and approaches on their real-world, people-development challenges. In addition, it provides a forum for disseminating information and creating a consistent approach to talent management worldwide.

Phase 3: Online Post-Work

Many resources and activities are provided for three months following the workshop, although none of these are mandatory. They include:

- Posted program Web site articles.
- Additional internal and external Web sites on the topics presented.
- Johnson & Johnson's e-university for additional courseware.
- Printable tools introduced during Phases 1 and 2.
- Personal "action coaching."
- 360-degree reassessment.

In addition, the program administrator follows up with participants in 90 days to encourage and guide completion of their action plans. At the end of Phase 3, a follow-up survey is sent to participants and their managers asking about the on-the-job impact of actions implemented.

While the program has been in place for a little more than a year, therefore with a relatively small sample size, self-report results show: Nearly 60 percent discussed their program action plans with their manager immediately after the program, 100 percent implemented some or almost all the actions they listed and more than 85 percent had actually used the learning from the program on the job when they returned.

Mary Lauria, Johnson & Johnson's director of management education and development, has summarized the value of this learning experience.

"J&J's strategy is very simple: leadership and growth," she said. "While there is no better training ground than an actual job assignment, we believe leaders at all levels around the world should be supported at critical transition points in their careers. This is where the Leaders Developing Leaders program plays a very critical role. It is a strategic investment, aligned to our business strategy, helping to build our pipeline with extraordinary leaders. Using a blended-learning approach, it provides participants with the right skills, approaches and tools to develop the leaders for our future."

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online environment with subsequent opportunities for practice in a classroom setting.

- Global implementations in geographically dispersed regions such as Asia, where travel time is a premium — the less time in the classroom, the better. Also, the use of online learning can help to minimize large language and cultural differences across the audience by either simultaneous translations or simply allowing variable time to complete assignments.
- Specific processes or tools training with online simulations. Learners can then apply these in their actual jobs using follow-up groupware applications to exchange their trials, tribulations and successes.
- "Soft skills" training focused on critical relationship-building, results-yielding competences. Blended learning takes full advantage of teaching these skills in minimal time. First, it can address the critical skill principles, methods and models in pre-workshop online modules with knowledge-acquisition assessment and even practice elements included. Second, it allows for actual skill application in face-to-face classroom role-play scenarios in an environment in which learners can test their skills, receive immediate feedback and create development plans for improvement.

How to Use Blended Learning?

The value of blended learning is in intentionally creating a meaningful collage of the best learning experiences that not only engages the learner but also results in improved performance.

What follows are some lessons we've learned from putting together a number of custom blended-learning experiences, as well as some brief tips to ensure your blended-learning experience is worth its investment.

Overall Design

Design the experience in distinct phases, informing learners in advance of the intended purpose, process and payoff of each (See Figure 1).

Design with auditory, visual and kinesthetic learning preferences in mind to optimize learning interest and retention. Include a variety of activities involving reading, live interviews and observa-

tions, field trips, lectures, videos, role-plays, discussion groups, problem solving, etc. that appeal to different learning styles.

Include ample time for a face-to-face classroom component. Learners like and appreciate practice, application, interaction and learning with peers. Include a baseline assessment (i.e. 180-degree or 360-degree) that can be reviewed, debriefed and linked to the workshop learning activities.

Online Coursework

Be mindful of learners' time and capacity by limiting the length of any one online module to a 10- to 20-minute digestible amount of content. Don't overload them with so much work they never complete it but do require some relevant output such as taking a test, writing a plan, answering some questions, etc. that motivates them to learn.

Encourage learners to delve deep into the training content in the e-enabled phase in preparation for a more robust application phase by providing basic case studies or real job work plans-application opportunities that require challenging and thoughtful responses with feedback rationale.

Face-to-Face Workshop/Classroom/Lab

Debrief and discuss all the assignments completed in the e-enabled component, or learners will conclude it was a waste of their time to have completed them.

Briefly highlight the online content to refresh the learners' memory but do not teach it again. Learners often find this patronizing and a waste of time.

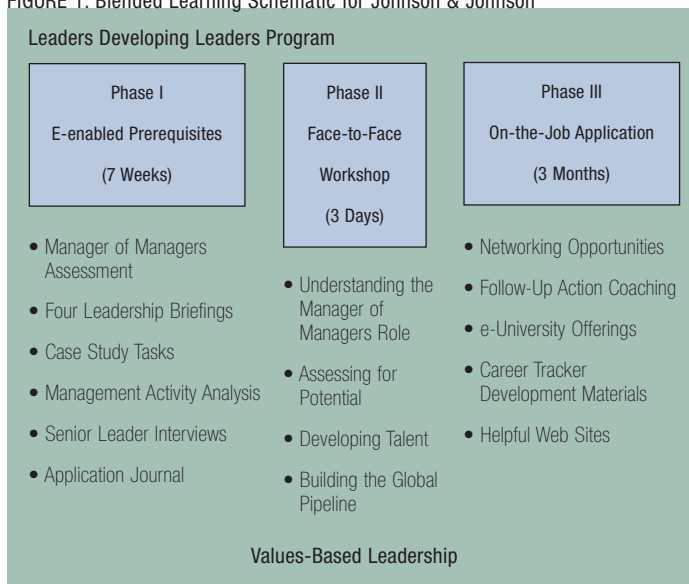
Follow brief online review segments in the classroom with "roll up your sleeves" application opportunities, such as role-plays, fish-bowls, relevant case study work and team-based activities, encouraging knowledge sharing and developing responses to challenges posed by the class facilitator.

Include time and materials for participants to reflect about what they've learned and how they are going to apply it back on the job by actually writing down these insights to personalize and internalize the content.

Allow adequate time, emphasis and tools for ongoing developmental action-planning during the workshop by building action plans incrementally, ensuring learners document freshly relevant information.

Distribute 180-degree or 360-degree assessment results early in the classroom setting so learners can pay particularly close attention to subse-

FIGURE 1: Blended Learning Schematic for Johnson & Johnson



quent lessons associated with their individually assessed developmental areas. This also provides opportunities for participants to share and receive feedback on their results with peers in a reasonably "safe" environment.

No doubt there are many more tips for ensuring an optimal blended-learning experience. Perhaps the most important one, mentioned earlier, is the opportunity to most effectively mix the right medium with the appropriate message. By doing this, the time and cost of the intervention are minimized because the benefits of each learning method are maximally leveraged.

To illustrate how these practices might be coordinated to produce a well-designed and balanced blended-learning experience, highlights of an actual program are presented in the sidebar.

Final Thoughts

As might be expected, there are always valuable lessons that can be learned from designing, developing and delivering any totally custom learning experience, particularly if it is of the blended variety.

Here are some issues that have surfaced while creating blended-learning experiences — some related to design, some to technology and others to the content itself.

- Less is more: Learners tend to want shorter classroom formats, clearly acknowledging they would rather spend more time working online on their own terms if it would reduce the time away from their jobs and homes. They also recognize, however, the importance of the face-to-

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