DIGITAL BEAT

Pick Up Your PDA

You can use technologies that aren't typical learning technologies to enhance learning (and your role). That's what the digital beat is all about.

By Darin E. Hartley

I received an email last month from Haidee Allerton, the editor of *T+D,* asking if I'd write a new monthly column called Digital Beat (formerly known as The Web). It took me only 27 nanoseconds to reply with an affirmative. I'm thrilled to be writing about things I'm extremely passionate about: the Internet, mobile technologies, instant messaging, wireless networks, and any other type of technology that is creating a digital beat in our world.

Daily, there are breakthroughs with technology that have direct—and indirect—implications for how we live, learn, and work. And each column will have a Ten Tips Checklist you can use as a practical take-away.

In my 15 years in the learning business, I have met brilliant and innovative professionals who are shaping learning into its diverse forms. I've met some of them through my work as director of solutions development for

Lguide in Seattle, Washington, where I have been providing learning consulting services to a variety of clients since 2003. Others I met during my time at ASTD, Dell Computer Corporation, Lockheed Martin, EG&G, General Physics, and the U.S. Navy. I have an undergraduate degree in corporate training and a graduate degree in training management. My work inside those organizations—with diverse and talented people—has catalyzed my love of learning technology and has fueled the ideas in my three books on learning: *Job Analysis at the Speed of Reality, On-Demand Learning,* and *Selling E-Learning*.

Anyone who knows me for more than five minutes can tell you that I am a rabid Miami Dolphins fan—which, depending on the year, can be tenuous. And, yes, last year was one of those years. But, as I always say, "There's always next year." OK, this is the last time I'll give that kind of detail about me.

The focus for this month's column is on e-learning and some related technologies. As training and learning professionals for organizations, whether they are big or small, or as independent consultants, you often have to hunker down in response to meeting a client's needs so that it's difficult to get outside of your office (literally) and see what's happening in the world around you. That can be detrimental to the quality of the solution you're trying to create for your client base.

Not your usual learning device
New technologies are being created outside the realm of learning that can have great impact as the basis for learning solutions. For example, when PDAs, personal digital assistants, were created, their prima-

ry function was to help people keep track of their contacts, tasks, calendars, and email electronically. Synching one's PDA to a computer was completed primarily to ensure that the personal digital data was the same on the handheld device and on the computer on the user's desk. Synchronization of the devices was done using a cable. The earliest versions of PDAs didn't use infrared ports for synchronization or to share information.

Fast forward. Now, personal data is only one element of the information that gets synchronized. Software applications are downloaded, as are databases, e-books, articles, and Webpages or Web clippings—in real time. Some PDAs now do double duty as phones or GPSs, global positioning systems. Educational software applets are available en masse at sites such as Handango.com, Palmgear.com, and palmone.com.

So, why is that relevant to you? If you see that more and more people are using PDAs and a large number of people in your organization are using them, it might mean that you would be able to provide value to your internal clients by offering them some learning and or

other performance solutions using this technology, which generally isn't considered to be a typical learning device. **GO TO** *"Performance Support Tools,"* page 35.

The beat goes on
The digital beat is about listening for the rhythms of technology developments and trying to create parallel solutions for your end users, your learners, your clients.

Another interesting trend is the increased need for greater localization of the learning solution. Because of the state of the economy, which is still dealing with large unemployment, organizations have fewer people doing more work. That means that most organizations will have lots of "horizontal loading" occurring. Horizontal loading happens when employees are given more responsibility and work while staying at the same pay level. Raise your hand if you're experiencing horizontal loading. If you're not, get ready to raise your hand.

That is an important factor to consider because it means that in most organizations, there will be even fewer opportunities for employees to "go to" training. The key phrase here is "go to." ❯❯❯❯

DigitalDashboards

There's increased discussion of the use of digital dashboards for learners when we talk about leveraging technology. For example, imagine that you're a sales manager in a company selling high-tech equipment. Wouldn't it be phenomenal to log into your computer and from a consistent homepage be able to track the revenue of your sales staff, order and sales pipeline for the current and next four fiscal quarters, key product and service information, and the latest news about your clients and competitors? Wouldn't it be great to see how your team is stacking up against peer teams? Wouldn't it be useful to know key competency areas that need development among your sales staff? Capabilities for those types of organizational awareness exist now.

Digital Dashboards
See these sites for software that can help you create digital dashboards inside your organization.
◄») **opendoor.ca**
◄») **infommersion.com**
◄») **cubiccompass.com**

I didn't say that people weren't going to be allowed to take training; I mean that people are going to have to get more training locally—at their desktop, at their workstation, on the manufacturing floor, on an airplane, in the car that gets them to and from the workplace.

Technology, the great enabler

There are a variety of ways that technology can enable increased localization of learning. One is by offering business simulations directly to the desktop. The idea is that business, and sometimes other types of, simulations can be reviewed by the end user right at the desktop. Simulearn is a company with some examples of types of interactions you might experience in the workplace that are replicated (at some level) with computer-animated characters and programmed business heuristics. Let's face it: It's easier to make a mistake in a business simulation, on your desktop, than in front of your peers or supervisors. In addition, most of these types of simulations allow learners to practice with failure in a safe environment.

◀ **simulearn.net**

Use the real world

Your staff still needs professional development, regardless of the amount of additional responsibility that has been assigned to them.

You can facilitate this professional development with real-time data and metrics that will support your coaching sessions, making you a more effective leader. The more time your folks are out selling and supporting their clients, the more successful they will be. When they're successful, you're successful.

E-learning is changing. Look outside traditional content areas and practices to identify ways to leverage technology. Watch CNN, read the *Wall Street Journal,* go to the local mall, attend a training conference, and don't be afraid to

emulate real-world practices into your learning solutions.

I invite you to join in this endeavor moving forward and would like your input about new technologies you'd like me to cover.

Ten Tips Checklist

Here are 10 tips for selecting e-learning.

1. Be able to describe in explicit detail what it is you and your organization need. This isn't as easy as it seems.

2. Acquire or build e-learning solutions based on a strategic plan.

3. Don't be the first to implement a "new" solution.

4. Ask suppliers to provide you with four references— two that loved what the supplier did and two that hated what it did.

5. Identify all legacy systems in your organization that might interact with the new learning solution.

6. Identify all potential future systems that might interface with the learning solution you want to implement.

7. Use trade shows as a way to assess the current state of offerings in the e-learning space. (But very rarely should you make a buying decision based on a visit to a trade show.)

8. Identify several potential vendors who can provide the e-learning solution you need.

9. Don't sign long-term contracts for e-learning solutions.

10. Determine organizational readiness for e-learning prior to trying to implement it.

Your Input
Contact Darin Hartley, director of solutions development at Lguide; darin@lguide.com.

Digital Beat *covers technology trends, news, and tips. Send comments, questions, and items of interest to digitalbeat@astd.org.*