



WHITE PAPER

Blended Learning Solutions for Smaller Companies

8 Keys Steps to Successfully Blend Formal and Informal Learning

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Many small and mid-sized organizations now recognize that on-demand answer finding is a primary source of employees' daily learning, and are searching for ways to support this informal learning in tandem with their more formalized blended training programs. This paper provides a structure for combining formal and informal learning resources within a blended learning model, by outlining eight steps for blended learning.



'A mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimension.'
Oliver Wendell Holmes

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Where Does Learning Occur?

Most of us only know how to be taught; we haven't learned how to learn. Malcolm Knowles

Most learning is self-directed and takes place informally outside the boxes on the organization chart. This informal learning, such as a quick search for information on the Web or advice from a peer, is the way most people learn on a daily basis, yet it is often overlooked.

The quantity of informal learning is surprising. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates 70% or more of work-related learning occurs outside formal training. Since most of us participate in these informal learning activities, why is this statistic so surprising? What has led us to a situation where organizations overwhelmingly invest in formal training but workers overwhelmingly learn informally? There are several reasons for this lack of attention. Perhaps the biggest reason is because no single group or department is really in charge of informal learning, and there is often no budget for informal learning as there is in the case of formal training.

Many companies have told employees that they must take responsibility for their own learning. Unfortunately, most of these companies fail to help employees identify their learning needs and to fund the necessary learning resources. However, some corporations are beginning to realize the value of supporting informal learning. Deloitte and Accenture are just two companies that have invested heavily in learning facilities that support both formal training and informal learning.

Since both methods are essential to increasing workplace skills, tremendous performance gains (both strategic and tactical) are available from the blending of formal training with informal learning.

Designing a Blended Learning Environment

"I am always ready to learn, but I do not always like being taught." Winston Churchill

The ideal blended learning model is one that integrates a wide range of functions that empower learners with more control to participate in several formal and informal learning activities. This notion of design is based upon building a fully 'learner-centric' environment to allow learners to navigate from informational to instructional content, from skills assessment to supportive tools, and from coaching to collaborative environments.

We believe that is important to provide a 'one-stop' learning environment by integrating all of our resources as much as possible into a single site. This approach streamlines the informal learning process by supplementing self-directed learning with mentors and experts and making resources available 24x7. It uses technology to keep content current and makes it easier for learners to collaborate and network both synchronously and asynchronously and seeks to treat learners as customers.

We propose that the highest level of blended learning is a combination of formal and informal learning with a learner centric point of view. Nothing else will produce the ongoing and consistent support for performance gains and learner satisfaction. This is the ultimate goal of training managers and executives alike.

The Eight Key Steps of Blended Learning

Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them become what they are capable of becoming.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

These eight steps provide an overall structure to both the sequential formal training events and to the random informal blended learning activities. The first step (*Prepare Me*) starts the learner with the formal training that follow in sequential order. The fifth step (*Check Me*) allows the learner to transition into the remaining informal steps, which happen, as they are needed.

1	Prepare Me	The initial step readies the learner with the essential skills and overall understanding to ensure his/her success throughout the remaining steps and helps workers learn how to improve their learning skills
2	Tell Me	The presentation step tells the learner about the learning objectives, facts and key concepts of the skills they are about to learn, and why it will be valuable to them.
3	Show Me	The demonstration step highlights the procedures, principles, concepts and/or processes so the learner has a good understanding of how to apply the skills.
4	Let Me	The practice step is where the learner gets the opportunity to interact with the new skills in a safe environment, allowing them to build their long-term retention and reinforce the previous demonstration.
5	Check Me	The assessment step provides the learner with feedback about the use of the skills within a formal training setting, thus allowing the learner to move forward in applying his/her skills within an informal environment.
6	Support Me	The assistance step is usually the first one within the informal learning environment. It is here that the learner must be able to search selected elements taken from his/her formal learning experience.
7	Coach Me	The coaching step provides tacit support of experienced managers, peers, mentors or experts allowing the learner to mix his/her learning with experience from others.
8	Connect Me	The collaborative step allows the learner to work within a community with other learners to solve problems. This step expands the learner's view of the skill.

Step 1 - 'Prepare Me' – The Readiness Step

*"I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it."
Pablo Picasso*

The key to any successful blended learning experience is the learner's **preparation** to experience learning in a blended setting. While we already know how to attend the traditional classroom, most learners need some guidance about how the technology will assist them so technology does not get in the way of their learning.

In addition to Internet-age skills and technological literacy, the learner must know:

- How to access the system, both locally and remotely.
- Whom to call with questions or problems getting into the system.
- Hardware and software available to them to participate in an e-Learning event.
- Getting to online resources that would be helpful to the learner.

The following are some suggestions that will prepare the learner for their blended learning program... perhaps you can think of other ways.

- **Explain the Process** - Hold 'How to Learn' sessions (either live or virtual) that outlines the flow of your blended learning program, showing the learning path from a view of simple to complex. It is very important that the learner and their manager see the WIFFM (What's in it for me?) during this first step.
- **Provide Technical Job-aids** – Design some ready-to-use instructions for the learner who needs basic computer skills such as logging on to a network, sending emails, downloading files, attending a chat session, and other technical tasks.
- **Team-building Session** - If there is a need to build an ongoing team for the duration of the program, then conducting a live classroom event is the preferred method.
- **Use a Virtual Meeting Tool** - A lot of pre-work information can be delivered in a virtual session to remote learners.
- **Use a LMS** - Release a welcoming announcement using your LMS (Learning Management System) to contact a wide range of individuals or targeted groups. If the program is for a new hire or supervisory group, the announcement can also include instruction about how to access the pre-requisite materials or direct them to a self-service web page for the download of the advanced training resources.

Suggested Methods:

Live virtual intro sessions, classroom, face-to-face meeting, e-mail, flyer, snail or office mail, phone, face-to-face meeting, web sites, announcements, newsletters, online bulletins, archived event, pre-reading, prerequisite, etc.

Business Training Library Resources:

Course objectives, course maps, multiple user guides, curriculum maps, competency maps, marketing campaign materials, and course content

Step 2 - 'Tell Me' – The Presentation Step

*"We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak."
Epictetus, Greek philosopher*

Presentation allows the instructor or e-Learning content to relate, dramatize, or otherwise disseminate information to learners. This approach makes use of verbal or written information and/or visual symbols to convey material quickly. It is intended to introduce a new topic, provide an overview, and to motivate learners.

This step is usually a one-way communication method and as a result, may have little learner interaction. It is intended for the learner to observe a skill or model behavior in order that they may apply their own efforts later.

Robert Gagne identified the mental conditions for learning that have been used by several other experts in the field of instructional design. Gagne states that different types of knowledge and skill require different conditions for learning and retention. A simplification of his "events of instruction" as these relate to presentation includes the following steps.

- **Gain attention.** In order for any learning to take place, first capture the attention of the learner. Present a problem or a new situation. The ideal is to grab the learners' attention so that they will watch and listen, while you present the learning point. You can use such devices as: storytelling, presenting a problem to be solved, doing something the wrong way (later show how to do it the right way) and why it is important within the context of their work.
- **Inform learners of objectives.** Early in each lesson, they should encounter a list of learning objectives. This initiates the internal process of expectancy and helps motivate them to complete the lesson. These objectives should form the basis for assessment and evaluation. This allows the learner's to organize their thoughts and around what they are about to see, hear, and/or do. There is a saying to 1) tell them what you're going to tell them, 2) tell them, and 3) tell them what you told them.
- **Stimulate recall of prior learning.** Associating new information with prior knowledge can facilitate the learning process. It's easier for learners to encode and store information in long-term memory when there are links to personal experience and knowledge. A simple way to stimulate recall is to ask questions about previous experiences or build upon previously introduced concepts. This allows learners to build on their previous knowledge or skills. Although we are capable of having our "creative" minutes, it is much easier to build on what we already know.

Suggested Methods:

Classroom, e-Learning, virtual or paper books, pre-assessments, skill guides, checklists, calculators, glossaries, articles, job-aids, paper workbooks, CD, audio, video, etc.

Business Training Library Resources:

Business skills instructional strategies, IT skills instructional strategies, the CompanyCollege LMS, and the Video and DVD Lending Library

Step 3 - 'Show Me' – The Demonstration Step

*"The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled."
Plutarch, Greek essayist*

The **Demonstration** step explains to the learner how to do a task as well as show why, when, and where it is done. This step is used to clearly illustrate the idea, concept, principle or procedure to the learner. For adult learner, this step places the skill into a real-life context so they can understand how it can be applied. The demonstration step should utilize several senses so the learner can see, hear and possibly experience the actual event and is the link between telling the learner why the skill or behavior is important and letting them try the skill themselves.

- **Adult Learning.** Principles of adult learning emphasize learner initiative, self-management and experiential learning so it is key to build the demonstration step around these goals. Adults are life-centered (also task centered and problem solvers). They are motivated to learn something to the extent they see that it will help perform tasks or deal with problems.
- **Modeling.** It is important to use sound instructional strategies that are most suitable to the content and specific objectives. For example, the approach to teaching communications skills is different than the approach to teaching finance or accounting skills. It is also easy to understand that these two approaches would be different in teaching a technical or software skill.
- **Chunking.** The content should be demonstrated in a blend of learning 'chunks' that are organized meaningful to aid in the retention and in the information recall. It can be in a blend of information that uses a variety of e-Learning whenever possible, including text, graphics, audio narration, examples, non-examples, case studies, analogies and simulation. This approach helps the learner to encode the information for long-term storage and move into the next step to re-enforce their understanding by practicing the new skill.

Demonstrations can be performed using e-Learning, classrooms, or given to the learner on a one-on-one basis. Also web-casts (archived seminars) and e-Learning are great methods for showing how the concepts, principles and processes are employed within a real-life situation.

Suggested Methods:

e-Learning, simulations, assessments, skill guides, articles, books, job-aids, paper workbooks, CD, audio, video, on-the-job assignments, decision-based scenarios

Business Training Library Resources:

Simulated dialogue and role-plays within Business Skills instructional strategies, simulations and 'show me' within IT Skills instructional strategies, Skill Simulations, CompanyCollege LMS, and the Video and DVD Lending Library

Step 4 - 'Let Me' – The Practice Step

*"Fewer things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example."
Mark Twain*

The **Practice** step is a dynamic approach that allows the learner to build their skills and become more assured in applying and reapplying their newly acquired skills in a life-like situation. This is the natural next step after explaining and showing the learner the context of the skill. Interpersonal skills are easily demonstrated by showing how to respond to questions during a job interview or how to deal with an angry customer.

The practice step reduces hazards and trial-and-error for learners who are conducting an experiment or procedure involving materials and expensive equipment. In this step, the learner is required to practice the new skill or behavior. Eliciting performance provides an opportunity for learners to confirm their correct understanding, and the repetition further increases the likelihood of retention.

- **Try out learning.** Adults need opportunities to apply and try out learning as quickly as possible. They need learning by doing rather than by being told and they treat mistakes as opportunities for more learning. The learning should be problem-centered rather than theoretically oriented content.
- **Support Learning.** In practical terms, instruction for adults should focus more on the process and less on the content being taught. Strategies such as case studies, role playing, simulations, and self-evaluations are most useful. Instructors in classroom settings should adopt the role of facilitator or resource rather than lecturer or grader.
- **Simulations.** Simulations provide interactive practice by allowing a learner to retry the skill until he/she has successfully attained the level of mastery that they are seeking. A live instructor or, in some cases, an e-Learning simulation is preferred if two-way interaction of learner practice with feedback is required. Simulations enable learners to explore and experiment in safe environment, free of real-world consequences. In such an environment it is less threatening to try out new attitudes and behaviors that can later be transferred in the work place. In addition, people who are in an exploration mode expect to find new things, to be enlightened and surprised.

This learning step makes it easier for learners to form new attitudes and adopt new behaviors in a simulated environment, skills that can be transferred into the real world.

Suggested Methods:

Virtual meeting or workshop, classroom, simulations, assignments, role-playing with peers, personal instructor or coach, passing control of virtual session over to participant

Business Training Library Resources:

Simulated dialogue and role-plays within Business Skills instructional strategies, simulations and 'show me' within IT Skills instructional strategies, Skill Simulations, and the CompanyCollege LMS

Step 5 - 'Check Me' – The Assessment Step

*"In the book of life, the answers aren't in the back."
Charlie Brown (Charles Schulz)*

The **Assessment** (or testing) step provides the learner with accurate feedback about their understanding of the content and instruction. Assessments are deliberate attempts by people to acquire information about themselves or others. Within instructional and learning environments, tests are used to measure what people know (knowledge) and how well they can apply what they know (performance).

- **Certification.** Assessment is particularly important if the learner needs to obtain academic or professional credit for their knowledge about the subject matter. In many situations, the assessment is done for legal or safety compliance reasons and it is used to verify the outcome of the instruction. The self-paced environment and the unlimited access to both instruction and assessment provide all learners with the opportunity to reach their desired level of mastery within each course. One of the best ways e-Learning is to be used is preparing learners for an outside assessment or certification (e.g. Microsoft, Novell, CPA, PMI, etc.)
- **Assess Skills.** Effective assessments allow learners to exhibit the behaviors specified in the objectives and provide meaningful feedback about those behaviors. Assessment strategies are closely related to the instructional strategies used to practice content and can include a rich variety of presentation, practice, and assessment methods supporting high levels of learner interactivity and engagement. Mastery of material, or certification, is typically granted after achieving a certain score or percent correct. A commonly accepted level of mastery is an 80- to 90-percent score.
- **Provide feedback.** As learners practice new behavior, it's important to provide specific and immediate feedback of their performance. Unlike questions in a post-test, exercises within tutorials should be used for comprehension and encoding purposes, not for formal scoring. Tools that can raise the level of self-awareness via real or simulated experiences can help learners discover for themselves the gaps between where they are now and where they want to be. Personnel appraisal systems, job rotation, exposure to role models, and diagnostic performance assessments are examples of such tools.

All too often tests are constructed to determine how much a learner knows rather than determining what he/she must learn or can perform. Frequently tests are designed to "trap" the learner and in still other situations tests are designed to insure a "bell curve" distribution of results and should be avoided. Strictly avoid the negatively biased methods and creating a 'fear of failure' by this type of testing. Individuals do not like being tested but they do like to know they are doing something right.

Suggested Methods:

e-Learning pre and post-assessments, local tests, study guides

Business Training Library Resources:

Tests within Business Skills and IT Skills courses, Skill Simulations, Practice Exams, and the CompanyCollege LMS

Step 6 - ‘Support Me’– The Assistance Step

*"Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes."
Mahatma Gandhi*

The **Assistance** step begins with formal training ends. The job of the learner does not end with the formal training events. Some elements of a new skill may not be used right away and can be easily lost, so it is important to provide the right level of support and resources to offset these effects. Providing support for the learner includes the use of several systems (i.e. multi-modal learning or performance support) that he/she will use informally following the formal learning events.

Providing support to the learner following the formal training steps is essential to increasing the learner’s performance. Several elements used in the formal learning process can be re-used to provide ongoing support. In many cases, the learner simply needs quick access back to materials or concepts covered in the formal learning events. These are learning objects rather than the entire course, or selected simulations, or certain job aids, or critical procedures that can be readily applied within the real working world. These help the learner to move beyond the application level to the synthesis level (Bloom’s cognitive taxonomy).

- **Make mistakes** – during this step, the learner will make mistakes and find themselves in need of a ‘refresher’ of the formal materials. Sometimes the learner wants this learning happen on a private basis without contact with an expert. Utilizing a ‘Google’ like search, they should be able to locate the right level of information or instruction to satisfy their needs.
- **Expand learning** – beyond the formal training the learner is engaged in applying their skills and this action increases their overall learning. Adults are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent they perceive it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations. Furthermore, adults learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively in the context of application to real-life situations.
- **Help Function** - the learner can perform additional research so providing access to online books (technical and business), manuals, reports, magazines, performance support, etc. are essential to provide assistance. Other types of feedback and assistance include access to open labs or resource centers, teleconferences, job aids, etc.

Suggested Methods:

Email, FAQ, ask the expert, virtual or face-to-face meetings, phone, assessment feedback, organizational websites or learning portal, video clips of instructors, job aids, chat rooms, threaded discussions, personalize the learner involvement, help desk

Business Training Library Resources:

Business Skills and IT Skills instructional strategies, Skill Simulations, the CompanyCollege LMS, Blended Learning Toolkit, and CCB

Step 7 - 'Coach Me' – The Mentoring Step

*"I never cease to be amazed at the power of the coaching process to draw out the skills or talent that was previously hidden within an individual, and which invariably finds a way to solve a problem previously thought unsolvable." –
John Russell, Managing Director, Harley-Davidson Europe Ltd.*

The **Coaching** step provides tacit support of managers, peers, mentors and experts allowing the learner to enhance his/her learning from real world experience of others. The intent of this step is to allow the learner to transition their skills from the knowledge level to the experiential level using the tacit support of experienced learners.

Having experts and mentors available to the learner during both the formal and informal phases of learning allows the individual to have immediate access to expert coaching.

In many cases the coach is a supervisor or more experienced peer so they can meet using a personal method (such as face to face or phone). Technical mentors are usually experts in their field, holding several technical certifications and may be in another location, so the use of email, phone, or virtual meeting tools may be preferred methods of contact.

- **Provide Coaching** – provide coaching instruction and tools for trainers, managers and learners. Recall of skills is greatly enhanced by being told, shown and experiencing a new skill.
- **Meet regularly** – have the learner meet regularly with their coach to review progress and discuss performance issues. Having conversations and a supportive relationship will do a lot to keep a learner on track and encourage them to conform performance issues.
- **Tie to Development Plans** – add the need for involvement with a coach within the learner's individual development plan. This tie-in provides a more formal structure to monitor access to experts and coaching resources throughout the informal learning period.
- **Experience the skill** – above all, the learner should apply their new skills within the working environment allowing them to create insights and learn new concepts.

The role of the coach is to provide expertise, consultation and interventions within or outside the scope of the curriculum. The power of the coach can be found in the short duration of the interactions and the influence on performance of the learner.

Suggested Methods:

Virtual meetings, classroom, face-to-face meetings, phone, email, chat sessions, instant message

Business Training Library Resources:

Discussion Groups and Client Community

Step 8 - 'Connect Me' – The Collaboration Step

*The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you.
B.B King*

Providing access to a community allows the learner to fully participate in **Collaborative** activities. Working with others to solve problems can increase the learner's success in applying their new skills within the workplace. These community-learning events can happen at any time and it is best if the learner initiates them. Technology keeps remote learners in easy contact and allows them to discuss topics that are important to their unique learning requirements.

- **Technology** – its is fundamental to provide the learner with access to both technology and software to link into various online collaborative sites.
- **Ad Hoc meeting** – use collaborative tools in an unstructured way to demonstrate content, solve problems or explain concepts.
- **Online Communities** – regular participation in established online groups can enhance the learner's connection to their industry and allows for expanded networking.
- **Conferences** – attending industry conferences and trade shows are an excellent way to connect with peers and partners.

Involvement in small learning groups can benefit learners significantly. These groups provide support and encouragement along with extra feedback on course assignments. Most importantly, if needed, help is readily available.

Suggested Methods:

Email, phone, virtual meeting, classroom, face-to-face meeting, phone, chat sessions, threaded discussions, role-playing with peers, assigned study groups at work, workshops

Business Training Library Resources:

Simulated dialogue and role-plays within Business Skills instructional strategies, simulations and 'show me' within IT Skills instructional strategies, Discussion Groups, Skill Simulations, and the CompanyCollege LMS

Mapping Business Training Library Resources to the Eight Key Blended Learning Steps

It may be helpful to see how training and learning resources map to each of the eight key learning steps. The following matrix shows how Business Training Library supports each of these steps. You may wish to map your current resources to this matrix to determine how well you are supporting each of these learning opportunities.

Product & Services	#1 Prepare me	#2 Tell me	#3 Show me	#4 Let me	#5 Check me	#6 Support me	#7 Coach me	#8 Connect me
<i>E-learning Courseware</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
<i>Video and DVD Lending Library</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
<i>CCB – Custom Course Builder</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
<i>CompanyCollege LMS</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<i>Skill Simulations™</i>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
<i>Practice Exams</i>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
<i>Blended Learning Toolkit</i>						<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<i>Client Community</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

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