Mobile Learning:
The Time is Now
Mobile Learning: The Time is Now

The use of pocket-sized communications devices to enhance learning has tantalized training executives since the first cellular phone was introduced.

It might seem ironic that during today’s frenzied marketplace for smart phones, MP3s and other hand-held devices, legions of training executives are still waiting for clarity before authorizing mobile learning initiatives at their companies. But who can blame them? It’s easy to be “frozen by the hype” of m-learning. After all, successful m-learning strategies face numerous obstacles.

Among them:
- How and why should you integrate the use of mobile devices into your formal training programs?
- What business challenges and learner audiences are uniquely suited to m-learning solutions?
- How do you build a business case for mobile learning?
- How can you optimize your content for mobile delivery?
- How can learners easily access content through just a few clicks on their devices?
- What performance metrics should you measure to evaluate pilot or program effectiveness?

When it comes to adopting mobile learning initiatives, many are still preaching wait-and-see. There are some compelling reasons for you to reassess the conventional wisdom.

Despite the challenges, the ultimate question for training organizations typically concerns when to adopt m-learning – not if. After all, its rapid growth is being fueled by numerous incentives including heightened time constraints on busy knowledge workers, the changing face of business, and the explosion of must-have smart phones in the hands of employees.

Today, busy executives are asking to take compliance training on their BlackBerries during free moments at the airport, consultants are seeking easy ways to collaborate with their colleagues and share information with clients, while sales reps and other field personnel want product information and quick tips via an iPhone app.

Consider that by 2013, the number of mobile workers will total 1.3 billion worldwide, a whopping 35% of the workforce, according to research firm IDC. The firm also predicts that by 2020, according to research there will be 31 billion connected mobile devices, more than four times the world’s current population. Mobile guru and former Nokia executive Tomi Ahonen sees this growth as nothing less than a paradigm shift in human communication. He refers to the explosion of mobile devices as the “7th Medium” following other fundamental communication innovations as print, radio, television, and the Internet.

So given the challenges to successful implementation of an m-learning program, exactly when and how should organizations begin the process? At Xerox Learning, we are often asked that question because our focus is on implementing effective learning and technology strategies, and more and more those strategies involve mobile devices.

But first, some background about mobile learning. Like many evolving terms in the training space, its meaning differs among stakeholder communities. At Xerox Learning, we consider an m-learning device to be a hand-held communications tool including mobile and smart phones, PDAs, MP3/MP4 players and gaming devices. It does not include laptops, the iPad and Kindle. While these devices are part of some strategies, the size and usage patterns are closer to a PC than a mobile phone.
The distinction, clearly, is that learning and performance support content must be packaged in bite-sized nuggets for m-learning to occur. While a full e-learning or ILT course cannot be directly moved to a mobile format, many of the components can be.

Executives who have not yet pulled the trigger on mobile learning are in good company considering that its growth, although dynamic, has not yet lived up to its billing. There are four principal reasons for this:

**Technology readiness.** The daunting number of mobile devices, software and technologies in the marketplace make it difficult to write courseware once and run it anywhere. Carrier and coverage differences can greatly impact performance, while organizations typically lack a model to get content to the edges of their mobile networks.

**Content readiness.** Most learning organizations are still wedded to developing and delivering formal training. They find it an arduous task to convert instructor-led training for other purposes, and most lack the capability for native m-learning content design and development. Many also lack an agile and social learning strategy to expand the re-use and reach of their learning initiatives. Further, e-Learning in Flash-based modules is not supported on many phones.

**User readiness.** With the increasing use of mobile devices for social networking such as Facebook, it seems obvious that employees and customers would embrace m-learning opportunities. But not necessarily. The mobile phone is a personal device, after all, and communications to it from unwanted sources are often seen as an invasion. Are they willing to change personal behaviors and use the same devices in a business context?

**Business readiness.** Many training organizations are still smarting from the economic downturn and are struggling to execute their priorities with fewer resources. They’re also reluctant to address the complexity of choices needed to launch even a pilot mobile program.

Any one of those reasons can justify inaction. But it’s important to note that these and other perceived obstacles on the technology and content fronts are being overcome daily by training organizations throughout the world. “Delivering content to mobile workers is not just possible, it is becoming a key requirement for connecting learners to knowledge,” says a recent report by Bersin Associates.

M-learning advocates are also discovering benefits from increased access, power and speed from advances such as increasingly robust mobile data networks. Namely, many types of learning are no longer tethered to the personal computer. Case in point: As Judy Brown points out in “2010 Forecasts,” financial firms such as Bank of America and Wells Fargo are exploring the use of mobile phones to deliver compliance training, product training, performance support, and other job aids.

In addition, increased collaboration and information sharing will figure prominently in the future, with obvious learning benefits when optimum business applications are connected to the right learner populations.

**Five steps to m-learning success**

Organizations often begin their m-learning initiatives by launching pilot programs to verify technologies and delivery methods, and build confidence. Companies can also initiate small scale m-learning programs with select audiences, such as a highly mobile sales force, to demonstrate business impact and to attract internal support.

To determine whether an organization might benefit from an m-learning program, and how it can best be instituted, Xerox Learning Services has created a five-step process. It begins by isolating the business pain points and preparing the organization for mobile learning. It then guides organizations through each step, including a pilot and launch.

1. **Assessment and planning.** Companies should examine their business needs and their training organizations to determine how delivery through mobile devices might improve learning. They should focus on specific business problems tied to organizational metrics. Examples: The need to extend the experience of existing classroom and e-learning courses, or to provide access to critical information just-in-time.

2. **Technology implementation.** Next comes selection of the appropriate mobile devices and technologies that would best support the specific business initiatives and learning environment. It’s important to limit this activity to the devices predominantly used within the organization, and not support the entire universe of m-learning devices. Doing so adds unnecessary complications and expense.

3. **Content delivery.** Mobile content can be developed, acquired or repurposed from existing learning and information sources. But in all cases, it must be designed with the right instructional model and deployed on appropriate mobile devices to capture the learner’s interest and increase retention. It also must be kept fresh.

4. **Support.** Quality support for mobile learners and practitioners, including content administration and help desk support, is a fundamental requirement for any successful m-learning initiative. It means maintaining the agility to keep content relevant, and providing access to experts to answer questions when things change or when things go wrong.

5. **Measurement.** An effective measurement strategy factors in both successes and failures to chart the best course forward. The measurements should ultimately be mapped to strategic or financial objectives such as growing revenue and reducing costs. Proximate measures related to improved performance and impact on strategic and tactical objectives should link mobile learning solutions to financial measures.
Xerox Learning’s suite of m-learning products

Granted, each of the five steps presents specific challenges for organizations seeking to launch m-learning initiatives. As analysts warn, those challenges will increase in complexity as technology platforms, security requirements, content quality and learner expectations evolve. That’s why many companies are reaching out to Xerox Learning Services and technology experts instead of going it alone.

As a technology-enabled learning services provider, Xerox Learning implements strategies that embrace the capabilities of today’s mobile learning devices. We have developed a suite of solutions that enable companies to quickly and cost-effectively reach employees around the globe. Our solution includes a global content delivery network that is optimized for multiple devices, as well as strategy, design and measurement expertise.

The m-learning platform includes a highly usable “front end” and a powerful “back end” that works across the spectrum of devices and analyzes performance metrics. Other mobile services include rapid strategy development, content development and conversion, customized design and branding, as well as integration of your mobile content with agile, social and formal portals. In addition, Xerox Learning Services provides support for mobile learning practitioners and learners, including content administration, 24 x 7 help desk support, and learning effectiveness measurement strategy.

Making the business case for m-learning

The advantage of m-learning is its unique ability to address a performance problem at the point of need. This translates to real business impact – enhanced speed and reduced cycle time, better-informed decisions, enhanced connections to customers and partners, and more.

Companies can also make a business case around the intimacy of mobile devices that individuals lack with their PCs and laptop computers. Mobile devices facilitate a natural learning style because they enable users to communicate with trusted sources for the information they seek. But technology alone doesn’t enhance performance, of course. If organizations lock all of their vital information in classrooms or behind a learning management system, and don’t expose it for the benefit of mobile users, their training investments are limited.

Xerox Learning maintains that by extending and leveraging investments in existing learning materials, organizations can significantly increase performance.

The time is now

Mobile devices are already ubiquitous, and soon they will eclipse the Internet as the dominant platform for communication. Look around. Your employees are using mobile devices in their personal lives in ever increasing, creative ways. They will begin demanding learning and productivity applications at work if they haven’t already.

We have entered a new mobile “renaissance” where new form factors and innovations will continue to accelerate. Organizations that recognize this and quickly move to test and adopt mobile learning solutions will achieve a competitive advantage. That competitive advantage may take many forms – a more productive sales force, more intimate customer relationships, more engaged learners. What will your competitive advantage be?

About Xerox Learning Services

Xerox Learning Services is a trusted provider of technology-enabled learning solutions that improve business productivity. For over a decade, we have advised senior learning, marketing and sales executives on how to design, deliver and measure the effectiveness of their education and training programs.

Because learners’ needs are multi-faceted, we believe learning should be too. That means delivering the right information, in the right format, at the right time. Xerox Learning Services can help you harness new technologies to deliver award-winning learning solutions across multiple platforms – from the classroom to the web to mobile devices.

But technology is just one enabler of success. That’s why our consultants combine technology savvy with expertise in strategy, instructional design, development, operations and measurement. Our consultants are dedicated learning practitioners, many having led or managed large-scale learning initiatives themselves prior to joining Xerox Learning.

To learn more, visit:
www.xerox.com/learning
or call 877.414.2676