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Motivate Learning in your Organisation with Mobile Learning

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In this paper we discuss what mobile learning is, how it can improve an organisation's learning processes and practices, and finally 4 key questions to answer before you implement mobile learning.

Background

Meet Bridget, the Learning & Development Manager for a medium size manufacturing company. Bridget is looking to improve learning delivery to all her employees and needs to ensure she makes the right decision on how to do this. Here is Bridget's journey.

My workforce includes people on the factory floor, customer service staff, engineers in the field and office, a sales force and service technicians who are on the road 90% of the time. We have a number of sites throughout Australia. Managers cover a number of territories. So, you could say a lot of our people are on the go.

My job is to support the learning and development of our workforce and it includes the usual learning activities of corporate compliance courses (you know the ones - Code of Conduct, Trade Practices, EEO), induction programs tailored for certain departments, safety awareness, product knowledge training as well as professional development. Some of these courses are delivered face to face and some are online courses.

We have had a Learning Management System for the last 3 years. I call it the 'engine' for our learning and development in the business. It accommodates users' learning plans and completed records, houses online content, has a course catalogue where users can self-register, and also targets learning based on a user's job role.

It sounds great but we have had mixed success with our 'engine' and our organisation has not embraced it like we had envisioned. So it seems this engine is still in the driveway, with a nice body around it, but not travelling too far. The success we have had is ticking off those compliance courses particularly for staff who were in the office, as they were able to easily view their learning plans and register in their compliance and other professional development courses. Their managers could then conveniently approve training requests.

We do have some petrol in the tank in the form of eLearning content. Considerable money was spent with a web house in the past to develop eLearning courses on product knowledge to assist our sales representatives, service technicians and customer service team. The courses look great but are quite lengthy and the uptake has been poor. Another issue though is that the content is now out of date.

Identifying the Problem

I needed to understand why my 'engine' was not kicking over and performing to initial expectations. After meeting with some key people in the business I discovered the following:

- **Time Restraints** - Staff could self-register in courses, and this work flowed to their managers to approve in the LMS. This was great for the first few months, but now users had become frustrated, as approvals were taking longer. This was because our managers' time was being consumed in meetings or travel. So logging onto the LMS and approving courses for their staff, was the last thing on their mind.
- **Results Not Current** - The supervisors on the factory floor do not see much value in the LMS, as it does not assist with their on-the-job-training/assessments. The updates in the LMS are done after the fact (a bit like that dreaded paperwork), and involves supervisors simply ticking people off in the LMS when they get back to their desk.
- **Out of Date Content**- The sales representatives and service technicians are out on the road and when they did have any spare time, contemplating a 40 minute course about the "Gooney Machine" did not exactly make them excited. They felt that as the content was now out of date there was little point in participating in this training and the LMS didn't recognise they had completed the course anyway.
- **Not Enough Job Aids** – Effective job aids were not in place and going back to the web house was not an option, as this was costly, took too long, and it didn't talk to the LMS.

Determining a Solution

After obtaining feedback from stakeholders and carrying out internal research, I realised the stalled learning solution for our business was due to a lack of access of learning in our workforce, in other words we were not presenting learning to our people when and where they needed it. So I had the engine, but it was not going anywhere, it was stuck in the driveway. I had to get this engine moving….I had to go mobile!

I kept hearing these terms "m-learning", "mobile learning" but before jumping on the bandwagon of another fad, I needed to thoroughly research it, to ensure this platform was here to stay and would effectively meet our organisation's needs.
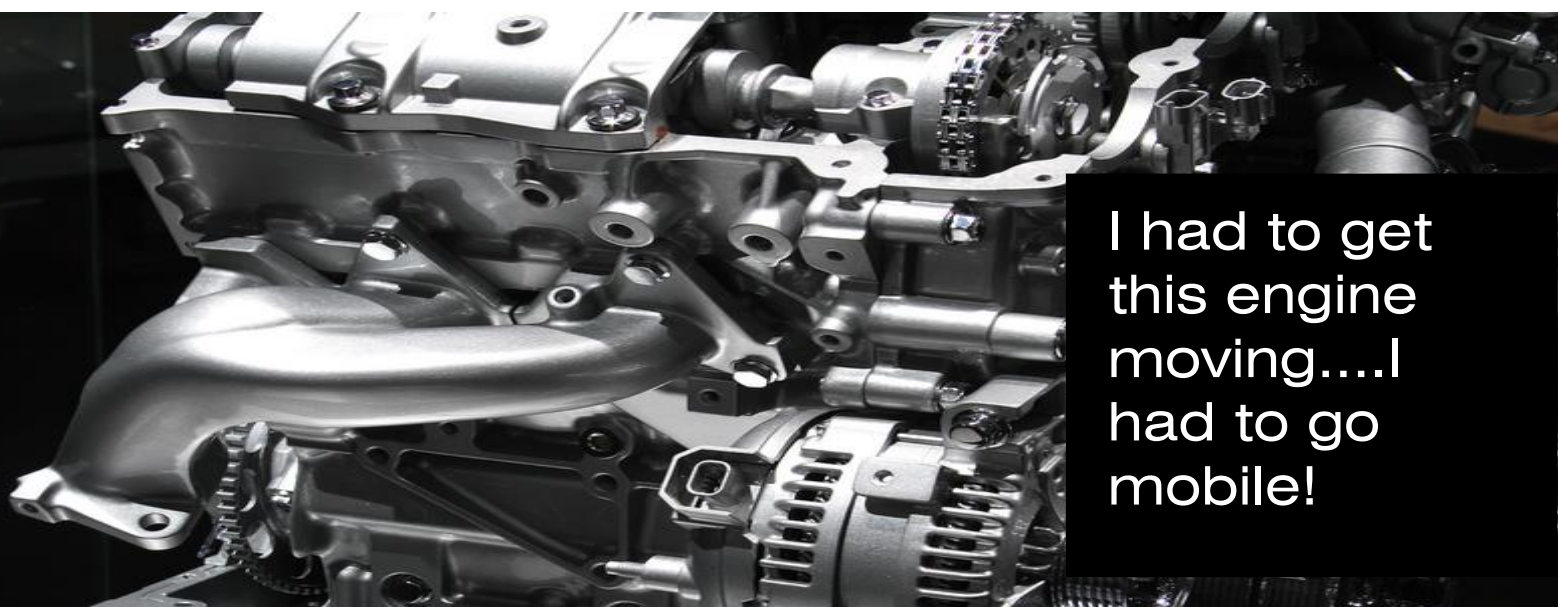
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My research uncovered some interesting statistics

Fortune reported that Smartphones outsold PCs for the first time – a full two years before the prediction by Morgan Stanley – and according to the UN Telecommunications Agency (www.itu.int) 77% of the world's population now has mobile devices.

By 2013, **mobile phones will overtake PCs** as the most common Web access device worldwide – Gartner Inc, 2010

By 2015, **80% of people accessing the Internet will be doing so from mobile devices** – 2011 Horizon Report

Smartphones and tablets represent more than 90% of the new net growth in device adoption for the coming four years, and increasing application platform capability across all classes of mobile phones is spurring a new frontier of innovation, particularly where mobile capabilities can be integrated with location, presence and social information to enhance the usefulness. – Gartner Inc 2012

I also discovered that some organisations that had tried to implement mobile learning had experienced poor results. Yes, they fell into the latest fad trap, with little planning or thought on how mobile learning would fit into their portfolio of learning solutions to meet their organisation's specific expected outcomes.

I knew introducing mobile learning was simply not 'rendering existing content on a mobile device and you are done'. Mobile learning also may not be appropriate for all content. I needed to understand what mobile technologies actually contribute to learning? In other words, what difference would it bring to my organisation and would it solve problems I had identified?

I realised the major contribution that mobile learning would bring to my organisation, is that it will deliver learning to the learner when and where they need it.

This in itself can have other benefits for the learner's engagement. Motivation has become a focus for what mobile learning offers that is different. Research has seen learners who work with mobile learning enjoy the process. In particular, the effective forms of motivation afforded by aspects of mobile learning are characterised as:
- control (over goals);
- ownership;
- fun;
- communication;
- learning-in-context;
- continuity between contexts.

(Jones, Issroff et al., 2007; Sharples, 2007)

4 Key Questions

So now I had identified that a mobile learning platform for learning was a legitimate one that would be here for the long term. I began to understand how this platform could assist my problems of getting access to learning to our employees.

However, as with introducing any new learning strategy, answers to relevant questions were needed and I had the following 4 questions.

1. How was Mobile Learning going to address the problems I had?

- **Notifications and reminders from the LMS were not actioned on a timely basis**. For example course approvals from the Manager. Through mobile learning I could;
    - Render these notifications to text or SMS on the Manager's device.
    - Have my Learning Management System accessed from a mobile device as an application, making this approval access an easy process while on the go.
- **The current process was not enhancing the on-the-job-training/assessments.** However, incorporating mobile learning activities we could extend the formal part of learning by adding:
    - Activities such as taking photos or videos as part of their assessment tasks.
    - Checklists and other performance support for the people out in the field, who could access this while on the job.
- **The sales representatives and service technicians were out on the road and needed access to content that was relevant and timely.** With mobility I could now look at assisting the sales representatives and service technicians by;
    - Developing content that was 'bite size' for that product and could be accessed via their mobile device at the time it was required.
    - Look at the possibility of using QR Codes to access the learning for the type of device the service technician was servicing.
    - Develop some podcasts on the latest additions to our product catalogue; this way on the road they could be brought up to speed fairly quickly.
    - Delivering content through the LMS on their phone, we could track these learning activities.
    - Refresher learning.

Clark Quinn states:

"Mobile as an augment to formal learning: reactivating knowledge, distributing practice, contextualising learning and even performance capture"

2. What devices does our organisation support?

My research revealed:

- **Not one design fits all devices**, so if we had many devices, we would need to design content that would accommodate all devices our organisation used.
- **Some devices may be more accommodating** for the type of learning activity we are delivering; for example using a tablet is much more conducive to delivering a full learning experience and they allow more interactivity, for example entering assessments.
- **Not only do we need to take the form of the device but the technology these devices use**. Due to technology constantly changing in the mobile world and standards at this stage not existing, building a solution that may be permanent could be extremely difficult. Also some technologies that we currently use such as Adobe® Flash®, Java, Java Applets, simply will not work on one or more popular mobile devices. So we need to limit the amount of devices we deliver this content to, or preferably focus on one.
- **If we need to track all content**, it therefore needs to be within the Learning Management System. Or is it for performance support only?
- We should also take into account that **the marketplace for mobile devices may change** due to the success of these devices. So we need to balance the capabilities of these devices and ensure that they are also going to be here for the long term.

The table below demonstrates the content compatibility between devices and their strengths and weaknesses.

	DEVICE	CONTENT COMPATIBILITY	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Smartphones	**Apple IPHONE**	HTML, HTML5, Apps – no Flash content	Popular with end users and strong installed base; uniformity of form factor, stable operating system	Lack of enterprise security; closed operating system; requirements of using Apple App Store to deliver apps
	RIM BlackBerry	HTML, HTML5 (depends on browser), Flash, Java; BlackBerry Apps	Enterprise security; large installed base, especially in corporate market	A variety of screen sizes to deal with; smaller screens on many devices, evolving operating system
	Android Phones	HTML, HTML5 (depends on browser), Flash, Android Apps	Popular with end-users, growing installed base	Customisation by phone manufacturers limits benefits of open system
	Windows Phone	HTML, HTML5 (depends on browser),, Flash, Window Apps	Enterprise security; growing installed base, especially in corporate market. Access to Office applications	Limited, but rapidly growing installed base
Tablets	**iPad**	HTML, Apps – no Flash content	Popular with end users and strong installed base; uniformity of form factor	Lack of enterprise security; closed operating system; necessity of going through App Store
	BlackBerry Playbook	HTML, HTML5, Flash, Java	Tied to BlackBerry enterprise systems for security, trusted name in corporate mobility	Limited installed base
	Android Tablets	HTML, HTML5, Flash, Java, Android Apps	Popular with end users, good resolution for e-learning	Limited, but growing, installed base
	Windows Tablets	HTML,HTML5, Apps – no Flash content	Enterprise security; growing installed base, especially in corporate market. Access to Office applications	Limited, but growing, installed base. This will grow once Windows 8 is released

3. Do I have the necessary organisational support?

It will be necessary to ensure that the mobile learning strategy is aligned with the company's overall organisational strategy. In order to gain support from key stakeholders, I will need to meet with senior leaders to gain an understanding of what their views are on mobile devices and to have the opportunity to outline benefits for our organisation for the introduction of the mobile learning strategy.

Our IT department will need to be involved throughout and they may have already arrived at a conclusion about what devices they will and will not support. We need to have a strong relationship with both our HR and IT departments. Regular communication with these departments to understand what the dynamics are in our organisation around providing mobile devices to employees will be an important aspect.

I know our organisation already has mobile devices, but I am not sure who has these, what they may have and to what capacity they are utilised. Existing mobile device availability will need to be addressed along with identifying potential audiences within our organisation that do not currently have mobile devices. We can then develop a suitable strategy as to the acquisition and distribution of relevant devices to pertinent employees through our current training access systems.

4. How does it fit into our existing learning strategy ?

Mobile learning presents an opportunity to improve employee performance, productivity and engagement, but it isn't the answer for every need. To be successful I need to understand how mobile learning fits within a broader framework, which will be driven by the maturity of our learning program and systems, our goals and our workforce.

Adding mobile learning to our well-established learning program is going to be easier than bolting it on to a program still in its early stages. I need to consider our workforce as well: are most of our mobile employees ready and willing to adopt mobile learning?

The majority of adults have a mobile phone and while some see it as a gateway to the world's information resources others simply see it as a phone. Older generation audiences may not be as adept in using mobile devices (especially with their eye-straining screens and small keyboards), however this is gradually changing. I also know during my planning I need to look specifically at segments of our workforce that are more mobile in their jobs, and focus specifically on their readiness and willingness to accept mobile learning.
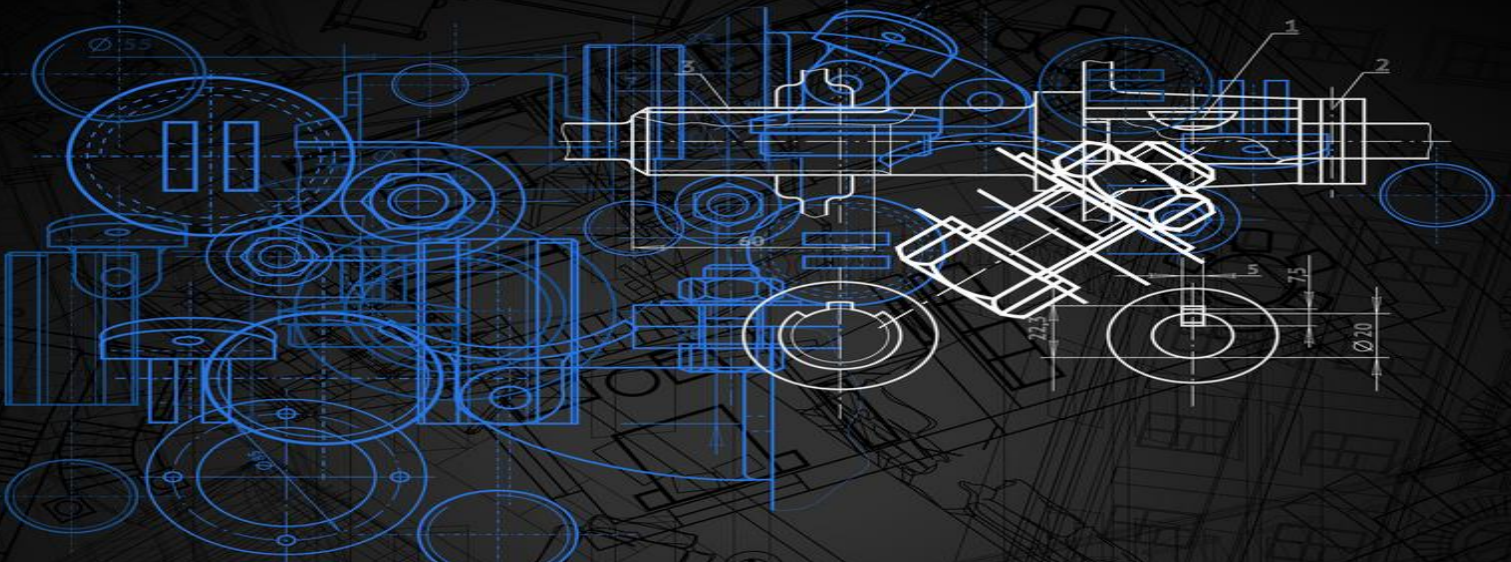
Conclusion

After spending some time on research to understand how mobile learning could plug some of the gaps I have with learning in my organisation, I identified some important key points. These are as follows:

- While there is a lot of talk about mobile learning, finding actual implementations are scarce. So **ensure you have a mobile learning strategy in place.** Do not simply jump on the next fad rollercoaster, without putting a proper plan in place.

- Like any planning, **ensure you have all the stakeholders involved** in your strategy. This encourages ownership and an understanding of what is anticipated with the introduction of mobile learning.

- As with introducing any new strategy, put some measurements in place to **ensure your new initiatives are delivering benefits and solving the problems you had**.

- Ensure you focus on where the quick wins are, so you can get some runs on the board. **Do not get weighed down in complex and long implementations.** Getting those quick runs can assist in the momentum you desire to drive your strategy into your organisation.