4 Important Considerations
When Leveraging Content for Mobile Learning
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INTRODUCTION

First there was ILT, then e-learning. Well, have you heard of m-learning—and are you ready for it? With the advent of smartphones, tablets, handhelds, and book-readers it was only a matter of time before executives would look for ways to integrate mobile computing into e-learning to make training more accessible and portable.

According to the 2010 Tomi Ahonen Almanac, more than two-thirds of the world’s population has a mobile phone subscription. It’s estimated that by 2013, more than 35 percent of the global workforce (nearly 1.3 billion people), will be considered ‘mobile workers.’ Even with these staggering statistics, learning executives are treading cautiously around this technology, trying to determine how it best fits into their corporate training model. Consider these statistics from the 2008 Learning Consortium about trends in mobile learning:

• Only 24% of organizations surveyed currently deploy mobile learning of any kind.

• Use of mobile devices is currently limited to placing and receiving organizational phone calls (98%), e-mails (91%), and text messages (83%).

• 73% of mobile learning is not integrated with an LMS.

• 38% of organizations are not currently planning the implementation of mobile learning.

• 26% are currently building a business case.

So, where are we today with mobile learning? More executives are recognizing the advantages of this modality—integrating it into their
learning strategy. The rest have yet to invest in mobile content, despite its
dramatic growth and usage. This is interesting considering its apparent
value. Why are learning executives being so cautious?

In a recent Learning Executive Think Tank, Tom Kelly, former learning
executive at Cisco and Oracle, and Jim Hanlin, President and Founder of
Best Training Resources met with seven senior-level executives to discuss
their plans to develop mobile content and the challenges they’ve faced
along the way. Specifically, participants were asked:

- What are your plans for mobile technology and what challenges do
  you anticipate for your organization in implementing mobile
  learning content?
- What is your mobile learning strategy and what technologies are you
  currently using?
- How are you leveraging your content for mobile learning?
- Are you focusing on a certain audience with respect to content?
- What obstacles are preventing you to implement mobile content?

Think tank participants represented a variety of industries including:
pharmaceuticals, software development, banking, business
communications, financial services, IT, and data management. While all
participants indicated they are planning to incorporate mobile content into
their learning strategies in the near future, they all admitted to concerns
that are holding them back.
The biggest challenge in creating mobile content is the diversity of hardware being used by employees and clients.

All of our think tank participants indicated they are just starting to venture into developing mobile content. Most are in a research and development phase as they wait to see how this platform evolves and works for other organizations. One participant commented:

“We are working closely with our IT organization to develop mobile content that is secure and in compliance with our corporate strategy. We are focused on creating an infrastructure plan that will enable us to deliver content in the near future.”

1. Mobile learning requires hardware standardization and increased security.

One of the biggest challenges in creating mobile content is the variety of devices in use today. One learning executive, who works in business communications, wants to incorporate mobile learning for his organization’s field sales team, but the rollout has been slowed due to hardware inconsistencies.

“There are so many different laptops, smart phones, and tablets being used by employees and clients—it’s hard to develop content that can be used on all technologies successfully. Since we don’t provide employees with mobile devices, we need to consider how hardware differences could impact content and delivery. This has caused a slowdown in the development of our mobile content.”

Another executive from a IT management company, explained his company’s hesitancy to jump into mobile content development for similar reasons.

“We have run into a lot of issues implementing mobile content, particularly in Europe. We do not control the mobile environment, so platforms and hardware are not universal. We cannot standardize hardware across the board, so we have decided to wait for the market to materialize. Hopefully, some solutions will emerge that can help us move forward.”
One learning executive noted that he is working with a private company that specializes in mobile learning. This company has successfully helped him with fulfillment and support, despite the disparity in hardware.

“There are some very good vendors in the marketplace who can design and implement mobile content over multiple formats. This has worked well for us. We’ve been able to concentrate on content and not worry so much about the infrastructure to support it.”

Another concern in mobile learning is security—especially in handling sensitive, proprietary content. Of particular concern is the Android, which is based on an open-source system, leaving the content more vulnerable. One executive from the financial services industry explained that all of their Android applications have been postponed in favor of other, more secure platforms:

“Mobile delivery is fast becoming the most important tool for our professionals on the road, so we have worked to develop viable content that is tightly aligned with our learning technologies group. The most popular and preferred platform for right now is Apple. The operating system is stable and relatively secure. Additionally, their interface is easy to use. We are also developing content for Blackberry—considering its popularity.”

2. Mobile learning means re-purposing existing or creating new for a smaller platform.

All think tank participants still have a lot of questions on how to optimize existing content for mobile learning. Some training content isn’t conducive to this platform because it cannot be converted into short, easily-digestible segments. And, what about social media? How do you best integrate mobile learning with technologies such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube?

Most agree that m-learning requires a different learning approach and program restructuring. Several of our leaders are experimenting with video—either creating new or repurposing existing content for field sales and service employees.
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In most cases, mobile learning will not be the end-all-be-all for training. Instead, it will act as a support for traditional learning.

One executive shared how he is leveraging existing video content for mobile learning that includes searchable programming, allowing users to access desired content, on-demand.

“We are re-purposing some of our video content for mobile devices to see how it is received and used. We found that this was the easiest, cost effective, and most conducive modality for mobile learning.”

Another participant from a software development company is working on how to best incorporate existing content into a mobile learning strategy.

“We’re trying to figure out how to develop mobile content—and do it smartly. We don’t want to build platforms twice so we’re investigating how to leverage our current platforms to accommodate all technology-based learning.”

3. Mobile learning provides an excellent support structure for traditional learning.

In most cases, mobile learning will not be the end-all-be-all for training. Instead, it will act as a support other, more traditional methods. Most of our learning leaders envision a blended learning approach that will combine e-learning and ILT—or another combination of modalities that best suit the medium. One executive, who works for a financial services company shared how he is using mobile learning to supplement training pre- and post-event.

“We use mobile learning for pre- and post-work to support our live events. Before class begins, we push mobile content to our students to prepare them for what they’ll be learning. We then make mobile content available as a refresher resource after they finish the course.”

Other executives have combined mobile technology with traditional learning platforms with some success. One participant commented that his organization saved over $30,000 this past year by transferring new hire training materials to the iPad.
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“We no longer distribute any printed training materials. Instead, participants receive an iPad with all of the learning content they need. The iPad comes complete with a training calendar as well as other collaboration apps. Students love walking away with an iPad and appreciate the convenient content.”

4. Mobile learning requires special considerations and should only be used for certain types of content to ensure success.

There are special considerations to examine when creating training for m-learning. A working design principle might be to develop content for the smallest to largest mobile device. Video instruction is the most logical training method, because it is easiest to create and implement—however, it doesn’t suit every training scenario.

One learning executive identified specific guidelines that he follows to ensure that video content is optimized for mobile delivery:

• Video clips are no longer than 2-5 minutes long.
• Each video clip provides a single answer or solution that is easily viewed and understood.
• Each video addresses a specific piece of content. The content is concise to keep users’ interest.
• Videos include web links with additional information for other learning.

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“Gamed-based content appeals to a younger audience, is engaging, and uses mobile applications. We discovered, that if we want mobile content to be used successfully, it needs to be meaningful, entertaining, and presented in a manner that’s appealing to the user.”

She added that creating meaningful m-learning content requires the input of everyone—including the user.
Crowdsourcing allows the collective base of users to share knowledge, experiences and to generate content that fits their needs precisely.

Mobile technology presents an excellent opportunity to develop content that fits the user and how they consume information today. One participant talked about how he is using crowdsourcing to generate content.

“Crowdsourcing allows the collective base of users to share knowledge and experiences and generate content that fits their specific needs. The idea of mass collaboration to develop content allows us to create a knowledge bank that is fluid and based on actual user experiences and demands.”

Crowdsourcing allows users to contribute to the evolution of content. It eliminates the guesswork of anticipating users' needs and questions before publishing. Mobile platforms are quite conducive to the crowdsourcing idea, because content can be implemented, modified, and updated in real time based on current trends and demands being experienced in the field.

CONCLUSION

Mobile platforms present a vast opportunity to enhance traditional learning methods. Mobile content is increasingly being used by sales and service professionals, who need on-the-spot information on how to solve customer problems.

Careful consideration should be taken about what type of content is best suited to the mobile environment. Learning executives should assess the real need and usefulness of the technology before deciding to deploy it. Security is also an area that needs to be addressed as this technology becomes more commonplace.

Many organizations are testing m-learning internally before rolling it out to external customers. As security and content issues are successfully addressed, m-learning will emerge as a vital component to corporate learning strategy.
ABOUT THE LEARNING EXECUTIVE THINK TANK

Learning Executive Think Tanks are by invitation only and are held six times a year—five via conference call and one face-to-face roundtable discussion.

The Learning Executive Think Tank, sponsored by Expertus, was created to bring key thinkers together to generate insights and best practices in order to help learning leaders run more effective organizations. For the future viability of the training industry, it’s important to look at key issues affecting learning organizations so that we may give back to the training industry and learn from each other.

Learning Executive Think Tanks are by invitation only and are held six times a year—five via conference call and one face-to-face roundtable discussion. Think Tank participants are proven, senior-level learning executives who have long track records of successful leadership. In our discussions, we concentrate on real results and the business aspects of training.

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ROUNDTABLE HOSTS

**Tom Clancy**
Tom Clancy is Vice President of Education Services at EMC Corporation. At EMC, Tom has held various field and corporate roles, primarily in Sales Productivity and Partner Management, focusing on field development, best practices and change execution. Since 2002, his primary responsibility has been leadership of the education role for all internal and external audiences.

**Tom Kelly**
Tom Kelly has more than 25 years of experience in the education and training industry and has held positions at NetApp, Cisco, Oracle Corporation, Sun Microsystems, NeXT Corporation and Control Data Corporation. Tom is currently a trusted advisor for a growing list of clients, including small to mid-sized companies focusing on learning organizations systems and strategies.

**Jim Hanlin**
Jim Hanlin is President & Founder of Best Training Resources, a business development, staffing, and personnel recruitment company focused exclusively on the corporate training industry. Jim has been involved in education and training for over 35 years as a senior administrator at a community college, director of education for a professional engineering association and has founded and served as president and a member of the Board of Directors for three other companies focusing on the development of corporate training strategy and custom training programs.