STILL SEEKING THE
PERFECT BLEND

Vincent Belliveau examines the most common mistakes and details the practical solutions that can help to deliver a blended success.

Most learning and development (L&D) professionals now accept that a blended learning strategy is essential to delivering organisational learning. E-learning, virtual classrooms and mobile learning have highlighted the fact that formal learning need not be confined to the classroom and indeed can be more closely aligned to the needs of busy employees in fast-moving organisations by moving outside it at least some of the time. Technology has also made it easier to deliver more cost-effective methods of training to dispersed teams and provide access to follow-up, refresher or extension materials. Moreover, increasing interest in social learning – facilitated by web-based technologies – has turned the spotlight onto the contribution of informal learning, which is believed to account for up to 80 percent of all learning.

While L&D professionals are aware of the range of tools at their disposal, many still struggle to deliver a successful blended learning strategy. This is usually because the right planning, people or systems have not been put in place.

BEWARE OF FUNCTIONAL SILOS AND CULTURE

Designing and delivering an effective blended learning strategy is only possible with a well-functioning, integrated L&D team, yet many Human Resource (HR) and L&D departments have discrete functional silos that concentrate on their own specialist areas. L&D professionals need to break down

any barriers to co-operation, integration and communication between departments so they can focus on the learners and agree on the best combination of learning interventions and content to deliver the organisation's objectives.

Some blended learning programmes fail due to poor design, typically because they do not meet the organisation's actual learning needs or they fail to take the organisation's learning culture into account. A full learning needs analysis delivers a true appreciation of what, how, why and when employees need to learn – and the blended learning programme can be developed accordingly. It is important that the L&D team views this analysis within the context of the organisation's learning culture and technological capabilities. For example, if an organisation has many field-based employees but there is no culture of remote or self-service learning, the L&D team will need to implement a communications campaign that persuades those employees to undertake learning within certain deadlines. Likewise, a weak learning culture may mean that line managers have to be persuaded to let employees complete e-learning, attend classroom training, undertake additional reading or participate in social learning initiatives during the working day. Ultimately, learners need to have access to the right, intuitive tools to complete a blended learning programme, and they must know how to use those tools. There is no point, for example, in including mobile learning in a programme if the target learners do not have access to the appropriate type of mobile devices.

SMART AND EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT

Learners fail to complete blended learning programmes if effective management tools are not in place. This is more complex than checking off a name against a attendance list – the L&D team needs to ensure that the right learners have been asked to complete the necessary elements of the blended learning programme. Then they need to be able to verify completion of each of those elements. Separate Learning Management Systems (LMS) for different types of training simply don't provide the necessary transparency for blended learning. Instead, organisations need a holistic learning platform that hosts all types of learning, as well as one that provides an online curriculum and booking mechanism, automated reminders and updates, automatic recording of learning completions, accurate and user-friendly reporting functionality, and online personal development plans.

Organisations that have shown success in delivering blended learning link learning

opportunities into a curriculum – so that once the learner has completed one element of the programme they are automatically prompted to undertake the next element. In addition, there are prompted options for the learner based upon their particular needs or circumstances. For example, if it is not possible for the learner to attend the classroom element of the programme, they may be able to complete an e-learning course, with additional reading, social learning and online testing instead. Automatic recording of learning completions and automatic reminders make it easy for L&D professionals and line managers to ensure full completion of the learning programme, whichever path the learner has taken. Automatic assignment of the curriculum is also important. For instance, a bank can leverage its LMS to automatically assign curriculum such as 'new to bank', 'new to teller role' or 'new manager' once an employee meets that criterion.

MOTIVATE THE LEARNER

A blended learning strategy requires learners to take much greater responsibility for their own learning, which in turn has dependencies in terms of the organisation's learning culture and the systems that help to deliver and manage learning. It also places a much greater imperative on the L&D team to deliver learning programmes that truly engage learners. It is essential to ensure the quality of the learning intervention and content, whatever the method of delivery. Moreover, the learner needs clarity as to what elements of the blended learning programme they are expected to undertake and by when, and their motivation may be improved by enabling them to see their progress towards their learning objectives. If the learner has their own personal homepage on the LMS,

they should be able to view the learning they are expected to complete, their deadlines and a summary of their achievements to date.

The benefits of a blended learning programme can be further enhanced if the learner is also prompted regarding access to related learning opportunities, such as additional e-learning programmes, online reading materials or relevant online bulletin boards. However, the learner should not be swamped with information; the layout should be user-friendly, making it easy for them to take control of their learning and understand their obligations. Another driver to increase adoption is via leveraging an LMS platform that also incorporates career, performance and talent management capabilities, providing staff with a one-stop shop for their career development.

KEEPING IT FRESH

Whether public or private sector, organisations need to maximise the talent of their people to deliver the best performance. To reach this goal, it is essential to implement an effective blended learning strategy, underpinned by good planning, engaging content and robust, user-friendly systems. It's also important for L&D professionals to keep up to speed with changes in practices and technology that can help to improve the provision and management of blended learning programmes on an ongoing basis. But most of all, blended learning requires the learner to become more engaged and take more responsibility for their own learning; enabling that process is absolutely critical for L&D professionals. Over time, this is generating a shift from L&D professionals telling learners what training they will receive and when, to asking them how they want to receive their learning and development.

Case Study

LV= is the UK's largest friendly society and a leading mutual financial services provider. The company serves 3.8 million members and customers and manages an estimated £9.5 billion on their behalf. In addition to having a complex business structure and a number of office locations across the UK, LV= is subject to regulation by the UK's Financial Services Authority (FSA) and strict data protection regulations. Nearly two-thirds of LV= employees are client-facing and must be trained to communicate with clients in a way that is compliant, factually correct and delivers outstanding customer service. LV= decided to implement a new Learning Management System (LMS) in order to improve the quality and timeliness of its management information and auditing capabilities. In addition, the LMS had to host online, face-to-face and blended learning and support a move towards a culture of self-service learning. This is particularly important to LV= because it has a geographically dispersed workforce; in addition to its office-based staff, key account executives are often on the road and other staff are home office based. Stuart Affleck, head of resourcing and development for LV=, selected Cornerstone OnDemand's SaaS-based LMS to assign, deliver and track learning and development (L&D) activity for the organisation's 4,000 employees across 28 UK offices. "Each LV= employee has a complex combination of governance, compliance and job-specific learning needs, so we needed a flexible and extensible platform for learning which we could use to build a more effective blended learning strategy, reinforce our new corporate branding and structure, and help the organisation to deliver business performance and outstanding customer service."

A blended learning strategy has many benefits for LV=. From a regulatory perspective, it is preferable and more effective to have a group-wide message that is delivered online to all employees in a consistent way. However, there is still a requirement for face-to-face learning, which takes place at LV='s main training centre in Bournemouth. In addition, LV= wanted to be able to deliver learning more effectively, with tailored learning schedules based upon regulatory requirements and learning needs. For example, the individual induction originally adopted a 'one size fits all' approach, which did not take into account individuals' future roles within the company.

Implementing a new LMS enabled the learning & development team to re-examine the learning content and encourage subject matter experts to focus on the key messages that learners really need. The blended learning strategy enables individuals to then access more in-depth training and information to build upon this basic provision as necessary. Each employee has a 'My Career' homepage on the LMS, which they can use to search for learning that suits their needs. The page has clearly defined sections for automatic or assigned learning (particularly for regulatory training), a 'browse' function that suggests related training opportunities, and training related to the individual's other interests or career development goals. If the individual has undertaken one element of a blended learning programme, the other elements will automatically be presented for completion. Learning interventions can be face-to-face training, online testing, e-learning or additional learning content such as documents or books. LV='s experience is that staff are taking more ownership of their own learning, because they are being encouraged to do so – and because they can book onto courses quickly and simply.

With a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) approach, LV= knows that the LMS will always offer the latest functionality at a predictable price and that the company will be part of a customer community that drives future innovation.

Vincent Belliveau is General Manager (EMEA) for Cornerstone OnDemand, www.cornerstoneondemand.co.uk