TRENDS

By Jennifer J. Salopek

Balancing Work and Learning

But it's really about the work.

As a journalist, I constantly have to learn a little bit about a lot of things to complete my assignments. On topics from barcoding to Bell's Palsy, wine tasting to wireless technology, I seek out just enough information from references and experts to form a competent thesis and write an article defending that thesis. As soon as the assignment is finished, most of that information gets jettisoned from my memory bank as I replenish it with new material on the next topic. It's a lot like studying for a college exam: You learn just enough to pass the test, but you don't retain a lot of the information unless you use it regularly.

On-the-job training, performance support tools, and job aids provide a similar type of temporary learning for employees—and, as market cycles accelerate while time and training budgets decrease, this type of on-the-fly learning is becoming even more crucial. The need to maximize resources while reducing learning time will result in a decrease in "sabbatical learning"—taking time off from work to pursue dedicated learning activities—and that's a good thing, says Lee Maxey, a business productivity strategist and principal of MINDMAX Incorporated in Boston.

A spring issue of *Smithsonian* magazine pictured a deck of playing cards created for American troops in World War II to help them identify enemy aircraft —an historic job aid. We need more such simple solutions, says Maxey, who believes that several trends have converged to necessitate an increased focus on productivity and a decreased emphasis on learning. He has been using the term "sabbatical learning" for three to four years.

"*Sabbatical* is a term that is steeped in the academic tradition," he says. "It's an old model, ingrained in a society in which people think about learning as an isolated enterprise. We must move away from that model. Rapid change means that it's impossible for instructors to be experts anymore. Second, it's virtually impossible to get away from work. And third, the useful content that's created isn't only relevant to employees, but also to many others along the supply chain."

But to create performance support tools and systems that work, it's vital to connect them to and position them within the context of corporate strategy. All companies have one of two overarching strategies, posits Maxey: Make money, or be sold. Either of those strategies creates a set of business goals that are measured through clear metrics; strategic initiatives to pursue those goals drive changes in process, people, and technology. "The people part is where we—training and development professionals—can really make a difference," he says, "as we help employees increase their speed to proficiency and their ability to perform."

But measurement is where most learning stops. "ROI is a backward-looking term," says Maxey. "We must verify, then improve upon business results, not just training results."

Our measurement units must also be refined. An experienced employee who needs to learn one advanced function of your customer relationship management system doesn't need to take a course on the whole system. Yet,

according to Maxey, learning management systems also derive from an academic model, and their unit of measurement is a course. "That's often too large of a horse pill for someone who wants just a little bit of information," says Maxey.
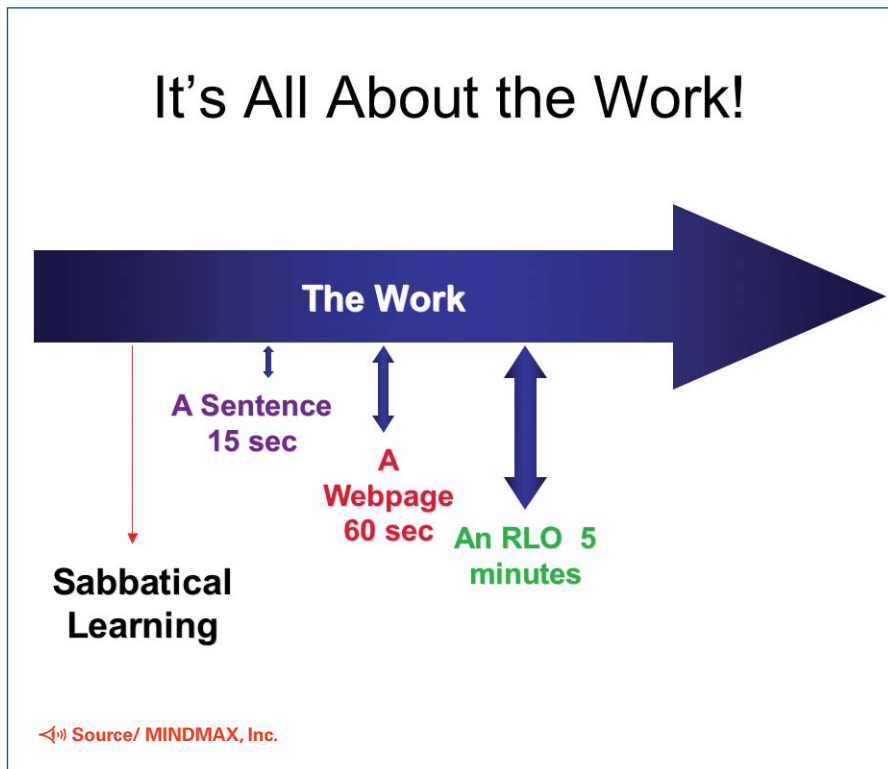
It's all about the work
So, how do we reconcile resource demands with the varying information needs of employees, customers, suppliers, and others within our business communities? And isn't this just knowledge management rendered another way?

"Knowledge management is an awesome concept that's still before its time," says Maxey. He thinks that corporate portals, and true integration through customer relationship management systems and enterprise resource planning systems, hold the key to enabling just-in-time sharing of information.

"We have the potential to build dynamic content that purposely doesn't have a shelf life; it changes and is fluid with the needs of its users," Maxey says. He envisions a shift from learning objects, which have instructional objectives to create a competency, to information objects—discrete pieces of information that are variably useful. "We'll move toward well-designed and delivered information objects," he says, that will increase productivity, decrease time to market, and increase our ability to manage corporate intellectual property.

The need to satisfy that last goal is especially urgent, as corporate tenure overall is decreasing. "We need employees to ramp up quickly, and we need to extract what they know before they leave," Maxey says.
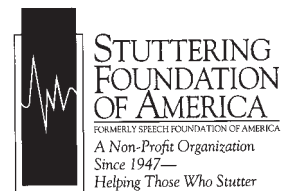
He uses a snowplow analogy: Snowplows are on-road vehicles, designed only to clear snow from roadways. If you want

It's All About the Work!

The Work

A Sentence
15 sec

A Webpage
60 sec

An RLO 5 minutes

Sabbatical Learning

Source/ MINDMAX, Inc.

the snowplow to hit something, you have to put it in the road. "Employees are much like snowplows. Learning should be put into the path of work."

Sabbatical learning just isn't practical anymore for all learning needs. Maxey defines it as "time away from work to learn—even if it's only 30 minutes." Even e-learning is still sabbatical learning. "E-learning is just a delivery method, but the unit of measure is still predominantly the course," Maxey says. That's not to say that sabbatical learning doesn't have its proper function; it's especially valuable for behavior modification, learning bodies of knowledge for certification, or mastery through deeper study in order to become an expert. Maxey also emphasizes that sabbatical learning provides a safe place for people to fail without consequences to the actual work. Even so, "Sabbatical learning isn't as functional for the real-time pressures of the work environment," he says. And, it presents a problem in transferring new information to performance: Sabbatical learning opportunities must be closely scheduled to the time of need to maximize transfer.

How do you put learning in the path of work? What can you influence in your own job? Pick something that can make a difference, then partner with operations, Maxey suggests. Get buy-in and support from frontline and midlevel managers to change work processes, and be sure to demonstrate the WIIFM ("What's in it for me?"). Then pick your methods carefully: For example, everyone uses Outlook. Could you deliver information objects that way? Or, for customer service representatives, consider your CRM. "Learning should be triggered by a problem in their path and information provided with minimal diversion, such as a mouse-over explanation," says Maxey.

Internal company portals can provide links to usable, accurate information. Reusable learning objects can be a mini-sabbatical: five minutes of instruction, embedded into the need opportunity. Or they can be laminated, pocket-sized cards featuring silhouettes of German and Japanese warplanes. Whatever the form, Maxey concludes, "It's always about the work, not about the learning."

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