Blended learning

Combining digital and classroom training to achieve maximum results

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Our professional environment is in constant evolution: the market is becoming increasingly regulated, employees’ focus areas change rapidly, and it is essential to both gain knowledge and understand how to apply it in practice. In the midst of this stands the individual employee—an individual who needs to understand what changes the second Markets in Financial Instruments Directive (MiFID II) entails for her and her clients; an individual who needs to understand how the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) will affect him; an individual who constantly needs to learn new things to remain up-to-date on all emerging regulatory changes.

Besides these mandatory knowledge requirements, companies are increasingly training in “softer” areas: raising awareness around a cultural shift, boosting the use of feedback, or helping their employees understand how to fight against cyber-attacks in the workplace. Given the complexity of many of these topics, dedicated tailored programs are becoming increasingly common. The plethora of planned training programs may frighten certain employees, but it is key to their continuous professional development.
Employers, on the other hand, are generally looking at these challenges from a much more pragmatic and often economically driven perspective. They understand that the company needs to be compliant on some of the above-mentioned topics and they may define a number of other areas that they consider strategic for their own development or for that of their staff. The corporate learning department—often working closely with the corporate compliance team—then seeks the most effective and efficient way to skill up the company’s workforce.

At this juncture, the company must adopt an approach to professional training and development that ensures the maximum possible response to the outlined needs, while also being reasonable in terms of cost—two criteria that may seem inherently contradictory at first glance. If we consider the evolution of the classroom training market over the past few years—both in Luxembourg and abroad—it is clear that these conflicting forces have shaped two major clusters of players.

At one end of the spectrum, we find a large set of Learning Solution Providers operating in the reasonable-to-low price segment, offering fair learning services to the local market. Standard content is used, developed once, and redeployed to be delivered to the broadest possible audience. Trainers or facilitators are often limited in their knowledge to what they have in their script. Such programs generally contain the standard theory and give examples on how it is applied in a general context. In order to make this a viable business, these Learning Solution Providers often cover a broad range of topics, but have a limited depth of knowledge of each topic.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find Learning Solution Providers with extremely extensive expertise on the topics they teach, generally delivering programs across regions, or even globally. They often cover a limited number of topics in detail but are able to elaborate on these topics way beyond their scripts, building on a true understanding of the field. They can
elaborate on specific situations and needs raised during their training sessions. They view themselves as facilitators instead of mere training providers, and see their role as facilitating a proper adult learning experience where training participants discover and internalize the knowledge themselves and understand how to apply it afterwards. While this option certainly sounds appealing, it obviously comes with a very different price tag—training programs of this kind often cost up to eight times the price of entry-level training programs.

Over the years, these two types of player have carved a niche for themselves in this market and succeeded in co-existing with their respective client bases—indicating that neither model is better or worse in terms of the perceived price/return ratio. Alongside the outlined classroom learning offering, digital learning has established itself and evolved over the past decade. In terms of meeting demand for affordable staff training, this has proven to be a viable option when training large numbers of people on standard topics. At a time when most training on business topics involved PowerPoint, it seemed obvious to use content slides and deliver them through a Learning Management System to the employee. While this proved to be a highly cost-effective way of training employees, academic rigor was somewhat lacking. In many cases, the interaction between the learner and the system was rather limited, and employees tried to finish the mandatory electronic lessons as quickly as possible by clicking through the content rather than focusing on developing their knowledge. Whereas Learning Solution Providers in the high-end segment were affected relatively little by this new way of training, eLearning put additional pressure on the low-price segment as it suddenly started to be seen as a replacement for face-to-face training sessions.

In this context, today’s employers are confronted with the challenge of finding the best possible learning and development solution—tapping into both the different types of classroom and digital training offerings—yielding the highest possible impact for both the company and the employees while being cost effective. It is a tough challenge, but it is not insurmountable if varying training needs are properly understood.

To that end, training needs can be split into three broad categories: • Standard knowledge and theory • Mastery of technical skills and their application in day-to-day work • Attitudinal and behavioral traits

These different categories of need can be met by the various learning solutions as follows.

Standard knowledge and theory do not necessarily require high-end classroom training. This type of knowledge can easily be taught through adequately designed reading materials or in a more engaging way in eLearning modules. Rather than spending precious classroom time to train people on what they could learn by themselves, eLearning modules are likely to be the solution with the highest impact at the lowest cost if conceived with the right expertise. Unlike early eLearning programs that were a mere compilation of content on a specific topic, high-end eLearning modules are now conceived by experts in both the topic and industry as well as in learning design. Only in this way it is possible to ensure the highest possible quality of the content while ensuring an engaging learning experience.

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Blended learning, combining digital and classroom training to achieve maximum results
When it comes to the mastery of technical skills, it is clear that eLearning alone is not the best solution. Company-specific examples should be used to make the lesson more memorable, while guided exercises help learners to not only understand the content but also internalize it and develop an ability to apply it. For such topics, companies do not necessarily need to call upon high-cost training facilitators; nonetheless, they should make sure that the Learning Solution Provider is adequately equipped to tailor the classroom experience to the context and needs of the organization.

For training people on their attitudes and behavior, it is not only essential that this is done in a classroom setting, but also that it is facilitated by trainers who have extensive expertise on the topic and are properly trained on facilitating such learning experiences. Regardless of whether you are trying to improve your employees’ practical sales skills or whether you would like to support them in better coaching and developing their teams, this type of message only has the expected impact if delivered properly. Saving on training costs by choosing an inadequate training delivery format or facilitator might actually create more frustration than benefit. For example, a sales expert might have a hard time completing an eLearning module on generic sales best practices in which she believes she is already an expert, not learning much and rushing through the three-hour eLearning pain, whereas she would have considerably benefited from a thoughtful exchange among experts in a classroom session.

Pinpointing the blended learning approach that best suits your needs may seem like a daunting challenge, but smartly combining digital learning with professional classroom solutions yields enormous value for the evolution of an organization. Taking the basic knowledge and theory out of the classroom and providing employees with the opportunity to learn these things through highly informative eLearning modules saves both time and money. Ensuring that field and topic expertise is combined with in-depth knowledge of learning design leads to learners staying highly engaged throughout the eLearning program and makes sure that the content is in line with the latest market trends and regulations.

Where eLearning is not the best choice—for instance if technical skills or changes in attitudes and behaviors are necessary—the learner should be taken into the classroom. Building on David A. Kolb’s adult learning cycle, classroom sessions should be designed to encourage the learner to experiment with the knowledge in real-world examples and role plays, reflecting on the experience and planning how to use the knowledge going forward. And ideally this training should build on earlier eLearning programs to ensure continuity in the employee’s learning experience.

In the end, there is no one-size-fits-all response to the challenge of training your staff. It remains essential, however, for each organization to properly understand the different contexts and topics on which it wishes to train staff, and to select the most suitable training delivery mode available in order to maximize return on investment. After all, this is all about an investment in one of the most important assets you have in your organization: your people.