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/IN PRACTICE/

Missed Steps

Blended learning helps increase collaboration and productivity, but firms often ignore key stages in the process.

By Darin Painter

ONE MILE from Memphis International Airport, employees at a fast-growing firm in the printing industry scramble to fulfill online orders in time for FedEx's last pickup at 2 am. Over the past five years, hustle has helped the company, Mimeo.com, achieve 1,120 percent revenue growth—good enough to rank No. 277 on *Inc.*'s 2005 list of the country's 500 fastest-growing private firms.

But Mimeo's hustle came with heartache. "In this growth mode, we began to run out of local, experienced talent to hire for skilled positions," says Tom DeGreve, the firm's vice president and general manager of operations. "We want an error-free facility, and simple on-the-job training for new hires wasn't going to be the answer."

Blended learning was. In January, Mimeo.com launched a training program for its 150-plus employees that mixed formal learning tools, such as classroom workshops and study guides, with informal ones such as threaded email discussions. The premise: Workers can learn more in the break room than in the classroom, so training

should be a continuous process that occurs inside and outside corporate walls. Also, training should intermingle a variety of media such as streamlined video, CD-ROMs, and computer-based tutorials made available at a one-stop portal.

The premise has substance. According to a U.S. Department of Labor study, informal learning accounts for at least 70 percent of what employees know about their jobs. "Most companies lack a budget for incorporating this kind of learning," says Dorman Woodall, director of Skillsoft Learning in Nashua, New Hampshire. "Another problem is companies that do adopt blended learning tend to ignore valuable steps in the process, especially at the front and back ends."

Woodall recently led a workshop for users of General Motors University (GMU), a global network of educational and training resources designed for GM's executive, management, technical, and professional employees. The university offers approximately 1,500 courses through classroom delivery, learning laboratories, satellite distance learning, and electronic and web-based applications.

After analyzing GMU and similar programs, Woodall outlined eight key steps to launching a successful blended learn-

ing program. (See "8 Key Steps of Blended Learning" on page 11.) He determined that most trainers and developers get Steps 2-4 right: They understand how technology enables organizations to keep training content current and how blended learning enables employees to collaborate. Unfortunately, most people who form a blended learning path also make two mistakes. "They don't prepare employees and they assume learning will take place," he says.

The need to prepare

Technology such as virtual training software shouldn't just collect learners; it should connect them. And no real connection takes place when trainers and developers fail to get employees ready for a new blended learning program.

"Step 1 is a way for corporate trainers to take an active instead of passive approach," says Woodall. "While learners already know how to attend the traditional classroom, most need some guidance about how the technology will assist them. To increase knowledge and performance, they have to prepare to learn. They have to know the training tools they're going to need, where to get them, how to use them, and whom to call with questions."

Woodall gives these suggestions to prepare employees for blended learning:

- Hold a how-to session (live or virtual)

8 Key Steps of Blended Learning

After analyzing the blended learning efforts of several organizations, Dorman Woodall, director of Skillssoft Learning, says most trainers and developers overlook Steps 1 and 5-8:

1. **“Prepare me.”** The initial step readies the learner with essential skills and overall understanding to ensure success throughout the remaining stages.
2. **“Tell me.”** This presentation step tells participants about objectives, facts, and key concepts of the skills they’re about to learn and why they’re valuable in the first place.
3. **“Show me.”** This demonstration step highlights procedures, principles, concepts, and processes so the learner can apply the skills.
4. **“Let me.”** During the practice step, participants get the opportunity to adopt the new skills, reinforce the previous demonstration, and build long-term retention.
5. **“Check me.”** The assessment step provides participants with feedback about the use of the skills within a formal training setting, which allows them to apply skills within an informal environment.
6. **“Support me.”** The assistance step, usually the first within the informal learning environment, occurs when a participant accesses selected elements from the formal learning experience.
7. **“Coach me.”** The coaching step provides tacit support of experienced managers, peers, mentors, or experts.
8. **“Connect me.”** The collaborative step allows participants to work together within a community to solve problems.

that outlines the flow of your program, showing the learning path from simple to complex. Make sure participants see what’s in it for them.

- Release a welcoming announcement using your learning management system to contact a wide range of people or targeted groups. If the program is for a new hire or supervisory group, the announcement should include information about how to access prerequisite materials or should direct them to a self-service webpage for downloading advanced training resources.
- Provide technical job aids that instruct employees on how to log on to a network, download files such as podcasts, attend chat sessions, and other technical tasks.

The need to check, support, and coach

“If you’re going to invest time and money into training, you might as well reinforce it and make sure it works,” says Tom Stanfill, founding partner and CEO of Aslan Training & Development of Marietta, Georgia.

“We use blended learning in the post-training process to reinforce what our clients have adopted and embraced, and as a support tool for our coaches.”

But many firms fail to follow through with back-end support to blended learning, Woodall says. “Companies should validate their programs and continuously support and motivate their learners,” he says, adding that most firms fail to incorporate Steps 5-8.

Woodall suggests these actions to get the most out of your next blended-learning venture:

- Begin a certification program to give participants professional credit for their knowledge.
- Give participants easy access to tools such as online books, manuals, reports, magazines, resource centers, teleconferences, and experts. Encourage them to participate in online groups that can enhance their connection to the industry and expand their networking skills.
- Appoint a coach to regularly meet

with participants to review progress and discuss performance issues.

“We understand the need to help our employees train in a variety of ways,” says Mimeo.com’s DeGreve. “The quality of our jobs is critical, so the quality of our employees is just as important. Understanding that we have to prepare workers and follow through with them, we’re eager to see what our new training program can do.”

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/WORKING LIFE/

Punctuality Counts

If “better late than never” is your manta in the morning, you’re not alone. According to an article published on CNN.com by CareerBuilder, **13 percent of workers say they arrive late to work at least once a week** and 24 percent say they arrive late at least once a month.

What are the biggest causes of their tardiness? **Twenty-seven percent of workers blame traffic;** 10 percent point to getting their kids ready for school or day care; and 11 percent say falling back asleep. Other popular reasons include forgetting something at home, feeling sick, and misplacing house or car keys.

Not surprising, 64 percent of employers say **Monday is the most popular day for late arrivals.** And while the majority of bosses don’t typically question the validity of the reasons provided, 35 percent say most of the time they don’t believe the excuses.

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/NEWS FLASH/

America's Job Bank to End

THE U.S. DEPARTMENT of Labor recently announced that it will end America's Job Bank (AJB) next summer. Government officials blame high operating costs and the proliferation of competing private-sector online job boards as the reasons for the termination.

AJB was the first national online job board when it debuted in 1995, and it served as the first Internet presence for labor exchange for each of the 50 states. Currently, the free site lists more than 2 million jobs and more than 685,000 résumés. Its infrastructure also was used to build the Hurricane Recovery Job Connection website to assist individuals affected by hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma.

In a notice released by the DOL, officials recognized the periodic need for a national job board in the aftermath of

unforeseen dislocations caused by the hurricanes.

"It is the department's assessment that it will be more cost-effective to contract for this type of service with the private sector on an 'as-needed basis,'" the notice says.

The notice also states that operating costs of AJB have been as high as \$27 million per year, but the DOL only has about \$12 million budgeted for maintenance. Consequently, AJB has not been able to keep up with private-sector job boards—such as CareerBuilder and Monster—or the industry's technology standards.

"The technology platform on which AJB is built is outdated," says the statement. "The cost to maintain AJB and constantly upgrade the foundational technology and make improvements to

the site is no longer justifiable."

The site's phaseout will be complete on June 30, 2007. Once the site is taken down, it will be replaced with a temporary splash page that will contain information on how to access state job banks.

SOURCE/Employment and Training Administration

/GENERATION ISSUES/

Boomers Fill Gap

While they are approaching retirement age, seasoned baby boomer professionals aren't being shown the door, according to Salveson Stetson Group, an executive search firm in Radnor, Pennsylvania.

"More companies are looking for experienced professionals who can make an immediate contribution to their organizations—those who don't require a lot of training or hand-holding," says John Salveson, co-founder and principal of the Pennsylvania firm.

"Many companies want more mature leaders who have solid track records of performance and sound judgment, and who will be able to mentor and develop others," adds Sally Stetson, co-founder and principal with the group. "These individuals also tend not to be aggressively looking to climb to the next organizational level after being hired because they are confident and content with themselves and their careers."

Older executives also are being recruited for turnaround assignments. According to Stetson, their previous experience and skills can help companies build stronger customer relationships, cut costs, and evaluate personnel to ensure proper talent management.

Because many companies didn't invest enough in succession planning and leadership development programs during the lean times, their next generation of leaders isn't quite ready to take on higher-level assignments that require immediate results. "There aren't enough skilled executives to replace the over-50 managers and executives who expect to be retiring soon. Because of this, older professionals are being asked to stay on the job longer," says Salveson.

According to a survey by AARP, 68 percent of workers between the ages of 50 and 70 said they plan to work full time after the traditional retirement age of 65.

That would more than double the number of employees aged 65 and older in the workforce by 2025.

"Companies need to develop new ways of encouraging older employees to stay in the workplace longer. Flexible work schedules, less-than-full-time assignments, and mentoring opportunities are some of the approaches companies are utilizing," Stetson adds.

/EXECUTIVE UPDATE/

How to Find a Good Coach

WITH GREAT WORK comes great accomplishment. And the need for an executive coach can mean that you've hit a career high.

But if the thought of finding one has you unnerved, the Ken Blanchard Companies offer five tips to get you over the fear.

1. Check credentials. Ask if the coach is certified by the International Coach Federation, (ICF) and if so, at what level. The ICF serves to ensure that coaches have specific training and at least 750 hours of experience before being certified at the Professional Certified Coach level or 2,500 hours of experience at the Master Certified Coach level.

The ICF also sets professional standards and ethics for coaches. "We have certified 2,000 coaches within the past six years. This is among the fastest-growing industries, precisely because clients experience the value of coaching and they tell their friends to try it. There is no longer the stereotype that coaching is just for 'problem managers' who need intervention," says Pam Richarde, president of ICF.

2. Match professional experience to your needs. Ask if the coach has experience coaching in the areas that you want to develop and in your industry. The more in depth their knowledge, the more they will be able to help you overcome obstacles and challenges, and to interact more successfully with colleagues.

"We have seen some dramatic changes that have been brought about from coaching, not only in terms of team member development, but also from the operational side. Coaching has helped us to identify opportunities and implement specific action plans for improvement," says Michael Serchia, director of human resources for International Coffee & Tea. "The real power of coaching is that one-on-one opportunity to focus time and energy on developing oneself and clarifying individual needs."

3. Check affiliations. Ask if the coach is

working independently or is affiliated with a reputable company. Many independent coaches are excellent and frequently do contract work with larger companies. The ICF can refer you to coaching networks in your area.

4. Set up an interview call. Ask if the coach is willing to do a sample coaching session with you and see if you get value from the start. Discuss a real problem during the call to see if there's forward movement right away.

"One myth is that it takes a long time to develop an effective relationship with a coach," says Linda Miller, executive coach and global liaison for coaching with the Ken Blanchard Companies. "Make the hiring decision based on whether the coach has provided value during the sample session."

However, Miller explains that adding value does not always mean feeling comfortable or even liking the coach. Some coaching moments can be uncomfortable because clients hear the truth.

5. Set the agenda. Good coaches let you set the agenda and stay in the lead. Their job is to provide the focus, structure, and accountability you need to work through your situation.

As you are being coached during the sample session, be aware of who is in control of the coaching session. Work with coaches who keep you focused on what you want to discuss rather than ones who take over the session by telling, consulting, or offering advice.

MORE/www.coaching.com

/QUIZ/

Are You a Career Activist?

As a workplace learning and performance professional, you know that leveraging skills, being engaged in your work, and having a mentor are crucial to career development. But, do you practice what you preach to participants?

CareerJournal.com is offering an online quiz that assesses how much control you have over your career. The true-or-false quiz can help you identify the situations that are causing you the most problems so that you can take an active stand to solve them.

MORE/www.careerjournal.com

/WORKING LIFE/

Respect and Retention Related

NO SURPRISE HERE: A survey by Sirota Survey Intelligence and the authors of *The Enthusiastic Employee* found that treating employees with respect and dignity is critical to retaining good workers, especially in a better job market.

According to the survey of more than 370,000 employees, 63 percent of those who do not feel that they are treated with respect intend to leave within two years, while only 19 percent of those who feel respected plan to find a new job.

How well-respected employees feel also is directly related to how enthusiastic they are about their jobs. Employees who feel “very good” about how they are treated are more than three times as enthusiastic as those who just feel “good.”

“The data clearly supports what many employees feel—that nonmanagement employees are treated with less respect than management-level employees (especially senior management),” says Douglas Klein, president of Sirota. “While almost half of senior-level managers feel they are shown a great deal of respect, just one-quarter of supervisors and one-fifth of nonmanagers feel the same. In fact, one out of every seven nonmanagement employees actually feels they are treated poorly or very poorly.”

The main reason employees don’t feel they are respected isn’t because of abusive behavior by management so much as it is management’s failure to demonstrate respect to employees.

“Management’s ‘sins’ are mainly acts of omission rather than commission,” says David Sirota, lead author of *The Enthusiastic Employee*. “But indifferent treatment, such as failing to recognize and reward employees for jobs well done, has an enormous impact on how employees feel at work and employers’ ability to retain them.”

Sirota recommends the following ways for employers to show workers respect:

- Recognize employees for their accomplishments and provide them with the

freedom to use their judgment.

- Solicit, listen to, and act on work-related ideas from employees.
- Encourage innovation and new ideas.
- Provide helpful feedback and coaching on how to perform more effectively.
- Value people as individuals and give them a sense of inclusion.
- Appreciate diverse perspectives, ideas, and work styles.
- Encourage full expression of ideas without fear of negative consequences.
- Listen to and fairly handle employees’ complaints.

“It’s easy to overlook how important things such as common courtesy and basic civility are in generating feelings of respect for employees,” adds Sirota. “Conversely, the occasional overtly abusive manager can have a tremendous impact not only on the abused, but also on the many more who witness the abuse.”

MORE/www.sirota.com

/FAST FACT/

Canadians Wade Through the Writing

According to a recent survey, 28 percent of Canadian workers “often” miss key information in written communications, and 63 percent miss key information “once in a while.”

When asked to identify the costs of poorly written communications, 85 percent said “wasted time,” 70 percent cited “lost productivity,” and 63 percent said “errors.”

SOURCE/Communicare

As New Jobs Decline, Workers Must Transfer Skills

THE LATEST U.S. employment statistics show that creation of new jobs has slowed considerably. Through May 2006, the number has declined 10.5 percent from last year—and 30 percent from 2004. Besides making it more difficult to find a job, this employment environment forces some people to change industries, according to ClearRock, an executive coaching and outplacement firm headquartered in Boston.

Only 730,000 new jobs have been created during the first five months of 2006, down from the 815,000 created from January through May 2005 and from the 1.04 million created during that same period in 2004. Only 75,000 new jobs were created in May, while economists had been forecasting more than double that amount.

Because of that, competition for jobs is increasing, and between 30 and 40 percent of laid-off employees are successfully transferring their skills from one industry to another. According to ClearRock, workers who have been displaced by industries that have been cutting back lately, such as manufacturing and banking, are now looking in such sectors as healthcare, information technology, and professional services.

With hiring slowing, more job-seekers need to transfer their skills into industries that are now contracting to those industries that are hiring,” says Annie Stevens, managing partner for ClearRock.

“It is much easier to transfer the experience you have acquired from one industry to another than it is to try to get a job in a completely different field of work,” Stevens adds. “You will have more success trying to switch from being an accountant for a manufacturer to being an accountant for a hospital, for example, than you will trying to get a job in an area in which you have no experience.”

The most important element of any industry-switching job strategy is to first search related industries. “Out-of-work bank employees should search for

jobs with mortgage companies, credit unions, and financial planners, in addition to looking for employment with other banks,” says Greg Gostanian, managing partner for ClearRock. “But after that, they should look for jobs within their functional areas (accounting, for example) in unrelated industries, such as healthcare and information technology.”

Stevens says that it also is important to learn the language of the industries in which you’re applying for jobs. “It’s not only important to ‘walk the talk,’ but you need to be able to ‘talk the talk’ as well,” she says.