

Microlearning: supporting staff engagement and performance for continuous organizational learning

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Abstract

Training and development (T&D) is a profession that has to continue to reinvent itself. As other professions also cultivate and reinvent itself, T&D unique involvement with these professions is to provide guidance on designing and delivering content for and with organizations. Those in the T&D industry will also look at what are the next big trends and ideas in learning and development. One trend that is not entirely new but is gaining more momentum is microlearning.

Organizations are always in need of cost-effective, innovative, creative modes to enhance their most prized asset: employees. To provide training some organizations are adequate at least initially with giving staff the tools needed to do their job effectively. Yet, what happens a year later for example to that employee that is in need a refresher content and relevance to performing their job. Better yet, how does the employee (and management) know if training was effective and understanding the level of employee engagement toward performance? Microlearning could help address this need for continuous learning and development gap. The attention span for adults now hovers in the average range of 8.25 seconds, thanks to all the technological advancements with instant available to information[1]. Microlearning has the ability to deliver highly concentrated information that is delivered in short bursts of on-demand information available when needed versus a 3-hour presentation that includes a powerpoint, handouts, and the employee away from productivity. The value that could essentially be added to identify performance gaps, increase employee engagement, and offer continuous organizational learning is a new pathway to respond to enhance learning and development.

This paper is aimed to introduce microlearning as a valuable platform that is capable of supporting knowledge and information that can engage employees in the workplace. Discussion points will include benefits for organizations and the growing trend and popularity of microlearning. Microlearning and its effectiveness, impact on employees training and development, and advantages and challenges with implementation and shareholder buy-in. Global impacts with various industries will also be highlighted to emphasize its diverse application and use. Conclusion will consist of methodology, examples, and procedures of various modalities used by different industries globally.

Introduction

Without question there are many definitions of learning. Knowles (2012) explains that learning involves acquiring and developing habits, gaining knowledge and observing attitudes and skills. Burton (1963) defines learning as ‘change in the individual, due to the interaction of that individual, and its environment, which fills a need and makes him more capable of dealing adequately with his environment’ (p.7). All of which emphasize the importance and contribution learning lends to society. It could be hard not to argue that society has become more knowledge and technology-based (Mavordozam and Ngulube, 2012). As society continues to learn and become more knowledgeable, for practitioners of training, it is more evident that businesses identify, construct and expand the value of learning to its constant changing workforce.

There have always been trends in training and development that causes an organization to shift its approach to manage its knowledge and learning. The focus of learning for these organizations have typically involved traditional formal practices of training. Variations of guided and contextual training usually include formal scheduled lectures, creating manuals, on-the-job training, and mentoring. All of which affects an organization bottom line on cost and productivity. According to the Association for Talent Development’s 2016 State of the Industry Report¹ the average cost and hours spent for an organization to train employees was about \$1,252 and 33.5 hours. Furthermore, training may not be aligned with having an impact on organization objectives and drive the desired business outcomes. Most business environments, especially high performing organizations, operate on accelerated pace and to remain competitive must constantly review and revise their training to not just staff being informed or knowing about a

¹ <https://www.td.org/insights/atd-releases-2016-state-of-the-industry-report>

new process. For an organization to invest this amount of time and resources, a shift in learning culture and practices will need to emerge. Facilitator-led and e-learning techniques are still common practices and earnestly should not be removed entirely. The move toward including on-demand learning as Sinha (2012) states introduces additional training components that could meet the demands of knowledge seeking employees. Of the many platforms and trends introduced, perhaps the reinvented buzz-worthy modality that may optimize learning is microlearning.

Microlearning by definition literally means ‘small learning’, and offers small focused doses or ‘bite-sized’ content that can be comprehended in short periods of time (Jomah, Masoud, Kishore & Aurelia, 2016). The concept of microlearning is not brand new as we as a society have always been exposed to bite-sized information and learning. If we recall how we received our morning news information for example, in short-focused segments, we are receiving small chunks of information which allows learners to process and perhaps recall information at a later date. The practice of microlearning can function in alignment with traditional training methods and depending on the employee needs, can be woven into daily workday activities (Giurgiu, 2017). Scientific studies conducted as Giurgiu substantiates, learners that receive short content materials versus large bulk content may increase retention by 20% (p.18). It is possible that introducing content in this manner, gives the learner memory capacity to absorb and retain information more manageable and recalled when necessary. The goal would allow for giving the employee the information when needed to perform a task and delivered in the relevant context.

Microlearning employees effectiveness & impact

Addressing the needs of the organization and the needs of the employee simultaneously could lead to overall positive impact and effectiveness on business processes.

Microlearning uses in training can quickly enable employees in receiving on-demand knowledge that can be tailored to an employees performance needs (Avery, 2016). In relation to rapidly changing business environments, microlearning grants employees access to current information whenever and wherever needed. This in turn allows for efficiency of employee performance and knowledge and minimizes the loss of productivity. Faster cognitive processing as smaller amounts of information permits the employee to apply the skill quickly (Carpenter, Forde, Stevens, Flango, & Babcock, 2016). Spaced repetition is encouraged with microlearning since the content is often distributed in intervals allowing for rest in between learning intervals (Cascio, 2017).

Implementation & shareholder influence

Transitioning learning from large, bulk content to the mindset and environment of short, focused, highly targeted to employees by using microlearning can be overwhelming and challenging for any organization (Mohammed, Wakil, & Nawroly, 2018). Organizations can utilize various modalities when implementing microlearning. When implementing microlearning in training, several considerations and principles should be considered. Avery points out when developing microlearning content suggested from the Association for Talent Development (pg.2):

- Timing-suggested maximum timing for video content between three to five minutes,
- Visually stimulating-focused pictures and direct infographics that speak to direct objectives and goals,
- Plan with high technological standards with purpose.

Additionally, to support shareholder buy-in, identifying clear business objectives and goals will be paramount in supporting any shift in learning. Cascio (2017) also affirms support to Avery

claims on gaining shareholder buy-in with additional factors. Identifying the idea of employees are no longer tethered to a specified classroom lecture or conference for learning, and importantly providing supporting and actionable data on gaining and validating the desired learning activity and behavior.

When people hear the term microlearning, the large assumption of modality is video. The modality of microlearning can be flexible and delivered in various forms. The majority of the context is usually digital but, the method can be adapted into the appropriate format that would most benefit the learner as Avery suggests (pg. 2). Modern examples include Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED talks), and YouTube that instructional designers can immediately access and share with employees. Cascio (2017) highlights several examples of microlearning applications that are readily available to organizations and employees instantly. Udemy Inc., Grovo, Lynda.com and Duolingo are but a few microlearning application that can be used in corporate environments (pg.7). These applications provide a mixture of focused content along with interactive content to engage employees on updated skill content.

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