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# Blended learning working in a leadership development programme

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## Abstract

Blended learning is a concept that has emerged with the onset of e-learning, or learning that is delivered across the Internet. This type of learning combines more traditional methods of teaching – such as instructor-led classes held in a physical classroom – with Internet-delivered content that is learner-driven and self-paced. This article looks briefly at the benefits of instructor-led training and e-learning, and describes the key elements of a learning organisation. It goes on to explain how e-learning was effectively incorporated into a six-month leadership development programme at a global organisation of 3,000 employees to enhance the instructor-led content and overall programme results. Such results included an increased sense of teamwork and camaraderie, establishment of common concepts and language, and greater efficiency in “jump-starting” group learning.

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## The major strengths of instructor-led training and e-learning

Blended learning is balanced learning. This balance is achieved by combining the advantages of two learning modalities, such as classroom instruction, with self-paced instruction that is delivered on the Internet. Blended learning captures the best of both worlds by allowing learners to pick and choose how they want to learn and allows greater flexibility and convenience about when they want to learn. The old adage about “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear” has taken on a new level of meaning with the aid of technology.

When considering a blended approach, it is helpful to think about the advantages of traditional methods, such as classroom instruction, along with those advantages that come with content delivered over the Web. Some of the most obvious advantages of classroom instruction are listed below:

- It provides the social interaction that human beings need and enjoy by affording a direct exchange of ideas. Since the beginning of time when cavemen first shared knowledge by drawing on cave walls for one another, human beings have benefited by sharing experiences.
- It offers a familiar and comfortable method that learners are used to. From an early age, generations have associated learning with a teacher in front of a classroom filled with fellow students and group activities such as discussions, team presentations, book studies, etc. It is a model that is well established within the greater social context of society and one that, until the last ten years, has dominated public education.
- It creates an interactive learning environment in which learners can test their own attitudes, choices, and reactions against those of their peers and an authority figure – enabling them to receive immediate personal feedback about the appropriateness and acceptance of these responses.

Now consider the major advantages of Web-based, self-paced learning:

- It respects differences in learning styles and pace. Unlike the “one size fits all” that often accompanies traditional classroom instruction, self-paced learning allows learners to work through subjects as quickly or as slowly as they choose, to repeat topics until they are grasped fully, and to skip over areas that have already been mastered. Free of the pressure of other learners’ impatience, for example, learners can review and retest a content area until they are comfortable with it.
- Self-paced learning affords the highest levels of flexibility and convenience for learners because the virtual classroom is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There are no waiting lists to contend with, no need to postpone learning until a class is offered, and no time gap between when learners are highly motivated to learn and when learning takes place.
- Web-based content is consistent in a way that human instruction can never be. Such content has been created, tested, and validated and is not impacted by whether or not the instructor got enough sleep the night before or is fighting a cold. Web-based content is the same over time, thus ensuring that the same key principles are emphasised, for example, regardless of where or when learners access the material. It is akin to having a superb master teacher in front of the classroom that is capable of offering the best instruction while being free of human frailties.

### Background to case study

The Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) programme had enjoyed a five-year history within the organisation that created it. Originally undertaken to groom more internal staff to fill supervisory level positions and reduce reliance on hiring externally, the programme evolved over time to serve as a retention tool, as well as an internal leadership talent pool.

The CEO frequently mentioned his desire for the organisation to strive to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement. In fact, many activities were centred on the belief

that learning was a competitive advantage. Hence, being a learning organisation was more than just an ideal. It was viewed as a corporate business objective with practical, bottom line implications. It was within this cultural context that the LEAD programme existed as one of the major means by which to grow leaders and secure a talent pool for the future.

In its most current iteration, the purpose of the programme is to develop management talent and increase corporate business knowledge within four areas of competency:

- (1) leadership;
- (2) interpersonal skills;
- (3) business/operational skills; and
- (4) personal traits.

The overall intent is that the programme will contribute to creating a “service-driven, goals-orientated learning organisation”.

### What is a learning organisation?

Author Peter Vail in his book, *Learning as a Way of Being*, describes the learning organisation as one which has “an internal structure and process marked by an imaginative flexibility of style in its leadership and by empowered contributions from its membership” (Vail, 1996).

But not only do learning organisations depend on internal structures that support learning at all levels, they are also reliant on processes being in place which encourage learning to occur. For example, if silos exist and departments seldom communicate with one another, it is difficult for learning to be shared across organisational lines. In the same way, if no value is placed on sharing knowledge, then interpersonal processes will not enhance distribution of information, best practices, or shared resources. The entire company will operate on the highly ineffective and costly method of trial and error – with everyone continually reinventing the wheel.

The leadership of learning organisations is creative, unafraid of change, highly receptive to innovation, and inclusive of diverse or unique ways of thinking. Senior leaders admit mistakes and are able to change course when needed; they believe that leadership resides in everyone, not just at the top. Such leaders are

also great storytellers, inspiring others around them to strive for the best, to take reasonable risks, to learn from mistakes, and to share with others, rather than hoard information as an expression of power.

Employees in learning organisations are free to use common sense and are expected to take action on behalf of the customers that they serve in order to resolve problems and build strong relationships. They view themselves as having the power to do so and feel confident that the formal infrastructures and processes are in place to support them.

Learning organisations demonstrate the strength of systems thinking, the concept that any one element of the system is interrelated to all others. When a single element takes action, an entire set of other actions is set in motion, like a stone dropped in a pond which sets off a series of small shock waves. The stone not only impacts the water at the point of entry, but it eventually touches all of the water as the action completes its cycle.

### Adaptive and generative learning

Learning organisations are living entities; like human beings, they have a life cycle of birth, growth, maturation and, in most instances, death, and then perhaps rebirth and a repetition of the life cycle in some new form.

In the book, *The Living Company*, author Arie De Geus notes that only a handful of companies have survived past 50 years of age (De Geus *et al.*, 1997). He highlights characteristics of organisations which enjoy longevity – among them is continuous learning, which can further be delineated into adaptive and generative learning.

Adaptive learning refers to the capacity to be able to cope with changes in the environment, whether internal or external in origin. Without this capacity, living beings cannot mature, grow, or survive. Prolonged resistance to change causes harmful stress and without adaptation, survival is imperilled and death may result.

Generative learning refers to the capacity to generate, or create, new ideas, innovations, and concepts that will advance the collective skills, wisdom and success of

the organisation. In a recent keynote address at the Emerging Leaders Conference, noted author, Michael Porter, reminded his audience: “We cannot protect our core competence. The only competitive advantage left is to be able to learn and change. The task is to maintain strategic continuity while balancing learning and change.”

By leveraging the benefits of stand-up instruction with online learning, organisations are more likely to achieve this critical balance, continue to innovate, and be among those companies that thrive in the knowledge economy.

### LEAD programme description

The six-month leadership development programme has an integrated strategic curriculum. It is needs based and concentrates on job competencies. The content focuses on outcomes and team processes, and employs pre- and post-test assessments of general management skills and on-the-job performance using self-reports and supervisors’ reports. Post-completion, these assessments occur at six-month and one-year intervals.

Because the programme aligns with current business objectives, an annual analysis of the overall programme results enables the corporate learning and development team which administers the programme to adjust it as necessary – a good example of adaptive learning in action.

Participants either select themselves or are chosen by their management chain to enter the programme. No one enters without the written, explicit support of their immediate supervisor since successful completion of the programme depends on their full co-operation. The sacrifices required of participants to attend weekly classes, complete outside reading and homework assignments, and juggle regular work duties alongside programme obligations could not be met without this support.

The specific leadership behavioural outcomes include the following skills or attributes:

- the ability to work within the system;
- the ability to conceive of and select innovative ideas;

- the capacity for drive, patience and persistence;
- mastery of one's own emotions, or emotional intelligence;
- whole systems thinking;
- ability to evoke trust and place trust in others;
- ability to use technology.

Participants spend each Friday from 8.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. in a classroom together. Various internal and external presenters provide instruction in subjects such as building trusting relationships, the role of managers in managing organisational change, leading with integrity, and operational business skills.

During the programme a series of six online SkillSoft courses in project management are completed by participants. Also incorporated is a panel presentation by members of the IT project office team to describe how projects are handled within the culture of the organisation. This blended approach allows participants to gain the knowledge they need which helps establish a common language, while the panel presentation provides assistance with "real life" applications.

The blended approach also provides a reduction in costs, another important advantage to the company. The alternative to online project management classes was classroom instruction led by faculty at a local technical school. Six-week segments, offered twice a year, were projected at \$40,000 per segment, not including materials. Because the company sought a tailored solution, they would have incurred all of the development costs before even being able to put the courses in place. Given that development was estimated to take three to four months, this alternative was not a timely solution either.

Online segments, on the other hand, were readily available, built on a solid instructional premise, and certified by the highly respected Project Management Institute (PMI) for Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). The cost savings alone justified the decision to incorporate the online version of project management classes for the LEAD programme.

Additionally, three online courses are completed prior to entering the programme,

including: *Leading and Developing Staff*; *The Power of the Learning Organisation*; and *Challenges of the 21st Century*. These help build a shared understanding of key concepts that are addressed later by facilitators on the first day of stand-up classes. The blended approach enables learners to come into the first day of class already prepared to discuss the concepts and how they can be incorporated into on-the-job behaviours.

The effect of these combined online learning experiences with stand up instruction is potent; participants praise the curriculum in final programme evaluations, citing the sense of heightened teamwork and camaraderie. The blended learning approach helps to create a shared understanding of concepts important to the learning culture and provide opportunities to reinforce them in a live classroom setting. Leveraging the convenience and accessibility of online components with traditional classroom instruction also expands the curriculum without increasing programme completion time.

## Summary

Blended learning can capture the best of both worlds for learners and organisations alike. It can be a remarkably effective means by which to achieve organisational goals without adding staff, capital investment, or burden existing staff with further responsibilities. The blended learning approach respects learner differences in style, yet also provides the much-needed social interaction that human beings seek and enjoy. It also offers a more cost-effective method of instruction that is of equal or higher instructional value to learners, many of whom are seeking certification in specialised areas, such as project management.

## References

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