

IM



Learning

Instant messaging is creeping into organizations.

By Joshua Bronstein
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WALK THROUGH any college dormitory—or past your teenager’s room—and you’re sure to hear the “brrring” of instant messages. While teens continue to be the largest users of this real-time communication, instant messaging or IM is making its way into corporations.

According to Osterman Research, more than 90 percent of organizations already have IM on their networks, and some analysts predict that IM eventually will outpace email. Like any new communication technology, IM brings challenges. But for workplace learning and performance professionals, IM is an opportunity to increase their repertoire of learning tools.

Why IM?

Whether employees tap into your organization’s enterprise solution such as IBM’s Lotus Sametime or Microsoft’s Live Communications Server, or use IM through consumer programs such as AIM, MSN Messenger, or Yahoo! Messenger, IM offers several benefits over other

communication vehicles:

“Presence” awareness. With instant messaging, users know who is online. Some consider this invasive but, because people can set “away messages” indicating they’re not available, IMs typically are considered less intrusive than a phone call.

Immediacy. Unlike email, you can get an immediate response to an IM, which may increase productivity.

Convenience. An IM toolbar, showing who is online, always can be open, and instant messages are easy to send from a PC or mobile device (see “Disconnected,” T+D, December 2005).

Dialog and collaboration. IM is an online conversation between two people—or groups, depending on the platform.

Multitasking. Employees can respond to email, participate on a conference call, and respond to instant messages at the same time.

IM for learning

With all of these advantages, there are many ways that IM can promote and facilitate learning.

Facilitate real-time learning. Probably the

greatest advantage of IM is that employees can get quick answers to questions. Struggling with a procedure? Sure, employees can scour the manual, but let’s face it, no matter how much we invest in training documentation and software programs, sometimes the easiest way to get answers is to ask someone. A co-worker or an overwhelmed manager may take hours or days to reply to an email or voicemail. But an IM can provide an immediate response—with up-to-date information that may not be documented. The IM appears on the receiver’s screen and will take an average of 20 seconds to complete, according to Wainhouse Research.

The example above is from a professional services firm, where a peer explains functionality in Excel.

Grammar and punctuation sticklers may bristle at this and, of course, more formal instant messages are appropriate in some cases. But this interaction is typical: It’s quick, informal, and achieved its purpose.

As a workplace learning and performance professional, you can encourage and model instant messaging for real-

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time learning. You can introduce IM during orientation and other training programs. You can also sprinkle your intranet with IM screen names and suggestions to contact topic owners if users get stuck. Because email can take too long and frustrate users, IM can be the perfect solution to promote self-service—with a little support.

To help managers see the benefits of using IM, show them how the technology works, provide examples of how they can coach via IM, and encourage them to be accessible online. Accessibility is important: Like email, IM requires a manager to remember to log in.

Dan Meyerson, vice president of learning for JPMorgan, encourages “managing by IMing around” as the new “managing by wandering around,” particularly for virtual employees. According to Meyerson, “managers tend to be more direct and honest in their IMs and emails” than in in-person communications. Employees also may be more likely to ask for help, and managers can IM employees during work situations.

Support e-learning. IM can encourage participation in and completion of e-learning programs, for example:

- Check in with registered participants by sending simple messages such as “I see you completed 50 percent of the Improving Email Messages course but haven’t been back in two weeks. How’s it going so far?”

- Send IMs when employees complete programs, for example, “Congratulations on completing the safety course. What did you find useful?” Knowing that someone is invested in their progress may encourage employees to persevere through online courses and participate in additional programs.

Improve navigation of knowledge management systems. If your company has a knowledge management system—or any

Employee 1: do you know how to undo split screens?

Employee 1: on excel?

Employee 2: yup

Employee 1: how?

Employee 2: go into.. one sec

Employee 2: ok highlight the column or row there the split is

Employee 2: go into Window

Employee 2: click freeze panes

Employee 2: that should do it

Employee 1: thanks!

Employee 2: no prob

knowledge base—you can encourage employees to use instant messaging for quicker navigation. Search engines are effective but, in many large organizations, the knowledge management system is packed with so much material that employees have difficulty finding what they need. Also, the most current and relevant material often resides on an expert’s hard drive, and contacting this person by email or voicemail, again, could take days or weeks. On IM, you can find out who has the information quickly—all within a couple of minutes.

In the example below from the entertainment industry, IM contributes to knowledge-sharing and saves time.

Supplement classroom training. If you’re looking for innovative ways to support classroom training programs, consider these uses of IM for trainers:

- Online office hours—Trainers, as some online university instructors already do, can set an hour each week when participants can contact them online.

Employee 1: hey

Employee 2: meow

Employee 1: this is random but do u know who i can contact about style promos since petes out

Employee 2: julie chen

Employee 1: awesome- thank you !

Employee 2: yw

- “Ask the Trainer”—This session is similar to office hours, but you might solicit and publicize a topic in advance.

- Coaching—A less structured approach is to give participants the trainer’s IM screen name. When the trainer is online, he can coach employees to apply skills learned in class.

- Group Chats—Group discussions can focus on a current work situation, a

mini-case study, or a relevant company event.

Participants who have access to IM during class may send silent messages to their peers. For example, during a recent classroom program, new college grads asked each other questions they wouldn’t ask in front of the larger group and solidified their internal network. While trainers may find this offensive (and some companies disable their network during programs for new grads), IM can be a powerful way to connect participants. And when absolute attention is necessary, trainers may ask trainees to close their laptops.

Market and communicate learning resources.

A bit more aggressive than emails, but not as intrusive as phone calls, IM can promote learning resources and

- encourage participation in a learning initiative

- remind employees about upcoming programs starting either next week—or in five minutes

- communicate last-minute changes such as intranet site updates and start times of classroom programs

- corral participants after a classroom training break

- seek feedback about a program or online resource.

Challenges and considerations

While IM at work is relatively new, we need to consider potential organizational and individual obstacles, now.

At the organizational level, one consideration is whether employees use an enterprise instant messaging system or individual consumer programs. With an enterprise system, reaching people is easy; but with consumer programs, you may need to collect IM personal screen names, which can be embarrassing and inappropriate for work. Also, IM programs may lack interoperability; for example, you can not use AOL's software to communicate with someone on MSN Messenger. Within departments, this is often resolved by encouraging people to register with the same program—they're free. But accomplishing that may take some legwork.

Companies have legitimate concerns about instant messaging on their networks. Enterprise systems include security measures, but consumer programs can bring viruses and privacy concerns. Also, as with any company documentation, instant messages may be retrievable and discoverable in litigation. Many organizations are required to store all IM conversations, which demands additional server storage. Finally, adding yet another communication tool, companies worry about potential productivity losses.

Because of these concerns, some companies implement enterprise systems or ban IM use entirely. Others dismiss IM as child's play and provide no guidelines around its haphazard use. Before downloading IM programs, you'll want to check your company's formal or informal guidelines.

From an individual perspective, instant messaging is not unlike any other communication vehicle: People prefer certain methods more than others. You probably know who is good on email and who you need to call instead. As IM evolves, employees will need to understand their managers' preferred communication methods and consider IM as just another option.

Employees still struggle with email etiquette (Have we finally obliterated the ALL CAPS emails?), and we face similar challenges with IM. Workplace learning and performance professionals can model IM etiquette by beginning interactions with an entrée such as "Got a sec?" keep-

ing conversations short, using proper grammar and punctuation when writing to a senior-level person who maintains this formality, and gracefully ending when the chat is over.

Of course, IM can be intrusive, and we'll discover the boundaries as this technology evolves and people become more comfortable with it. But instant messaging is a terrific tool that can accelerate business—including the business of learning. **TD**

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