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Strategies for Building Blended Learning

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At a recent conference, a practitioner was overheard saying, "I can see why blending makes sense. But what do I put with what? We have a hundred instructors and e-learning modules. If I put them together, is that a blend? What is a blend and how do I make it work in an organization that prefers a quick fix?" Those questions and more are tackled here.

A blend is an integrated strategy for delivering on promises about learning and performance. Blending involves a planned combination of approaches, such as coaching by a supervisor; participation in an online class; breakfast with colleagues; competency descriptions; reading on the beach; reference to a manual; collegial relationships; and participation in seminars, workshops, and online communities.

A study by Peter Dean and his colleagues found that providing several linked options for learners, in addition to classroom training, increased what they learned. In 2002, Harvard Business School faculty DeLacey and Leonard reported that students not only learned more when online sessions were added to traditional courses, but student interaction and satisfaction improved as well. Thomson and NETg released a 2003 white paper that reported speedier performance on real world tasks by people who learned through a blended strategy—faster than those studying through e-learning alone.

What's in a blend?

Options for blended learning go beyond the classroom. They're formal and informal, technology- and people-based, independent and convivial, and directive- and discovery-oriented. If you want to help employees with retirement planning, for example, a blend makes sense because the need extends over time. People can seek the information that they need, when they need it. Assist employees through workshops, coaching sessions, support groups, and online classes and performance support tools, such as the Social Security Administration's Benefit Calculator or the Living to 100 Life Expectancy Calculator©.

The table below presents the possibilities of what can constitute a blended learning approach:

|	
Live face-to-face (formal) • Instructor-led classroom • Workshops • Coaching/mentoring • On-the-job (OTJ) training	**Live face-to-face (informal)** • Collegial connections • Work teams • Role modeling
Virtual collaboration/synchronous • Live e-learning classes • E-mentoring	**Virtual collaboration/asynchronous** • Email • Online bulletin boards • Listservs • Online communities
Self-paced learning • Web learning modules • Online resource links • Simulations • Scenarios • Video and audio CD/DVDs • Online self-assessments • Workbooks	**Performance support** • Help systems • Print job aids • Knowledge databases • Documentation • Performance/decision support tools

How do you build a blend?

There's no cookbook for blends. The topic calls out for empirical research, stymied to date by murky definitions for blends and their ingredients, as well as the normal challenges associated with workplace studies. In the meantime, here are some guidelines for thinking about and constructing successful combinations. Derived from experience, observations of best practices, and the instructional design literature, these approaches highlight real constraints.

Stability and urgency. Will this content last for one or two years? Will there be changes within days or weeks? A good distinction to remember is that product information tends to be fickle, while such concepts as a perspective on leadership or customer service possess more staying power.

Another consideration is the amount of time developers have to create the belnd's ingredients. Does the program need to be up and running within five days or will there be several months to design and develop assets for the blend?

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of content types based on these issues:
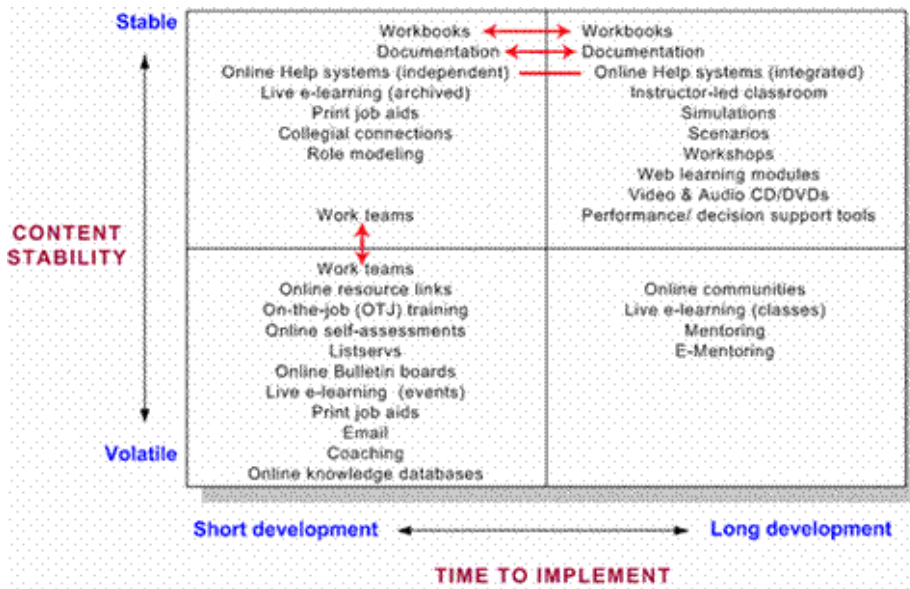
Now let's apply this breakdown to a real situation. Imagine that you work for a large health maintenance organization. Nearly every newspaper in the United States has raised fears about hormone replacement therapy (HRT). New opinions and studies appear daily. Patients are concerned, even frantic. Phones are ringing off the hook with questions about HRT, and doctors don't have all the answers. Physicians are eager for help now.

When considering solutions to this problem, our attention is immediately drawn to the left column of Figure 1. The need is urgent, and there's no time for a generous development cycle. More important, content is emergent and unstable. The top goal, therefore, is to provide doctors with access to emergent expertise to boost their knowledge and confidence with patients.

The lower left quadrant recommends several options for distributing information to the doctors.

- An online knowledge database to serve as a central repository for HRT information and a directory containing relatively stable information, including individuals and units within the HMO with special knowledge or responsibility regarding this issue. Email could blast FAQs and events to doctors, alerting them to local meetings to discuss the issue.

- Coaching over the phone that would allow doctors to process emergent concerns with experts.

- A print job aid, produced by experts on the topic, that summarizes the benefits and risks of each treatment. This could be combined with a reading list and links to online articles.

A devoted listserv that pushes the very latest information to doctors on a daily or weekly basis.

- Live online briefings that provide doctors with updates about the latest findings, as well as allowing them to participate in discussions. Events with stable content could be archived for later reference, providing value to new doctors and others unable to participate in online events.

Touches and cost. Next, answer the question: Is human interaction essential or will technology suffice? If the program is controversial, abstract, or complex, it makes sense to invest in human interactions provided through instructors in classrooms, coaching, mentoring, synchronous electronic presentations, and informal face-to-face meetings. Through interactions with other people, you can solidify attitudes and murky concepts.

Cost influences decisions about blending, too. How much is the organization or individual willing to invest in achieving specified outcomes? If the outcomes aren't achieved, is the situation dire? If the blended program is successful, what kinds of benefits will accrue? Development of realistic assets and human involvement add cost to the venture.

Figure 2 shows how these considerations influence your choices.
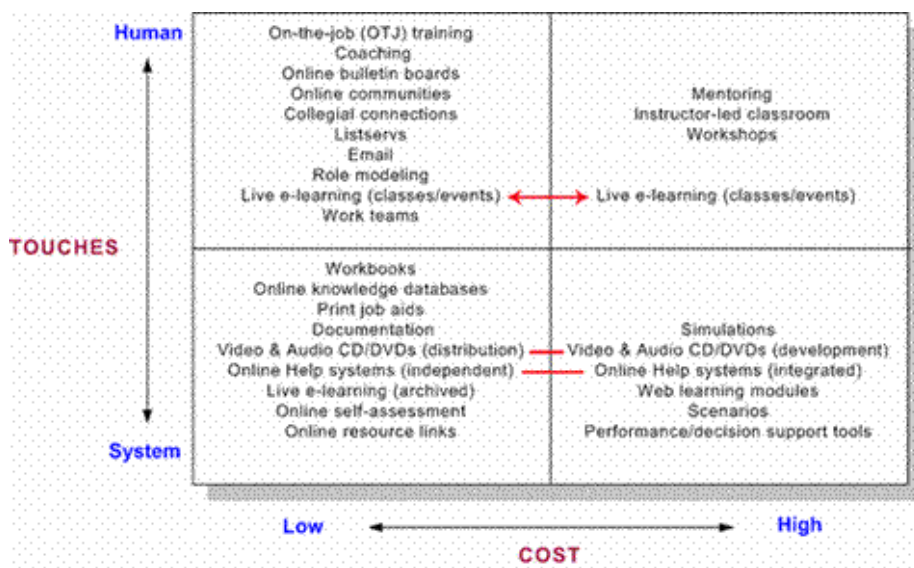
To understand this better, imagine that you've been asked to introduce global virtual teaming to an organization that many characterize as individualistic in its culture. A performance analysis found that employees are unclear about the definition and impact of global virtual teaming and that the majority of people are unconvinced that this approach will be effective.

The executives, however, are keen on this shift and are ready to invest resources. Because this is a top priority initiative with participants that span the globe, you can assume that the organization is ready to support higher cost solutions, such as those found in the right column of Figure 2.

But you still need to manage employees' concerns about virtual teaming. What assets might best earn their support? Without question, human interaction holds the most value in this instance. Face-to-face workshops would provide opportunities for employees to learn about, question, appreciate, and get comfortable with virtual teaming. Likewise, a live e-learning event, could present a model of virtual teaming and expose employees to the people and processes involved in virtual collaboration.

Once the concept and benefits are clear and conversations have transpired, the lower-right quadrant might have something to offer, including

- e-learning modules that instruct global team leaders on how to set and communicate goals

- a performance support tool that can nudge good decisions associated with the tasks global

teams are asked to tackle

- an online community that can build exposure and consensus about new approaches that executives are eager to establish across the organization.

Learning resources and experience. At this point, it's time to focus on actual resources and assets, and consider how people will use them. Will learning assets be delivered and quickly vanish or will they be available for the long haul and future reference?

The value of most job aids, documentation, performance support tools, and online knowledge bases is that they're available over time and provide assistance on an as-needed basis. Extended access to such resources is desirable when people are overloaded with information, content changes frequently, topics are complicated, or material is infrequently used.

Because both independent and communal activities are possible, another issue to consider is the learners' experience. Will they work alone on the job or at a home office, train, or plane? Will they engage with others in their attempt to learn and improve performance?

Figure 3 gives you an idea about how these factors influence decisions.
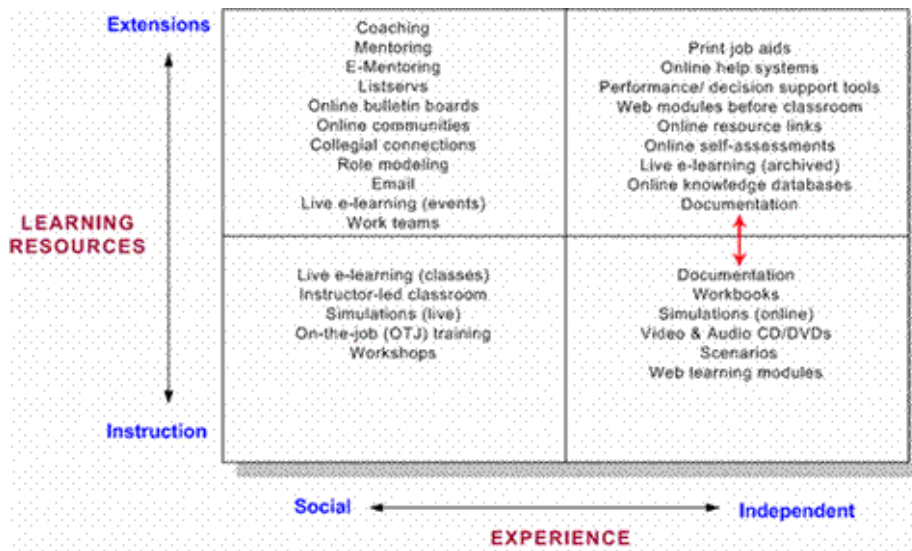
For this example, imagine that you need to introduce a clerical staff to ACCESS, a database program in the Microsoft Office Suite. The learning goal is to help clerks become familiar and comfortable with using ACCESS in their daily tasks.

A needs assessment revealed substantial fears about the new program. Only a small percentage of staff envision ways that ACCESS could be used for their jobs. While most said they now use and like computers, the majority weren't curious about ACCESS and seemed satisfied with existing programs. Meanwhile, executives are resolute about the ways employees should use the program.

Given that situation, what should the trainer do?

Ideally, instructor-led classes and workshops would introduce employees to the features and benefits of the software. Instruction to build confidence and fluency, and work on tasks with peers, is indicated in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 3. It also makes sense to use live e-learning to provide examples of model applications for their business. These programs can then be archived and made available for new employees or for refresher training. Once staff has grown more comfortable with the program, an online help system provided by Microsoft can support employees on the job—as needed. If resistance lingers and more interaction is required, you can use an online community or coaching by managers to help staff work through their concerns.

What it takes to blend?

Too often training professionals focus on which e-learning library to buy or how to explain new

roles to instructors. Blending should rivet attention on how to combine resources to achieve a strategic purpose, such as decreasing time to market or increasing repeat business. Therefore, staying focused on strategy is crucial to blending success. Other key factors include

Deliver assets and guidance. Because learners don't always know when they need additional instruction or when they're ready to test their skills, effective blends must include guidance. Direction can appear as sample paths, breadcrumbs marking progress, diagnostics, and recommendations targeted to roles, tasks, priorities and progress.

Work cross-functionally. A blend is the opposite of a silver bullet. Blended learning involves working with and convincing people and units across the organization. Make certain that all those involved understand their roles and the reasons for multifaceted approaches.

Encourage independence and conviviality. Before e-learning, trainers typically made choice between delivering information through self-study or teaching in groups. Emergent technology makes it possible for employees to enjoy both. Participants can study on their own in print or online while they simultaneously participate in online communities, phone conferences, or live meetings.

Focus on flexible options for employees and customers. Blending enables people to get an answer, regardless of the location, time, and learning preferences. This has positive ramifications for knowledge workers who need access to information immediately, rather than after a scheduled event or an expert available for consultation.

Put people in the middle of the blend. Here are some examples:

- a manager helps her employees decide whether they want to participate in an online community
- peers advise others on taking the class online or face-to-face
- an instructor acts as a catalyst in the online communities, making certain that the right people get to the right experiences and assets
- a supervisor reminds staff why the topic matters.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Be clear about links between learning options. The ingredients associated with a program on virtual teaming, for example, grow in significance when assembled and associated with daily challenges, performance reviews, and career development options.

Embrace redundancy. Redundancy is part of any good blend because it allows participants to receive the same and elaborated messages from several sources in various formats over time. For instance, a topic is discussed in a traditional classroom, it's elaborated on in the online community, and actual examples are housed in the online knowledge database. In addition, supervisors may host lunch chats to practice key concepts while email messages reiterate content. Finally, self-assessments present directions for development.

Take on key initiatives and measure results. The best way to counter the preference for quick fixes is to realize results in the organization. Blended initiatives—on behalf of sales, IT, or HR— speak volumes to those who would rather not.

Recognize this as an opening salvo in the quest for effective blends. In our research, we found few definitions and little research on blends. To that end, after trying these approaches, measure your efforts and share your results with fellow practitioners.

Nothing but blends

El Agave, a premier Mexican restaurant in San Diego, California, is known for its blends. Their efforts on behalf of mole and tequila concoctions are instructive for those interested in blending. They use the highest quality ingredients; they're clear about expectations; and they offer options. They taste and test and improve; and they use elbow grease to smooth the sauce and beverage as needed.

Of course, El Agave has things going for it. They don't do everything; they focus on doing one thing really well. You'll not find a blintz, frappe, or pasta on the menu. The buyer, chef, bartender, and waiter are coordinated in their devotion. Finally, they've never thought about their signature dishes as blends. It's just what they do—day in, day out.

Workplace learning professionals should think similarly. Let's move beyond thinking about blends as something unique or special. They're simply another method for moving towards the concerted systems that's essential to learning and performance. Blends are characterized by customization, integration, purpose, flexibility, and redundancy. The alternative—one-size-fits-all—is no way to serve a global workforce.

Additional Reading

Here are some resources and examples for professionals eager to put blends into action.

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