Training for the 21st Century:
The Strategic Impact of Blended Workflow Learning

by Craig Perrin
New Methods Bring New Value

Competing well in the 21st century requires innovations and efficiencies of every sort. Successful companies leverage learning and development as they do any other capability – to drive revenue, contain costs, and retain talent. Gone is the age of training for training’s sake, of learning misaligned with a unified competitive effort. In these companies, learning plays a strategic role and delivers practical value every day.

Several key trends all but demand this new role for corporate learning. Dispersed employees, often around the globe, must now learn and work together – impossible except through technology. Not only do many employees want to learn through technology, executives want returns on their investment in technology. And these same executives routinely ask for metrics that prove the competitive value of training.

These and other trends leave many leaders dissatisfied not with the content, but with the delivery of most training, whose methods and impact are unchanged for decades. Traditional instructor-led training – as effective as it continues to be for some purposes – simply hasn’t kept pace with advances in other areas. It optimizes neither the investments, the advancements, nor the learning potential of today’s technology. As a result, learning professionals now seek:

• Better use of available technology.
• Learning that directly supports critical work activities.
• Shorter increments of learning.
• Delivery that appeals to both younger and more seasoned employees.
• Opportunities for employees to learn from each other, as well as from experts.
• Ways to augment coaching by managers to reinforce new skills in the workplace.
• Reduced need to travel for training.

While these demands haven’t altered the mission of training – resolving business issues through improved knowledge and skill – they have altered the shape of training. Organizations now seek ways to blend innovative learning methods with the daily flow of work. “Blended workflow learning” is shorthand for these sweeping changes in the technology, delivery, application, and reinforcement of learning solutions.

Blended workflow learning integrates two or more ways to learn (or “modalities”) with immediate opportunities to apply a skill, tool, or concept on the job. In a typical blended workflow solution, learners might devote 3-4 hours per week over 6-8 weeks to learning activities and skill use, often including:

• A short group event, either online or face-to-face.
• Other learning activities using a range of methods and media.
• Immediate application of that week’s skill, tool, or concept.

Employees learn in groups, coach each other, and access collaborative tools and other resources in an online portal with scheduling and tracking (LMS) functionalities.

Flexible Learning Modalities

Depending on organizational needs, location of learners, available technology, and other matters, a blended workflow solution employs all or some of these learning modalities:

Live online sessions. Technologies like Live Meeting™ or WebEx™ offer real-time voice interaction with virtual break-out rooms and visual aids such as PowerPoint™ slides and virtual white boards. These events may employ a virtual-world technology, e.g., Second Life.
**Live face-to-face sessions.** For co-located learners, the classroom continues to play a role in some blended workflow solutions, with all needed training aids – facilitator guide, PowerPoint™ slides, workbooks, wall charts, handouts, DVD video, and so on.

**eLearning.** Short individual online assignments, integrated into the larger mix of modalities, reduces the time required for live group instruction.

**Streaming video.** Viewed individually or with a group, videos may be live-action skill models or summaries, or Flash-based presentations with still or motion graphics, text, and audio.

**Online audio.** Learners individually listen to short, downloadable audio files, which often substitute for reading.

**Online learning portal.** In a dedicated Web site, learners and facilitators interact via threaded discussions, wikis, and other collaborative tools, and access all assignments, schedules, PDF documents, eLearning, application tools, video, audio, etc.

**Coaching.** To support coaching by managers and peers, learners may receive real-time or e-mail coaching from a subject-matter expert also familiar with the structure and technology of blended workflow learning.

Based on its established culture of learning and available technology, an organization selects an appropriate mix, if rarely all, of these learning modalities. For example, an effective, relatively low-tech blended solution might include only a face-to-face kick-off event followed by a series of live online events and related paper-based assignments. But to realize a chief benefit – short learning events, each followed by immediate skill use – all blended workflow solutions exhibit key structural features.

**The Shape of Learning Today**

To highlight the innovative structure of blended workflow learning, compare it with traditional learning. The central experience of most training is a classroom session, of course, usually lasting from four hours to three days. In this event, learners cover a great deal of content, ideally with planning and scheduling before, and application and coaching after the session.

Among its other modalities, a blended workflow solution may include events, but these events are much shorter (usually between 45 and 90 minutes), more numerous, and spaced over time. Blended workflow events emphasize activities that require real-time interaction among learners – e.g., a discussion, simulation, or skills practice. Other, often solo, activities employ other modalities to help learners complete other critical steps in learning – assessment, knowledge acquisition, and application.

The unique blended workflow sequence designed for a U.S.-based organization will serve as an example. For a widely training dispersed training population, this company wanted to:

- Leverage its existing LMS and corporate intranet.
- Eliminate travel costs for face-to-face training.
- Closely integrate small increments of training with learners’ daily work responsibilities.

The chart below shows the first four weeks of this company’s 10-week sequence, including a short face-to-face kick-off event (at the annual sales conference), weekly virtual group sessions, and individual learning and application activities:
So, instead of attending in a projected three-day face-to-face event (covering a complex set of skills before application), participants learned and applied one skill, tool, or concept during each weekly learning cycle. The time for online session, solo and collaborative learning activities, and application assignment was under 3 hours per week for each learner.

The Benefits of Blended Workflow Learning
Compared to traditional instruction, blended workflow instruction brings a number of benefits:

*Less disruption of day-to-day work.* Shorter group events obviously take learners out of the workplace for shorter periods, allowing normal work to proceed. Learners complete other brief learning tasks, including application in their jobs, as schedules allow.

*Appeal for new demographics.* The newer modalities engage those who prefer to learn online. Short live events engage traditional learners, avoid the low completion associated with eLearning alone, and appeal to anyone with competing priorities.

*Learning from experts and peers.* Expert content and a skilled facilitator form the heart of every blended workflow solution. Learners make content their own by sharing their application experience with peers in live sessions, wikis, blogs, and threaded discussions.

*Practical results through immediate skill use.* Blended workflow learners regularly apply a single skill, tool, or concept to daily tasks. This limited, immediate skill use – in contrast to the sporadic application after big-event training – supports new behaviors and practical results.

*Ease of revision or customization.* When separate training components (or “learning objects”) reside digitally in a content management system (CMS), learning professionals can identify, combine, and tailor components to meet the needs of different populations.

*Effective use of available technology.* Leaders obviously seek ways for existing technology to support efficiency and productivity. A blended workflow solution, with multiple modalities and implementation options, maximizes the return on earlier investments in compatible technology.

*Cost savings through reduced travel for training.* Short face-to-face events work well in a blended workflow solution for co-located employees. For geographically dispersed employees, live online sessions reduce or eliminate the travel costs of traditional training.
These and other benefits make blended workflow learning an extraordinarily flexible solution for short-term problems of training cost and efficiency – while the same time fueling progress toward big-picture corporate goals.

**How to Succeed with Blended Workflow Learning**

Like any learning initiative, this type of solution requires careful attention to implementation planning, execution, and evaluation. At the foundation of all blended workflow learning are five core principles:

1. **All content in one place.** The online learning portal, within a comprehensive LMS (Learning Management System), unifies schedules, assignments, media, PDF documents, eLearning, and online tools for ease of access and use.

2. **No redundant or conflicting content.** Mixing eLearning and live training from different sources can frustrate learners with conflicting or redundant content. An effective blend unifies complementary content to avoid this serious problem.

3. **Collaborative learning at least every 4 to 6 hours of training time.** Effective blended workflow learning includes group events and team application assignments more often than advised by learning theorists. Online social tools further increase collaboration.

4. **Dedicated project management.** Even more than other forms of learning, a blended workflow solution requires careful oversight by competent administrators, from planning through execution and evaluation.

5. **Active executive support.** To match the extended commitment required of learners, senior leaders must demonstrate their own commitment by coaching, modeling skills, allocating time for training, and creating line of sight to the strategic goals of training.

Beyond these five principles, a successful blended workflow implementation pays special attention to the following matters:

**Learning design.** Classroom activities may not translate well to live online events. With no eye contact, for example, some learners may not take part. Activities that require participation – a contest, case study analysis, etc. – help keep people involved online.

**Facilitation.** Some techniques uncomfortable for some facilitators in a face-to-face session – calling on people by name, for example – are useful online. Even experienced face-to-face facilitators will need to adapt and add skills to succeed with live online training.

**Application assignments.** Some blended workflow learning proceeds in parallel with a real-world group project. Without a project, learners complete neutral assignments. (e.g., “Use this skill and report your outcome in the threaded discussion.”) Still, these assignments must support regular work activities.

**Scheduling.** If work priorities conflict with a scheduled session, a learner may attend the same session with another group at a different time, or listen to a recorded session. (Audio recording is a normal step for one session in each learning cycle.)

**Unity and continuity.** With instruction spread over time, learners may lose track of direction unless the design, materials, and facilitator highlight the role of each session and assignment in achieving overall learning outcomes and practical results.
Portal design. As the meeting point and repository, the portal must allow painless access to social tools, schedules, assignments, media, PDFs, etc. When portal design frustrates learners, facilitators, or administrators, it can jeopardize the impact of training.

IT support. Even with good portal design, learners have different levels of comfort and success with the underlying technology. Easy access to IT support keeps technology from becoming an obstacle to learning.

Coaching. Coaching is as vital to blended workflow learning as to any other form of training. Beyond coaching by managers, a blended workflow solution may involve a “learning coach,” often a facilitator, available real-time by phone or chat, or via an e-mail link in the portal.

The methods and modalities of blended workflow learning are a close fit for many organizations. For others, they may present challenges:

• How easily can your associates access the Internet or corporate intranet?
• How comfortable are they with live online instruction and solo e-learning?
• What internal help is available to oversee an implementation with many moving parts?

It makes sense to answer these and other baseline questions before you adopt a blended workflow approach. Then, if your organization is culturally and practically prepared, this new type of solution can leverage the power of learning to support your strategic goals.

A Case in Point

Promoting Mutually Beneficial Relationships, a custom nine-week course for a global service organization, illustrates how blended workflow learning can address a strategic issue, in this case, sales productivity. The executive sponsor wanted her sales support staff to:

• Use selling and service skills with clients and colleagues.
• Speak with authority about the company’s full range of solutions.
• Partner with the sales force to support customer engagements.

Employees across the country devoted 3 hours per week to live online sessions and assignments involving eLearning, streaming video, and a full learning portal. Posting and commenting on application results in threaded discussions was a weekly assignment.

After training, learners spoke of their strong relationships with distant colleagues. “This is a well thought-out and executed course,” said one learner. “It engaged me in different ways to help me grow and stretch.”

The executive sponsor spoke of learners’ improved ability to probe, offer solutions, negotiate, write proposals, and describe company services. It’s important to note that this executive’s active involvement promoted both practical and strategic results.

References


About Craig Perrin
As AchieveGlobal’s Director of Solution Development, Craig is a thought leader who works cross-functionally and with clients to guide creation of a range of responses to market needs. Since 1986 he has played a central role in developing the company’s flagship programs in leadership, sales, and customer service; co-authored two best-selling books; written many articles and position papers; and produced eLearning and video that have earned scores of national and international awards. In 1998, Craig was named Times Mirror Editor of the Year. Craig’s positions before AchieveGlobal include curriculum designer, stand-up facilitator, college instructor, and art curator. Craig holds a B.A. and M.A. from San Francisco State University.

About AchieveGlobal
In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. AchieveGlobal provides exceptional development in interpersonal business skills, giving companies the workforce they need for business results. Located in over 40 countries, we offer multi-language, learning-based solutions—globally, regionally, and locally.

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