

Staff Training: Alternatives to the Classroom (March 9, 2012)

The pharma sector lags behind others when it comes to delivering knowledge and ensuring continuing professional development in a timely and efficient way. Mark McClelland and Candida Chandorkar outline how organizations sector can improve their continuing professional development and effectiveness at work.

For such a knowledge-based industry, the pharmaceutical sector has been surprisingly slow to adopt the latest advances in learning management. From induction to continuing professional development, there remains a heavy emphasis on classroom training. In the second decade of the 21st century, this is unlikely to be sustainable. In pharmaceuticals, like every other sector, there is huge pressure on margins. Every organization is trying to do more with less, trimming budgets and increasing productivity from existing personnel. While training has stayed on the corporate agenda, HR and training managers are being asked to find efficiencies so the use of classroom training is coming under closer examination. Most pharmaceutical companies and contractors operate from multiple locations so employees have to travel to attend classroom courses. The time and cost associated with travelling to the training adds to the overall time and cost of the training itself and there is the further opportunity cost of employees being away from their daily responsibilities — which has an impact on productivity.

This combination of a reliance on classroom training, coupled with a reluctance to bring employees back into the classroom on a regular basis (because of the impact on productivity), has led to an imbalance in the provision of training over an employee's career. For example, a new starter will spend a long time on classroom-based induction programs—typically 85–90% of a 2-3 month program — and thereafter will receive less frequent learning opportunities, mostly delivered on an ad hoc basis, during the remainder of their employment. Indeed, it is not unusual to find employees who have been with the company for 10 years or more, who have never participated in refresher courses and who have benefitted from little additional formal training. In addition, individuals recruited into sales positions can end up undertaking training they don't need as they are trained on all the organization's activities — all therapy areas, products or regions — before they are assigned to a specific area. Of course, the other issue with “front-loading” so much heavy learning into a classroom-based induction program is that it becomes a real challenge to ensure learning retention, particularly if the training itself is not highly engaging or ultimately relevant to the employee's job role.

Changing the learning mix

In other industries facing similar challenges, the answer has been to change the learning mix so employees spend less time in the classroom without sacrificing the required learning outcomes. This can start as soon as the employee joins the company; experience indicates that the time for induction programs can be reduced by as much as 50% by replacing classroom courses with alternative methods of learning where possible.

Changing the learning mix also enables the organization to take a more proactive approach to continuing professional development. Put simply, if learning can be delivered at any time and in any place, it is easier to keep critical employee skills and knowledge up to date.

Regulatory requirements are a particular concern for field-based sales staff, who tend to be geographically distanced from the organization's central training facilities. For sales teams, new regulations can be introduced (as in the UK) regarding inducements and bribery that change the suitability of corporate hosting, gifting and so on. Ignorance of such changes can be negative both for the individual and the organization, in terms of customer perception and regulatory penalties. If a field-based sales professional is unaware of the latest developments in their product or marketplace they may omit to refer to key benefits or make other mistakes that lose rather than win the business. As such, particular attention needs to be paid to meeting the learning needs of remote employees. Alternatives to classroom training for these employees include e-learning, "live" learning delivered via web conferencing and mobile learning, but equally it is beneficial to provide ongoing supervision, coaching and mentoring for field-based employees in person or via social tools.

The importance of measurement

Any lack of technical, regulatory or business knowledge presents a considerable risk for organizations in this sector, so it is essential managers are aware of any knowledge gaps that need to be bridged. An additional benefit of introducing technology into the learning mix is that it can help capture and track course completions and learning. Indeed, if every part of a learning program is registered in an employee's online training record — including offline interventions like classroom courses and mentoring sessions — it becomes easier to check the employee's progress and the organization's potential level of risk. What's more, if post-learning tests are made available in order to check learning retention, it can help identify whether knowledge gaps really have been closed, whether new employees are ready to be deployed or existing employees are capable of moving into new positions.

Taking learning out of the classroom

There are a number of alternatives to classroom-based training, whether that is pre-training reading, e-learning, mobile learning, social learning or serious games. Given the complex nature of their learning needs, it can be difficult for organizations in the pharmaceutical and medical devices sector to find suitable alternatives in off-the-shelf learning packages. Basic sales skills courses can be of use to sales teams, and similarly other basic business courses can be helpful across other areas of the organization, but this will need to be supplemented by tailored training that demonstrates how those skills should be used within the context of the organization, its culture and its competitive, market and regulatory environment. Thankfully, the provision of customized technology-based learning interventions is much faster and cost effective than was the case a decade ago.

The e-learning industry has matured to deliver much more innovative, effective and engaging learning interventions. Mobile learning and games are becoming mainstream ways of delivering serious business learning — because ultimately they are very effective. Similarly, the use of technology to learn, play and communicate is much more prevalent among the working population — across both sexes and all age groups — so employees are more receptive to using technology-based learning.

However, technology-based training currently represents only about 15% of total learning provision in this sector; that is significantly less than other business sectors. Most of that provision is represented by e-learning; even the most forward looking pharmaceutical and

medical device companies are still in the early stages of exploring the possibilities of mobile devices and serious games. However, US companies are starting to embrace change and could end up gaining strategic advantage over their European competitors.

There is no doubt that moving from a predominantly classroom-based approach to a more blended approach represents a huge change, but unquestionably that is the direction in which the industry as a whole will move in the coming years. The use of technology delivers too many benefits to be ignored — ease of use, better learning retention, faster dissemination of information, the ability to check and reinforce learning, convenience and a reduced impact on productivity. As influential industry players become more innovative in their approach to organizational learning and gain competitive advantage, others will follow their example. After all, the key to achieving a good return on investment in training is not just imparting knowledge but delivering practical skills and behaviour change that is converted into enhanced job skills, increased productivity and quality, improved customer service or operational efficiencies. Organizations who don't want to be left behind should evaluate their current training blueprint and determine how they can optimize that blend to improve its results.

What can be taken out of the classroom?

Some learning still belongs in the classroom but greater use of technology-based training can deliver real results in a much more efficient and time and cost effective way. How does the organization decide upon the right blend? There are several key steps that can help guide HR professionals and senior managers:

- 1. Identify when and where employees need this learning — when they join the organization or on an ongoing basis? Is the objective to impart knowledge or improve skill levels?**
- 2. Which technologies are used within the organization and therefore are available to use?**
- 3. What is the best way to impart the information? Ostensibly dull information can be made more compelling by the use of scenarios or “serious games” — that is, graphically rich games that nevertheless deliver a key business learning objective. The more immersive world of gaming facilitates highly effective “learning by doing” that delivers results; moreover, the innovation that can be seen in high quality, Serious Games is attractive to employees who often see traditional e-learning training as uninspiring.**
- 4. Identify the learning that can only be delivered face to face in the classroom — this has precedence for classroom training time and budget.**
- 5. Within those classroom courses — can some learning be completed as pre-work before learners enter the classroom, perhaps through suggested reading materials and the completion of online scenario exercises? This helps ensure that learners share the same base level of knowledge on the subject and so is invaluable in helping to make the best use of time in the classroom.**

6. Identify the learning that can be provided through on-going support, either via online learning or on the job support in the form of coaching and mentoring.

7. Could online tests be used to embed the learning or check learning retention? This is particularly useful in helping the employee to see how they need to apply their new learning in their job role. Simulations help the employee practice in a safe environment, make and correct mistakes and build their confidence before implementing their new knowledge or skills in the real world. For example, some pharmaceutical companies ask sales staff to undertake online training that requires them to complete multiple scenarios or “serious games” with virtual physicians who present with different requirements and possible solutions.

8. Are there any topics that employees ask for advice on, on a frequent basis? Bite-size learning nuggets can be made available on a just-in-time basis or as a reminder when the employee is actually doing their job. Such applications can be delivered at the desktop or over mobile devices. Short courses can also be delivered via an iPad, iPhone or other mobile devices, particularly to time-pressured or field-based employees.

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