On the move:
How mobile learning is reshaping talent development

By Sei-Myung Chang, Catherine Farley, Breck Marshall, Terry Nulty, Kress Riley and Sean Bengry
Mobile devices are an increasingly ubiquitous presence in our lives, including our work lives. Forward-looking organizations are working today to use mobility to enhance the way their people learn and work. To be successful with a mobile learning strategy, companies need to integrate mobile capabilities with other training channels, offer their people a seamless experience and utilize design principles appropriate to a mobile device.

Mobile learning is here, and here to stay. As smartphones and tablets become a near-constant presence in our lives, almost every type of company today is considering how best to use mobile devices and applications to enrich their organization’s talent development capabilities.

Companies are encountering several types of challenges in designing effective mobile learning experiences. The most obvious is the size and form factor of mobile devices, with smaller screens and keyboards, and without a pointing device such as a mouse. With these device constraints, one cannot just import e-learning presentations and applications, as is, into a mobile environment nor deploy the kinds of text-heavy reference guides and slides used in classroom teaching.

Equally important, however, is the issue of properly integrating mobile learning solutions into the broader ecosystem of enterprise learning and talent development.

By knowing how and when to incorporate mobility into a learning strategy, companies can multiply the benefits of talent development, helping their people and their entire organization perform at higher levels.

The advantages of mobile learning

The promise of mobile learning is compelling. Overall workforce productivity can increase because people can be learning whenever and wherever it’s convenient, rather than being pulled away from their work for extended periods of time—the default training approach of many companies. Traditionally, a worker had to come to the learning experience. Now, learning can come to the worker.

In addition, in industries ranging from sales to health care to manufacturing, workers and professionals can use mobile devices to support their performance and receive guidance or certification for the task at hand. Mining companies, for example, can use wireless learning applications to perform compliance assessments, helping to certify the required level of knowledge for workers before they enter the mines. Other types of companies can certify workers before they engage in complex or risky tasks. This kind of application helps deliver faster processing of results and can streamline management of the assessment process by automatically updating corporate records to track completions—an important business objective.

Mobile learning can be an effective way to reinforce learning experiences within the broader context of talent development. It can also align training more closely to how people actually learn. Even with the advent of digital learning, content and courseware are generally pushed out in sequential fashion: a classroom event perhaps followed by a computer- or web-based event, followed by an online seminar or communication, and so forth.
Yet, as demonstrated in Figure 1, that’s not really how people learn and especially not how training departments should plan effective learning experiences that create an enduring difference in people’s knowledge, skills and abilities. As we learn, we move forward, branch out, and take unexpected paths with new connections. We also loop back based on additional experiences to understand previous concepts more deeply. Mobile learning, properly planned and executed, goes beyond the “anytime, anywhere” benefit to deliver experiences that foster greater retention and better performance.

**Figure 1:** Traditionally, experiences even in a blended learning environment are pushed out sequentially. (Top figure.) However, the way people learn looks much more like a complex adaptive system. (Bottom figure.) We move forward, branch out to other related ideas and loop back to a deeper understanding of previous topics based on new experiences.

Because of its flexibility and continuous availability, mobile learning can support how people actually learn. It has an important role to play in reinforcing experiences, offering people information at their fingertips, and providing refresher courses just prior to the performance of complex tasks.
Keys to success

Given the clear potential of mobility to enrich enterprise learning and drive business outcomes, what can organizations do to accelerate the maturation of their mobile learning strategies and to have a more immediate impact on the performance of their people? Here are several success factors to bear in mind.

1. Design mobile learning as part of your overall integrated learning and talent development strategy

Mobile learning is most effectively implemented as part of a larger learning and talent development strategy that helps augment, extend and complement the varied experiences needed to improve workers’ knowledge and skills and align their behaviors with business strategy. This integrated approach means that diverse types of learning formats and channels should be used, including instructor-led training, communications, e-learning and, yes, mobile learning.

Although the research behind the “learning pyramid” (that people retain only 5 percent of knowledge gained from a lecture, but 90 percent of information they teach to others) has been largely discredited for lack of data, what is still valid is the fact that reinforcement of learning in multimodal fashion gives the brain more ways to organize the information into memory for later recall.

Mobile learning is part of a learning delivery strategy which, because it is more faithful to how people actually learn, can more readily translate learning experiences into long-term knowledge and changed behaviors.

Discussing mobile learning in this broader context involves putting performance support and collaboration into the mix, as well. With mobile, the driving force is accessing different, and shorter, bits of information—a training module, a short assessment, a reference document, a blog, and so forth—and also reaching out to colleagues across the corporate network for experience and expertise in an area or topic.

From a mobile learning perspective, this mix of modes and channels is the real power behind a well-thought-out enterprise learning strategy. It’s not just about getting content onto a smartphone or tablet; it’s about tying all of the pieces of a learner’s story together, enabled by mobility.

2. Adapt new techniques for digital content management

The holistic, integrated approach just discussed has ramifications for content management. As organizations build, buy and curate learning content, they encounter a distinct challenge around how to manage multi-channel content. It is important for organizations to be thinking about their content maintenance and management model early on.

The proliferation of channels poses a risk to those charged with managing and curating internal and external learning content, especially digital content, keeping it fresh and making sure it connects to all forms of the organization’s learning experiences, including classroom events, e-learning modules, web-based interaction and mobile learning. It is also important to effectively rationalize modules, tools and solutions to minimize the total cost of learning.

3. Create learning experiences appropriate for a mobile device

Many of the essential rules of mobile learning are the same as with any effective learning experience. Organizations need to target the experience at individual learners and the competencies they need to do their jobs, with a focus on addressing gaps in the specific proficiencies of an individual. Beyond the basics, people in particular kinds of roles need specific kinds of learning experiences and content if they are to make progress and feel they are advancing in competence. Workers also have particular contexts in which they are learning and these need to be understood by designers—where learners are located, what they are doing and who they are with. From that, better decisions can be made about the length, design and usability of the mobile learning experience.

Training must also be designed explicitly for the particular characteristics and constraints of mobile devices. Consider the challenges of designing a learning experience appropriate to how we engage with a device. In a learning context, mobile devices are likely to be used in short bursts of activity rather than over extended, continuous periods of time. People can interact with laptop or desktop e-learning for longer periods of time compared with interactions over a smaller device such as a smartphone. This means that mobile content must be extremely focused: short video snippets, for example, must replace long-form video. To create an effective mobile learning experience, instructional designers need to streamline content and leverage methods of interaction distinctive to mobile devices.

It’s important to remember the hard lessons from the early days of e-learning, when classroom-based materials were just reproduced as “page-turning applications”
and put into computer-based training modules. The result was extremely static and boring learning that, moreover, did not take advantage of the unique functionality of a computer.

Learning designers can avoid that mistake with a new generation of digital learning by taking a truly learner-centric approach and finding creative ways to leverage the unique features of mobile devices such as location awareness and touch capabilities. If the device used is a tablet computer, courses can incorporate apps such as Noterize™, which enables students to complete experiments or annotate worksheets. Mobile devices equipped with cameras can help document field trips or group interaction with images and video, complemented by blogs that can enhance and preserve the learning experience.

When we acknowledge both the differences and the advantages of mobile devices in a training setting we have the opportunity to deliver learning experiences that are distinctive and high-impact.

4. Provide seamless training across learning experiences and devices

Employees now have access to a variety of computing and communications devices. If a learning experience is to be coherent, people must be able to port learning in progress from one device to another, seamlessly. For example, someone may start a session in the office at a PC, then continue the session on a smartphone during the commute back home, at which point they may finish on a tablet or other device.

This is an IT challenge that is not insurmountable. For some years, telecommunications and cable companies have been touting an "any screen" strategy whereby customers can watch their favorite sporting events, for example, on a large TV, on a tablet and also on a smartphone, moving easily from one delivery mechanism and device to another.

Many companies also have experience creating seamless interactions for customers across call center, phone self-service and web-based service channels and these learnings can be applied for employee interactions with enterprise learning.

This kind of integrated digital platform has important ramifications for planning and deploying enterprise learning more effectively and for managing content. In a learning context, such a platform can connect employees with learning experiences through a centralized and prioritized list of interaction channels. Multiple kinds of messaging and coordinated alerts can be sent out to learners, and the platform can provide managed message orchestration and history with an interaction rules engine and audit trail. User demographics can also be captured, enabling analytics engines to determine with more accuracy what types of learning experiences, with whom and in what sequence, are producing the greatest results.

5. Create a comprehensive “bring your own device” (BYOD) strategy to deal with security issues

Consumer mobile devices in the workplace—the so-called “bring-your-own-device” (BYOD) trend—are changing how work is done and, by extension, how mobile learning takes place. According to a recent Gartner report, almost 40 percent of organizations globally are actively encouraging BYOD. By 2017, half of enterprises surveyed expect to move exclusively to BYOD for smartphones.¹

Yet IT departments will need to approach the BYOD phenomenon with care. Implementation of BYOD programs exacerbates the challenges of information security, device management and workspace delivery. Unfortunately, endpoint security controls, mobile device management (MDM) tools and workspace delivery mechanisms are inconsistently implemented across the myriad of mobile platforms.

Primary concerns among IT executives include the loss or theft of mobile devices containing sensitive corporate data or unencrypted protected health information and the challenge of enforcing security policies on devices that are not owned and managed by IT. Clear governance and security structures will be necessary as the BYOD trend grows. If such security mechanisms are not in place, the growth of mobile learning will slow.

6. Effectively manage the organizational change that accompanies the move to mobile learning

Mobile learning requires changes in mindsets among employees, supervisors/managers and learning professionals, so managing change effectively is essential to driving a successful mobile learning strategy. The assumptions and current usage patterns of different age groups must be figured into the mix, as well: Millennials increasingly expect to do most of their work on mobile devices; slightly older employees are likely to be more tethered to traditional PCs or to be less comfortable doing substantive work on a tablet or smartphone.

¹ “Bring Your Own Device: The Results and the Future,” Gartner, 5 May 2014.
Conclusion: A bright future

Mobile learning is increasingly becoming an essential aspect of an organization’s overall talent development strategy. Mobile learning offers opportunities to deliver training experiences in a way that results in better knowledge retention and new behaviors aligned to business strategy.

To avoid missteps along the way, however, it is important for learning professionals to bear in mind that they should develop mobile learning experiences that are both appropriate to the mobile device and experience, and that complement the enterprise’s broader objectives for talent development.

Using mobile technology simply for technology’s sake can lead learning designers down the wrong path. However, by making the technology serve the unique environment of mobile learning—and by offering compelling user interfaces and seamless user experiences—companies have the opportunity to energize the entire ecosystem of talent development, delivering compelling learning experiences for their workforce anytime, anyplace, and in support of clear business outcomes.
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