

Training Is Broken (There. We Said It.)

With training's limitations under scrutiny, it may be performance support's time to shine.

By Bob Mosher and Frank Nguyen

Like it or not, many training programs are incomplete and do not directly affect the overall performance of our employees.

Why such a harsh statement? Because training, as it has historically been designed and delivered, is simply not able to keep up with the performance demands put on the typical knowledge worker today. This is not to say that current training programs are not designed well or don't do an amazing job of knowledge transfer.

The problem with our information age is that even with the most successful of formal learning experiences, the amount of information needed to be effective, combined with the rate at which that information changes, makes many well-intended training efforts flawed before they are ever released.

And this phenomenon is only going to get worse. Here are some interesting statistics to keep in mind:

- The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that today's workers will have had 10 to 14 jobs by the time they are 38 years old.
- One in four workers today are working for a company they have been employed by for less than one year, with one in two having worked for a company for less than 5 years.
- According to former Secretary of Education Richard Riley, the top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 will not have existed in 2004.
- According to researchers at the University of California Berkeley, the amount of new information created in 2002 was five exabytes (that's roughly 5,000,000,000,000 gigabytes)—double the amount of information created just three years earlier.

We no longer live in a world where knowledge alone is power. What's important to an average worker is keeping current with the new software procedure, the latest and greatest product to sell to a customer, or the updated human resources policies to manage employee performance. And despite our best efforts, training programs just can't keep up with the volume and volatility of information. This has been the case for years.

Enter performance support (PS). Rather than training workers on everything they need to know before they enter the workplace, PS provides them with the information, resources, and tools to perform where they need them most—on the job. In other words, PS aims to provide the right people with the right information at the right time.

Although this discipline has been around for almost 20 years, it has long



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been the exclusive domain of organizations with the knowledge, technology, and deep pockets to implement it. With the rapid adoption of e-learning, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, and our growing knowledge of how to best leverage PS in the workplace, this is no longer the case. This decades-old discipline's time has finally arrived, and it may become the next dominant learning approach in corporate education.

There are many key components inherent to developing a successful performance support strategy, such as adoption of simple integrated technologies, intelligent changes to training processes, and alignment of people within the organization.

Simple integrated technologies

Until a few years ago, the only way that organizations could implement performance support was to either adopt simple paper-based job aids and manuals or develop a custom electronic solution. The former was expensive to maintain and sometimes impossible to keep current. The latter was expensive to build, and at times, equally difficult to keep up to date.

Times have changed. The adoption of e-learning put a gold mine of formal learning content onto corporate

intranets. The Internet has enabled customer self-service even when phone lines are busy or brick and mortar offices are shuttered for the evening.

The advent of Web 2.0 technologies has made it possible for average workers to share their knowledge and expertise rapidly. Vendors now offer a range of turnkey PS systems that can be purchased off-the-shelf rather than developed from scratch.

When deciding on the right technologies to support the performance of your employees, consider a few guidelines:

- **Integrate with the work.** Identify the tools that your workers primarily use to perform their jobs, and bring the support into those tools. Perhaps they use a cash register in a retail environment, a forklift in a warehouse, a machine in a factory, or a software application at their desks. PS is most effective when the worker doesn't have to stop their work and hunt for information.
- **When you're done, integrate more.** Identify the places in your environment containing the information that workers need to perform their jobs. Pieces may be stored in a learning content management system, a help desk knowledge base, or a file share with process documents.

- **Rather than migrating or duplicating this support information, it is usually best to leave it where it lies—pursue PS technology that allows you to integrate with multiple sources of content and deliver it to the worker.**

It's likely that not all support information that workers require will already be documented. It will be necessary to create new content using your PS tool to address these gaps.

- **Don't pursue technology for the sake of technology.** It's common, and often tempting, to get caught up in the coolness of the latest and greatest technology. However, the adoption of emerging technologies sometimes fails, not because of the technology itself, but because it was a solution applied to the wrong business problem or as part of an overly complex effort. Keep it simple, and select only the technologies that match your needs.

How does training change?

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Before we added PS to the mix, formal instruction carried the burden of covering everything. That changes when PS is intentionally designed into your overall learning strategies. We have seen five-day classes whittled down to a day and a half. If you design and teach a self-directed PS framework, students leave class able to support themselves. Having to absorb everything stops being the key driver of the training because participants are taught to find what they need on their own.

So what is the role of training? Is it still a vital part of the process? Training's role actually becomes more important than ever if it's allowed to be designed and experienced differently. The most obvious difference will be how long formal training needs to be. With PS as a part of the learning journey, there's no need to keep students as long as we have in the past.

The content becomes primarily about two things—an overview of the

critical concepts, processes, and skills needed to get started, and time to learn the PS strategies and tools to find and apply the new information when needed. Not only is this a powerful cost model for training, it is also a more effective and long lasting one.

Content maintenance

Unlike discovering training material deficiencies, which can be worked around by a gifted facilitator, PS must be accurate at all times to be successful. The reason for the focus on accuracy is that learners will naturally gravitate toward information that is most accessible, but also information that will aid or ensure their success. If PS is accessible but not accurate, they may seek other support methods.

To enable an effective maintenance strategy, content acquisition, deployment, and notification need to be the primary areas of focus.

Acquisition. The most critical step in maintaining any PS strategy is the ability to obtain or receive updated information and incorporate it into the solution in a timely manner. There are three stakeholders who should contribute to the ongoing content maintenance—the end-users themselves, internal resources in the training department, and subject matter experts in the field.

There should be multiple feedback systems available for each, embedded as close to the point of performance as possible. For instance, the end-user feedback should be embedded within the workflow and the PS system itself. This will make it easier for them to immediately flag an error or add new learning content.

The same should be made available for the other two stakeholders. As mentioned earlier, existing content that may support the performance of end-users should also be pulled from content systems and made available through the PS.

Deployment. Once the most current content is gathered, reviewed, and edited or created, a content deployment strategy that reintroduces the content back into the learning environment

needs to be initiated. The deployment of updated content can be either done on a scheduled or an ad hoc basis.

This process should be managed, as it will assist with the number of notifications going out to the user group and the management of the content. At the same time, it is imperative that the deployment is not delayed to the point where it would affect the accuracy of the information accessed by the end-users.

Notification. It is imperative that notifications of changes are timely, accurate, and visible. This will provide the target audience with the information they need when they need it, and assurance that it is up-to-date and accurate.

Over time, when managed well, the end-users will begin to trust the information, though it is still a requirement to provide timely, accurate, and visible release information, the approach to how it is sent can change. Notifications should be handled based on whether the change is a major or minor release.

A total learning culture

For a PS strategy to be successful, it is not sufficient for it to be integrated into formal learning events and work tools, as mentioned above. The entire learning culture and resources that support a worker throughout the journey from mastery through competence needs to be engaged. For this to be done successfully, you need to understand all the stakeholders and touch points a learner has along the way. And each touch point needs to understand how they affect the learner and the new overall messaging and strategies surrounding the self-serve strategy.

For example, one of the more common stakeholders neglected during these types of initiatives is the help desk. If a worker is taught to use a particular PS strategy in class and then returns to her desk and opts to call the help desk instead, the help desk should understand that its first response should be to redirect that learner to the PS strategy rather than answer the question. Other stakeholders might be peers, subject matter experts, or even managers. Each of these resources

should understand the strategy and tools being employed so they can better compliment, not hinder, these efforts.

The recent evolution of PS will allow training programs to be more powerful than ever. Adding PS strategies to an existing portfolio of training offerings creates a total learning system that supports the learner throughout her journey to mastery and competency. Changing the strategy from one of knowledge gain to one of knowledge application is the first key step, and one whose time has finally come.

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