

Learning at work: e-learning evolution or revolution?

Latest trends and blends in management
and leadership development

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1. Introduction

This research is a follow-up to the report produced by the Chartered Management Institute in 2007 entitled: 'Realising Value from Online Learning in Management Development'. One of the conclusions of the previous report was a general trend towards 'blending' various methods of learning as appropriate for the subject and objective. The goal of this current research was to identify progress towards integrating e-learning with other learning technologies and interventions.

The popularity of the term 'blended learning' has grown in recent times; however the concept itself has actually been around for some while. To this extent, blended learning would appear to be not just the latest trend or management fad – it instead represents a forward-thinking and integrated approach to individual and organisational learning. Yet, surprisingly, its actual application, and in particular the impact of e-learning on it, has not been widely researched.

To address this knowledge gap, this report was produced by the Centre for Applied HR Research at Oxford Brookes University and is based on two main strands of research:

1. An online survey of 1,087 members of the Chartered Management Institute
2. In-depth interviews with learning and development professionals at 15 leading employers from both the private and public sector.

Whilst the term blended learning was not immediately recognised by many of the managers who responded to the online survey, this is perhaps to be expected given the several new meanings the term has taken on over recent years.

Integrating different training interventions has been recognised by learning and development professionals for some considerable time as probably delivering a more successful learning outcome. However, broadly defining 'blended learning' is not easy and the first part of the report seeks to develop a workable definition.

The advent of e-learning has really focused more attention on blended learning, but there is the danger that it has come to simply mean the combination of 'face-to-face' learning with some e-learning. In this report we use a broader definition, including the wider use of the internet as a learning tool - termed in the previous report as online learning.

The increasing use of technologies such as online video (e.g. YouTube), social networking (e.g. Facebook) and virtual realities (e.g. Second Life) in everyday life is more advanced than in most blended learning. This removes one of the sources of resistance ('technophobia') previously reported for online learning and supports the view that blended learning represents the future of learning – a future which is becoming inevitable.

Whilst there were differences between the perspectives of the learning and development professionals interviewed and the individual managers who responded to the survey, these were far less than in some other relevant research studies. This may mean that learning professionals and line managers are converging in their thinking as to how different technologies and interventions can be used to develop more effective learning.

This report seeks to draw out not just progress on this journey towards a more integrated approach to learning, but also the lessons learnt along the way. Finally it explores some ideas about the future direction of blended learning.

2. Summary Findings

The research explored the growth of blended learning in the context of overall management development activities and key trends are identified here.

Organisational commitment to management development

- Management development as a critical success factor in organisations is now well established. Nearly two thirds of managers (64 per cent) strongly agreed/agreed that their organisation gave high priority to developing its managers. Over half of managers (56 per cent) reported that their organisation used a competency framework for managers, and 43 per cent reported that there was an explicit budget for management development.
- However, it is disappointing that less than half of respondents agreed that all managers had a personal development plan; and only 49 per cent believed that their management development policy was aligned to their business strategy. Significantly, only 57 per cent agreed that their organisation measured or assessed its management and leadership development activities. This is likely to be reflected in the finding that only 52 per cent of managers strongly agreed/agreed that management development has had a positive impact on their organisation over the last three years.

Delivery of management and leadership development

- Work-based, experiential learning is the most dominant mode of management and leadership learning: 92 per cent cited 'learning from their own experience' as their most common development experience. This learning was also regarded as the most effective (53 per cent) and most likely to be used in the future (61 per cent). Significantly, all the case study organisations interviewed viewed blended learning as a valuable route for harnessing new technologies to better support experiential learning and integrating self-directed learning into organisational objectives.
- In-house development programmes (77 per cent) and external programmes (72 per cent) were reported as the most widely available formal modes of delivery of management and leadership development. These were also seen to be the most effective with ratings of 45 per cent and 43 per cent respectively.

The growth of online learning tools

- In terms of where the 'blend' lies now, the more traditional forms of instruction still tend to dominate the learning process with reading management books/articles (72 per cent), on-the-job training (62 per cent), academic study (50 per cent) and management qualification/accreditation (47 per cent) all ranking highly amongst those surveyed as methods used in management and leadership development and learning in the last twelve months.
- However, it appears that a growing range of online management and leadership development activities are being offered by organisations. Forty-seven per cent of managers reported having access to a virtual learning environment, i.e. a software system designed to support learning, and 38 per cent of managers responded that they could access blended learning opportunities for management and leadership skills.
- Increasingly, online resources and e-learning are enabling self-directed learning which is not always fully captured by the learning and development department. By giving individual managers increased accessibility and flexibility, online resources can be used continuously for learning and reference.
- Looking at the uptake of online resources among all managers surveyed, the most popular resources were case studies, with 61 per cent stating they sometimes/frequently used this format. Forty per cent also reported that they sometimes/frequently used e-learning modules and 35 per cent used online assessment tools.
- Compared with the findings from the 2007 research, in the past 12 months there has been a surprising surge in the use of some new media, particularly among directors. Usage of videos (increased use from 21 per cent to 51 per cent), discussion forums (increased use from 24 per cent to 40 per cent), and social networking sites (an increase from 12 per cent to 34 per cent) reflect greater engagement by directors. In contrast, the use of blogs and podcasts among all levels of manager has remained at around 10 per cent.

Future trends in learning

- Cost and the quality of resources were driving factors for adopting blended learning for many of the case studies. Unsurprisingly, organisations spend a great deal of money developing materials and they are not prepared to throw this investment away. Blended learning allows organisations to supplement and complement existing courseware and materials rather than replace them. Although design costs are typically much higher, longer term deployment costs are much lower. Many organisations are also buying off-the-shelf solutions from major suppliers to reduce development and design costs.
- Organisations believe the effectiveness of blended learning is substantially improved through controlling and actively promoting the quality and range of learning resources available. Crucially, it also appears to provide far greater engagement for the individual by giving them the responsibility for driving their own learning.

-
- More than half of managers agree that blended learning enables the use of different instruction methods to suit different learning styles (58 per cent); supports different learning outcomes (56 per cent); and allows learners to work at their own pace (60 per cent). Only 13 per cent of managers believe that blended learning is “just the latest fad which offers nothing substantially new”.
 - A significant minority of managers (28 per cent) agree that Web 2.0 technologies (e.g. social networking, wikis) have the potential to transform management and leadership development activities and that in the next ten years virtual worlds and gaming technology will enable all development to be experiential. This push towards Web 2.0 technologies is being led by the younger generation with 37 per cent of managers under 40 and 36 per cent of junior managers agreeing with this.

3. What is Blended Learning?

3.1 Defining and understanding blended learning

All specialisms develop their own language and the people development arena is no different. The basic concept of blended learning, of using more than one type of training intervention to achieve a learning goal, has been in practice for a long time, but its usage has grown in response to the impact of e-learning. Combinations such as project work, reading assignments, psychometric questionnaires and a ‘face-to-face’ programme, are just a few examples of elements that have been integrated into management programmes. From this perspective, blended learning is not so much a new idea as a natural, self-evidently useful evolution of learning, using the most appropriate techniques for each situation. We would argue, however, that even if blended learning is an inevitable next stage for learning, there are many lessons being learned by the advanced organisations interviewed for this research which can be of value to others as they adopt blended learning in the future.

There is no doubt that the arrival of e-learning as an important vehicle for corporate learning has created a new momentum and that technology will continue to be a key enabler in the rapid growth of blended learning. As noted in our previous research, whilst e-learning is a very efficient method for learning transfer, for many learners and some subjects it has its limitations. Blended learning integrates appropriate methods to ensure maximum learning impact, avoiding the disadvantages and maximising the advantages of the component methods.

Among the case studies, most organisations that were interviewed agreed that blended learning is, in its basic form, simply a combination of distinct forms of learning. Some perceived it more in terms of the technology associated with the learning and others as more to do with the overall learning experience that was achieved.

For the National School of Government e-learning is a main component of blended learning, although they stress that the e-learning element should not just be about preparing people for face-to-face courses. For example, they have a website containing a series of short papers about management. It is not necessarily classified as e-learning, although it is online, but it provides short pieces of information (no more than 5 minutes reading) that people can do with as they wish – it is like a credible, tailored and focused ‘google’ or ‘wiki’. It also has online communities which allow discussion forums, interactive document libraries and wikis (using Web 2.0-type technology).

The term blended learning had less meaning for those outside the learning and development function than for those in it. Drawing on findings of the quantitative survey, when initially questioned, only 16 per cent of respondents reported to have blended learning available to them as a form of delivery for management and leadership development. Later on, though, after having been provided with a definition of blended learning as ‘learning that integrates both face-to-face instruction and online instruction’, 38 per cent of managers stated that their organisation offered access to blended learning opportunities for management and leadership skills.

This uncertainty notwithstanding, the findings of the online quantitative survey largely support a key theme emerging out of the case studies of the growing importance of e-learning as a component of blended learning. Table 1, below, highlights recognition of a dual strand of work-based learning in organisations – face-to-face learning supported by online resources and similarly online learning facilitated with a range of social interaction.

Table 1: If you have used blended learning over the past two years, which of the following best describes your experience?

Description of learning experience	(Base: 555) %
Learning involving both face-to-face and online learning	43
Face-to-face learning with online support resources	29
Online learning with no elements of online social interaction	21
Online learning with online social interaction	7

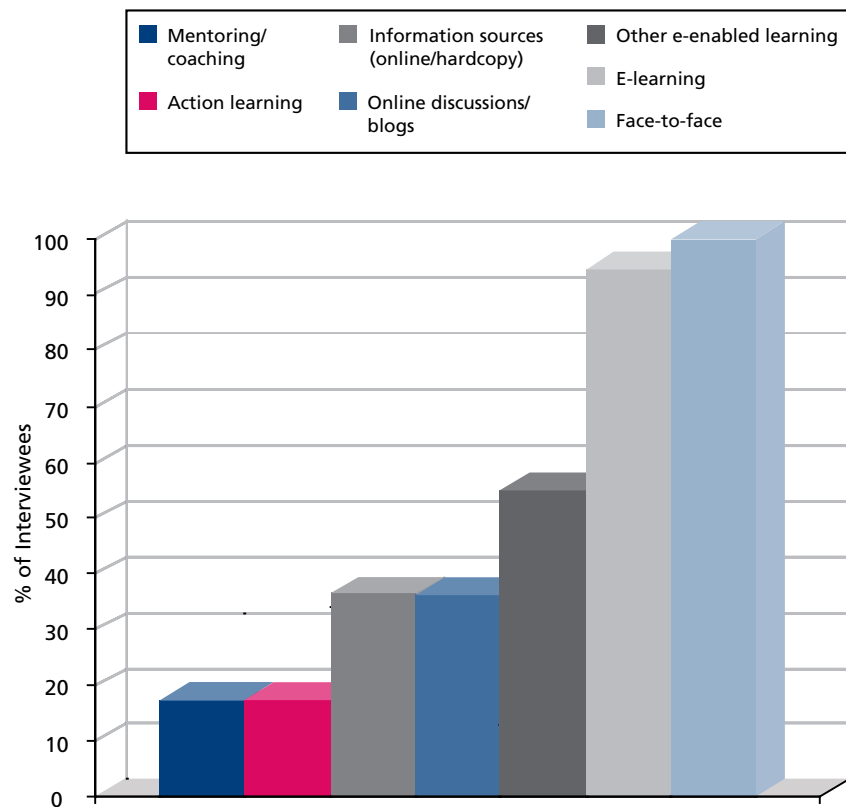
In light of the overall findings of this research, we are using the following definition:

‘Blended learning is a designed, integrated mix of training and development interventions and experiences, using different face-to-face methods and online technologies, intended to enable people to best meet their learning needs.’

3.2 What are the features and components of blended learning?

Whilst there is acceptance that blended learning can include many forms of learning, the major components, according to the learning and development professionals within organisations, are quite clearly e-learning and traditional ‘face-to-face’ workshops, see Figure 1 below. The extent of integration between these two types of learning is discussed later in this report.

Figure 1: Main components used in blended learning



When asked to consider support resources for management and development generally, managers report a high preference for using case studies as a key source of learning in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Key online learning resources used by managers to support management and leadership development

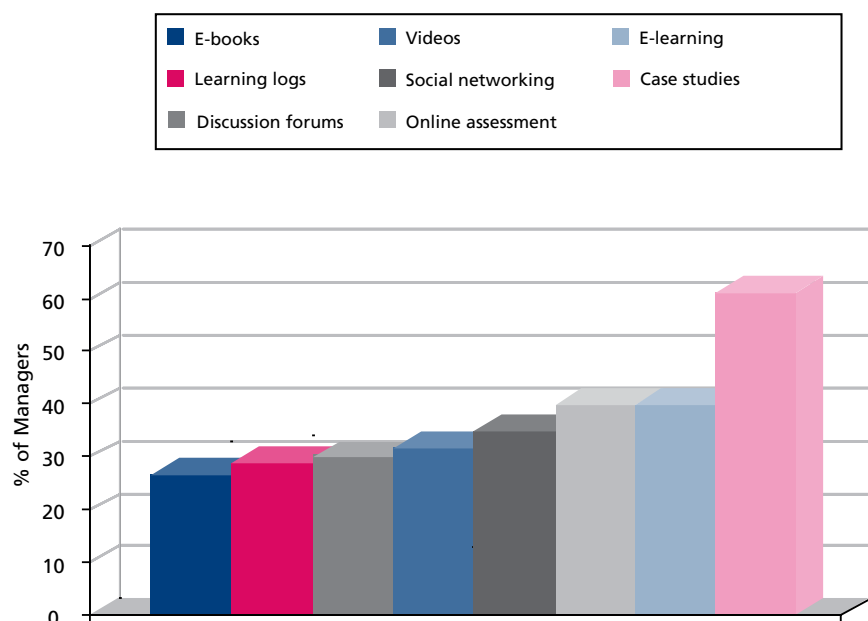


Table 2: Use of newer learning technologies by management level

	Junior Manager		Middle Manager		Senior Manager		Director	
	%							
Base: 1,087 (2008)	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008
Blogs	17	8	11	10	12	9	11	9
e-Coaching	19	18	18	18	15	17	10	14
e-book	26	36	20	28	17	24	14	22
e-learning	42	44	38	42	34	39	25	35
Discussion forums	33	23	28	36	33	27	24	40
Videos	11	21	17	30	21	35	21	51
Podcasts (audio)	8	13	10	13	12	11	12	13
Social networking sites	20	28	14	39	13	41	12	34

Compared with the findings from the 2007 research, in the past 12 months there has been a significant surge in the use of some new media, particularly among directors. Usage of videos (increased use from 21 per cent to 51 per cent), discussion forums (increased use from 24 per cent to 40 per cent), and social networking sites (an increase from 12 per cent to 34 per cent) reflect greater engagement. In contrast, the use of blogs and podcasts among all levels of managers and directors has remained around 10 per cent.

The organisations interviewed also demonstrated a wide range of different applications. For example, Organisation A, a major global manufacturing company, uses webinars extensively as part of its blended learning. These not only allow worldwide access to a particular source of knowledge, but also enable individuals in different time zones to experience the session when it is convenient for them. A major difference from our previous research is that online assessment has now been used by a significant number of managers.

3.3 Why implement a blended learning approach?

The majority of organisations appear to have adopted blended learning with the goal of delivering more effective learning. As will be examined in the next section, cost saving is now seen by many as a benefit but was not an original driver. Several companies stated that the up-front design costs of blended learning were higher than pure face-to-face learning, but the ‘lifetime’ costs were lower as delivery was less expensive.

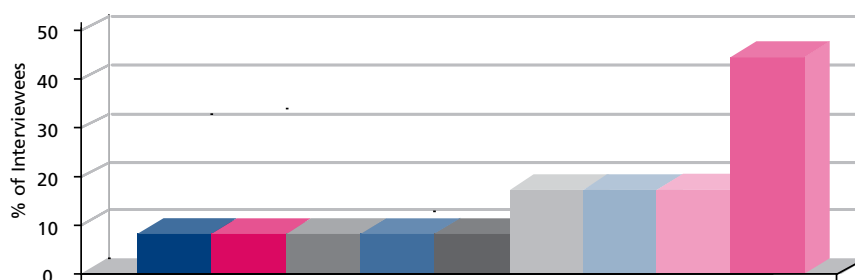
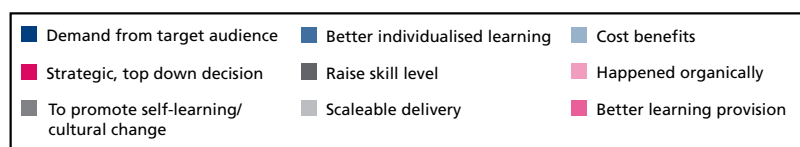


Figure 3: Reasons for adopting blended learning

Whilst only a small number of organisations stated that they have incrementally developed blended learning, other comments suggest that this has probably been the route taken by the majority.

Case Study 1 – The early adopter

Organisation I (a major broadcaster) carries out around 40 per cent of its management training using blended learning. It has adopted this approach to create more effective learning rather than for pure cost reasons.

Its blended learning comprises a wide range of training interventions and technologies including; online knowledge sharing, wikis, coaching, face-to-face programmes, workshops, action learning, and mentoring. It also utilises blogs.

It considers that blended learning can be used for a wide range of management development activities and has produced a series of 26 modules in its leadership programme.

In terms of investment it believes this varied approach to be cost effective but this does not always mean that the costs are lower. Whilst in a simple blend such as e-learning combined with face-to-face, costs can be reduced; other blends may be more expensive.

This approach also demands change in the training function with both the need to be able to develop online content but also to support the coaching of managers across the organisation.

The future they believe will involve much less structured training towards what they call 'sharing and referencing'. Due to the rate of change, managers will have to identify their own learning needs and materials with support from the organisation.

3.4 Technology and blended learning

One interesting trend, compared to our previous research, is the acceptance by most organisations that to use more e-enabled learning requires them to have a supporting Learning Management System (LMS). In Organisation N, the LMS is linked to the HR database and gives the ability to schedule classes and curricula, allocate rooms and trainers to a particular course, enrol employees, and measure teacher productivity and employee attendance patterns. LMSs can also trace and report on compliance training, schedule refresher courses and associate blended learning content with a job family or cohort to give total flexibility.

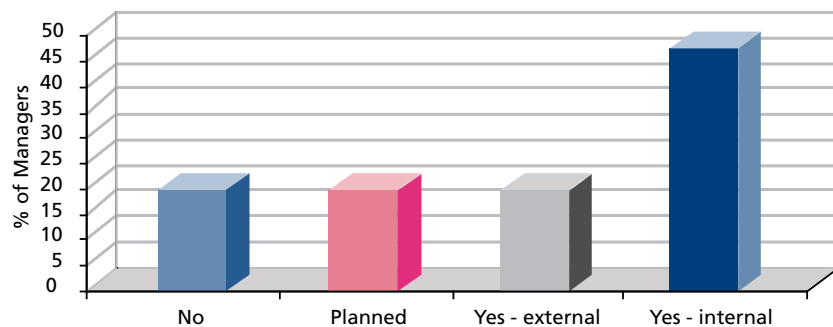


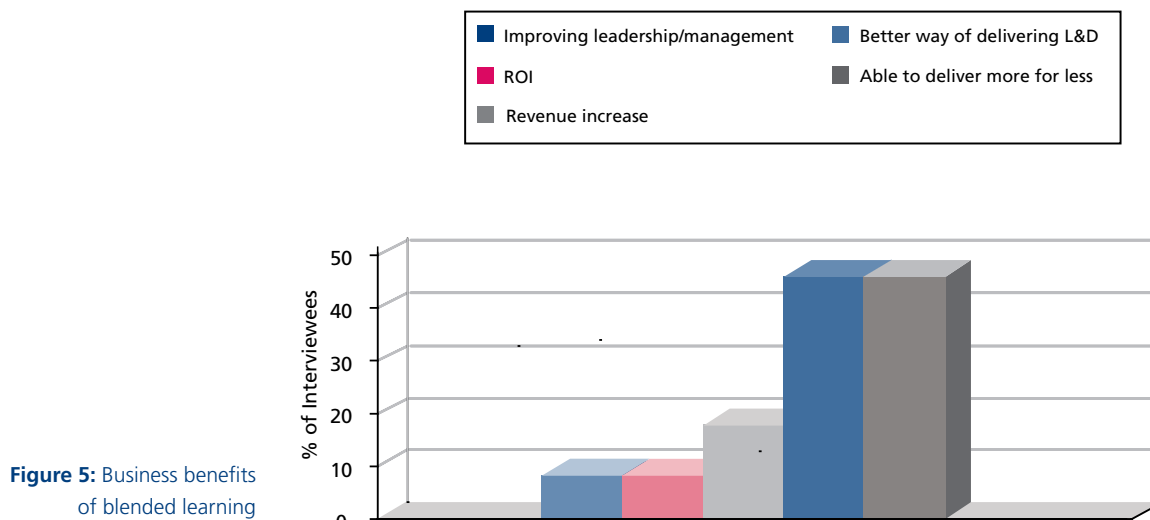
Figure 4:
Extent of Learning
Management Systems

The widespread adoption of software systems to support learning was reflected in the survey to managers. Forty-seven per cent of managers reported having access to a virtual learning environment i.e. a software system designed to support learning.

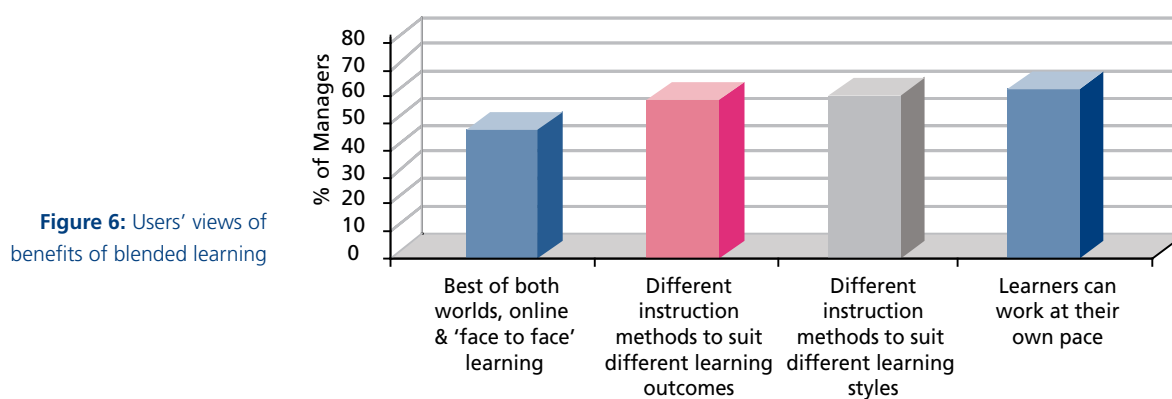
4. Benefits of Blended Learning

4.1 Perceived benefits

'Being able to deliver more for less' and 'a better way of delivering learning and development' were equally seen by the case study organisations as the main benefits. E-learning, as always, has a trade-off between higher upfront costs and longer term savings as the programmes are delivered more cheaply to large populations.



The interviewees believe that blended learning is a better way to deliver learning and that overall it will have a positive impact on the business. As with most training, especially management and leadership development, it is difficult to quantify the financial benefits beyond cost reduction. The managers surveyed reinforced the view that this approach is likely to be more effective as they returned very positive scores on the benefits shown below.



The case study interviewees, when questioned on general benefits of blended learning, also considered that flexibility for the individual learner was the main advantage. The self-directed aspect of blended learning was strongly supported by the results of the quantitative survey as seen in Figure 6 above, with 60 per cent agreeing that it enabled learners to work at their own pace.

Several major organisations from different sectors clearly identified that using online learning to prepare participants for 'face-to-face' workshops was very beneficial in maximising overall learning. Other benefits identified by the interviewees were that the learning could be designed as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event and that the use of online learning can make the training more relevant for younger employees, or as one interviewee put it, 'the Nintendo generation'.

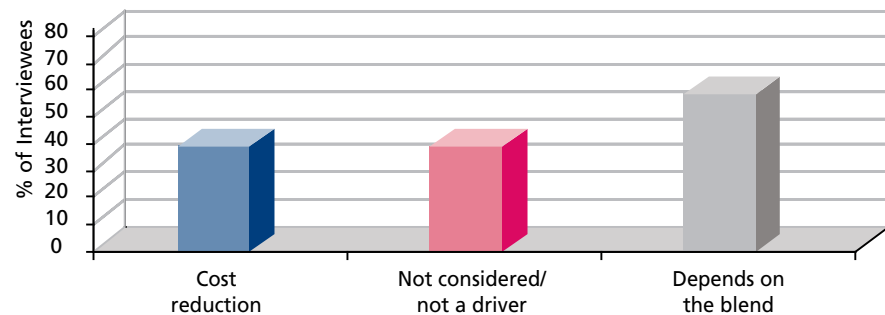
Some organisations envisaged a future where management learning took place continuously, as a seamless part of the working day, with much less use of formal 'blocks' of out-of-office courses. Organisation J, a large retailer, for example, envisages that learning will become an everyday activity, with the perception of training shifting away from something that is done to an individual and towards something that helps a person develop and learn on a daily basis.

Organisation B, a major electronics company and Organisation C, one of the world's largest consumer products companies, both suggested that a crucial benefit of blended learning was being able to offer consistent programmes on a wide geographical basis including to growth areas such as China.

Overall the benefits were seen as cost effectiveness and more flexible learning, which permitted the training to suit more learning styles and thus to achieve the major benefit of more effective learning. Interestingly, whilst all parties considered this flexibility a key advantage, at this time it would appear that beyond 'face-to-face' and e-learning, few other approaches are integrated into the current versions of blended learning - which means that there is scope for flexibility to be increased still further.

4.2 Costs

Figure 7: Costs of blended learning in relation to other types of learning



The issue of costs was explored in more detail with the case study organisations and, whilst some considered there was a cost reduction benefit, over 50 per cent believed that cost is dependent on the particular blend and did not see this as a key objective.

On the other hand, those that did focus on costs reported significant overall savings. For example, Organisation D, a well-known airline, used blended learning for cabin crew programmes and identified significant cost savings because trainees were much better equipped before they arrived on the programme. This preparatory work reduced failures and shortened course durations. The success of these programmes also raised the awareness of blended learning across the organisation and other functions started asking how they could use this approach for their training.

In common with many of the respondents, HBOS, a major financial services company, supports the opinion that blended learning costs up to six times more to develop than 'face-to-face' programmes, but that this cost difference disappears as the programmes are rolled out to large numbers of staff. For very large organisations, such as the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC), even the savings in printing costs can be very significant and environmentally more sustainable.

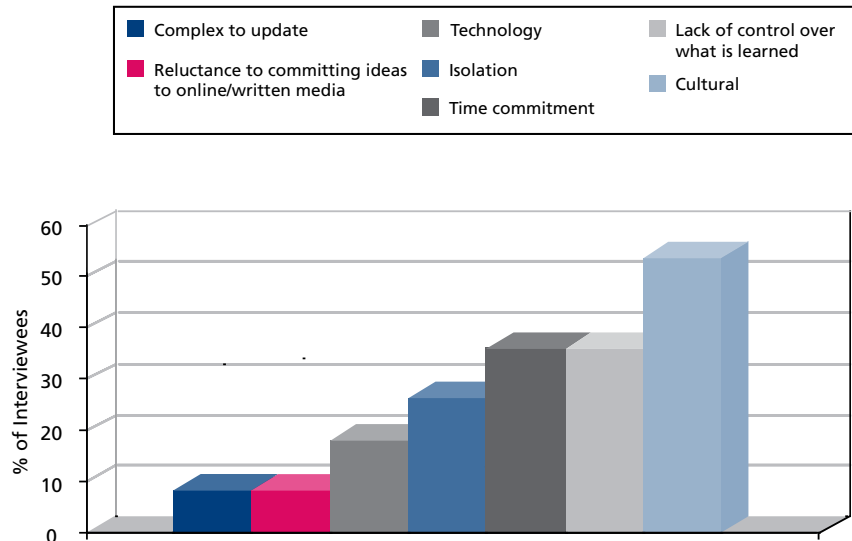
It is worth noting that reducing the overall cost was possible for the larger organisations who were interviewed for this research. However, for smaller organisations the situation may not be so straightforward since, if they have to develop their own e-learning, they will have to spread the cost over fewer employees. They are perhaps more likely to utilise more generic external e-learning programmes which could have the advantage of proven effectiveness but would not be so easily tailored to the organisation's specific needs.

Organisation H makes the extremely valid point that the real costs of training are in the time of the learners and their subsequent effectiveness. Blended learning can reduce these time costs as well as providing increased effectiveness.

5. Barriers to Blended Learning

Cultural issues continue to be the main barriers to blended learning. Interestingly, technological barriers appear to have become less of an issue since our previous report on online learning. Where technical issues are raised they tend to be about using more advanced features such as interactive video and to be more about the capacity of internal networks and systems rather than user resistance. As previously mentioned, the technology people use in their leisure lives (shopping, online networking and gaming) is currently more advanced than much that is used in blended learning.

Figure 8: Main disadvantage of blended learning



The cultural issues raised by the interviewees cover several topics. There appears still to be a reluctance by senior managers to use online learning. However, the reluctance of senior managers to use any kind of training has been noted in other studies over the years and, from this research, it is not possible to tell if this is just another symptom of this worrying situation. In many ways, blended learning may help overcome one source of resistance by senior managers as it enables a greater proportion of learning to take place in the manager's own work (or indeed non-work) time and can be scheduled much more easily than traditional face-to face courses.

- Organisation C has concentrated its blended learning on its junior and middle managers but they expect take-up to increase amongst senior managers as Generation X and Generation Y individuals take over from the previous 'baby boomer' generation.
- HBOS, for example, distributes, and makes available, short, bite-sized pieces of information and preparatory online learning for senior managers which could include video clips by respected and influential people or credible authoritative articles to maximise engagement with the learning programme.

More generally, employees still appear to have the view that only face-to-face training is 'real' training. This problem was also seen in our previous study and, as will be discussed later, this leads to a need for the right marketing/communication in terms of changing culture.

The isolation issue identified by some as a barrier may also be connected to the employees' views on what is real training and is another cultural barrier that needs to be overcome. Many respondents suggest that a major benefit of traditional training is the intense, focused interaction with others over a reasonable time period.

Two related problems were the perceived lack of time to undertake the training and ensuring that employees complete programmes. Building the right culture to allow blended learning to flourish is probably the only way to overcome these issues. One international organisation found that some employees were not committing the time to complete the preparatory online learning. They considered this work so key and integral to the programme that they cancelled programmes rather than go ahead with participants not fully prepared.

Similarly, the fact that blended learning tends to be more self-directed means that organisations should use more sophisticated means to assess effectiveness. There may well be a good correlation between the normal 'attendance' measures and the effectiveness of traditional training but this is not adequate to ensure the effectiveness of a self-directed, less structured suite of learning methods.

Lack of control over learning for the employer is an interesting issue and probably varies with the type of blended learning that is created. Where the learning is an integral part of a 'face-to-face' programme then there can be more control. However, some programmes provide resources for employees to use in developing their own learning. The more unstructured the blended learning the more difficult it becomes to ensure the right development is occurring.

Again this problem can be most acute at the more senior level where the blended learning includes providing ad-hoc access to videos, online articles, e-books etc. rather than specific programmes. Whilst there are some control elements that can be included in such a process, the basis of the approach is to provide resources and allow the managers to make the choice as to what they need.

Some organisations are applying this approach lower down their organisations and supporting it with more coaching. The use of coaches, whether from the training function or the line, may in the longer term be the best way to ensure the training is used and effective, rather than the older approaches which mainly centred on course attendance. Control over learning is also exercised by giving clear guidance on what learning is required to achieve career goals, and specific, carefully designed blended learning programmes to meet those requirements.

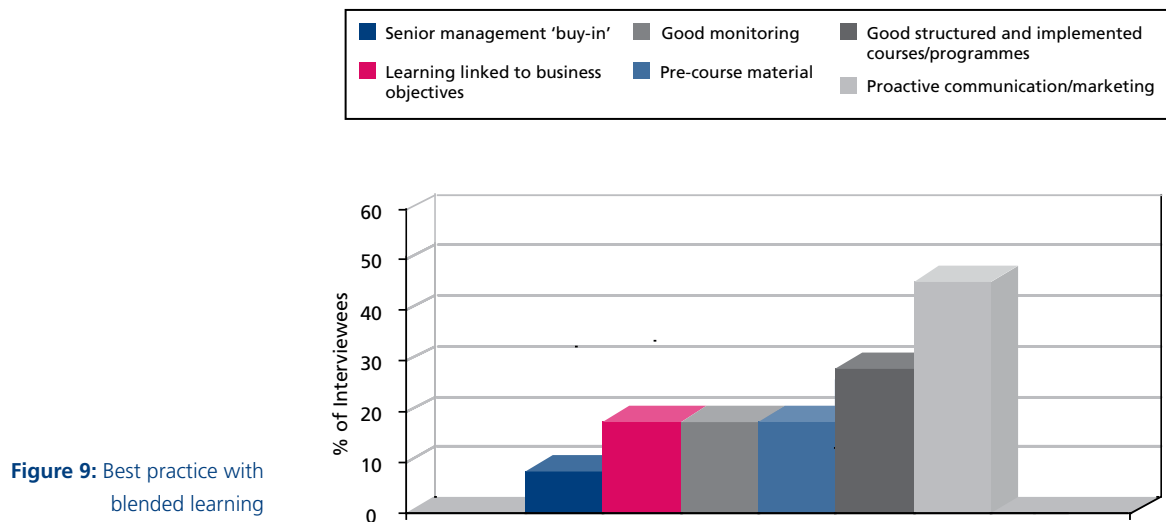
6. Implementation

6.1 What makes blended learning work?

As with all training and development activities the quality and relevance of the programme is just as important in blended learning as it is in other types of intervention. However, there are some additional aspects which are unique to blended learning and the key ones are the quality of the implementation and the users' acceptance of this format for learning.

Where there is a considerable online element to the training it is considered that building some kind of online community can have a positive impact on the success of the programme. As in our previous studies, proactive communication appears to be key in making a blended learning approach work. As was shown earlier, the biggest barrier is cultural and therefore a varied, dynamic communications campaign is vital to make blended learning succeed.

Organisation F, one of the world's largest hotel groups, has raised blended learning course completion rates ten-fold since 2004, partly through very effective communication and marketing of the benefits of blended learning.



The quality of the programmes and their implementation is also seen as important. One reason for this may be that if the employee finds it difficult to access or use the programme or it is not relevant enough to the user, then the cultural barrier may reassert itself and the employee gives up on using it. Where preparatory online learning is an element of blended learning then it would appear that organisations have to show considerable discipline by not permitting trainees to attend the 'face-to-face' training if they have not completed their preparation.

The case study participants also considered that there were two elements that needed to be addressed if an organisation was considering implementing blended learning:

1. The objectives of the organisation in introducing this change needs to be very clearly defined.
2. Considerable attention should be given to the needs of the people who will be using the programmes and the culture within which it will be introduced.

Some of the respondents considered that it was best to take a slower, more careful approach to ensure that the organisation and the staff can adapt and so improve the effectiveness of the blended learning.

Organisation C, for example, took what it called a 'bold but cautious' approach. This involved converting a 'flagship course' into a blended learning programme but using a low-key and gradual approach to implementation. In particular, it maximised the feedback it received by interviewing both the stakeholders and the delegates and treated the feedback very seriously.

The interactive nature of blended learning and its ability to enhance learning through the sharing of conversations, stories and metaphors is also clearly highlighted in the findings of the online survey. Seventy-five per cent of managers stated that being able to have a conversation with others when learning was effective/very effective. Such findings serve to validate the prominence of tools such as communities of practice and discussion groups as key drivers of blended learning.

6.2 Suitable subject areas for blended learning

Previous studies have highlighted a reluctance to use online learning for 'soft' skills, such as management and leadership training. However, 38 per cent of managers stated that their organisation offered access to blended learning opportunities for management and leadership skills. Breaking this down further, 23 per cent claimed to have access to blended learning for behavioural skills and 36 per cent for technical skills. These results would appear to show that once e-learning is integrated into a blended learning solution then it is becoming more acceptable for management development. An appropriate blend of online, self-directed learning with face-to-face, coaching and other techniques seems ideally suited for management development.

For some, blended learning was particularly suitable, even necessary, where the context of the learning was important. For example, for Organisation N, it was much better for hotel staff to be trained in the working environment and using real situations than to train in a less realistic training environment. For Organisation I, as a major broadcaster, the challenges faced by managers are heavily contextualised and this requires a combination of on-demand learning supported by work-based coaches and mentoring.

Blended learning can also provide 'just-in-time' support where smaller elements of a programme or reference material can be accessed on-demand rather than waiting for a course schedule etc. For example, if a manager needs to discipline a staff member, s/he can access that element of a programme rather than waiting for a 'First Level Supervisor Course' to take place.

6.3 Support needed for blended learning

Technical support is vital during the development phase of any programme and the relationship between the developers/suppliers and the functional expert is also seen as critical. Where the blended learning programmes involve technology, then the quality of the supplier or in-house technical support is viewed as critical to ensure the programmes are used. As was mentioned earlier, in a climate where users may be unsure about using blended learning, any technical problems can soon discourage use of the programme.

Using coaches who can establish good relationships with the trainees can help overcome many problems. Coaches can help build the confidence of users when they first begin using the programmes. Organisation N notes that access to a coach/

subject matter expert is more critical at senior levels, but there also needs to be access to a subject practitioner in order to both gain the theory and witness the application of knowledge. For example, data can be presented via e-learning but if there is no support, there is no contextualisation. By having this contextualisation the learner can move from knowledge to application and wisdom. Although coaches can be important to the blended learning process it is extremely difficult, as confirmed by Organisation B, to identify line-manager coaches due to the time commitment required.

Programme administration is another area where good quality support is essential. If users are faced with a lack of administrative support then this can lead to poor completion of programmes or ineffective learning. The quality of a supporting Learning Management System can also be a key element in ensuring seamless administration.

6.4 Management of user-directed learning

The issue of control of learning was mentioned earlier in this report. As the culture of organisations and their training requirements differ, it is not possible to define one approach. Respondents considered that organisations first needed to define what they needed to control and what they did not. Due to the nature of their business, some needed mandatory courses. Others felt that they wanted to have certain management modules that individuals had to undertake to prepare them for promotion but that other programmes could be selected by the employee and/or their manager. The final approach was to have some kind of mentor or coach role that worked with the employees to define their training requirements and so build a development orientated programme.

Case Study 2 – Championing self-directed learning

Organisation J, a major retailer, sees blended learning as a key component of creating a self-directed development culture. In this instance, 'self-directed' refers to individuals taking responsibility for how and where they learn, whilst the organisation sets the desired outcomes and targets that need to be achieved to enable career progression. The approach starts with new managers where 75 per cent of their initial training is via blended learning. This programme is self-directed and designed to meet the individual's needs.

The organisation has proved the effectiveness of blended learning as by utilising e-learning it has been able to halve the duration of a targeted management programme.

The retailer has faced cultural challenges including within the HR function itself. Changing the culture to one of self-development is seen as critical for success, as is having the right degree of technical competence.

For the future this organisation believes that more technology will come into the blended learning arena. For example, they refer to mobile learning, an example would be the provider Skill Pill, whereby a small chunk of information is learned via SMS/ video/podcast etc prior to another learning event. The changing demographic of the learner (i.e. an increase in 'digital natives' - see www.marcprensky.com), will mean this way of learning could become more popular.

They are also exploring the use of a Web 2.0 Facebook-like tool to enable the more rapid passing of information across the organisation.

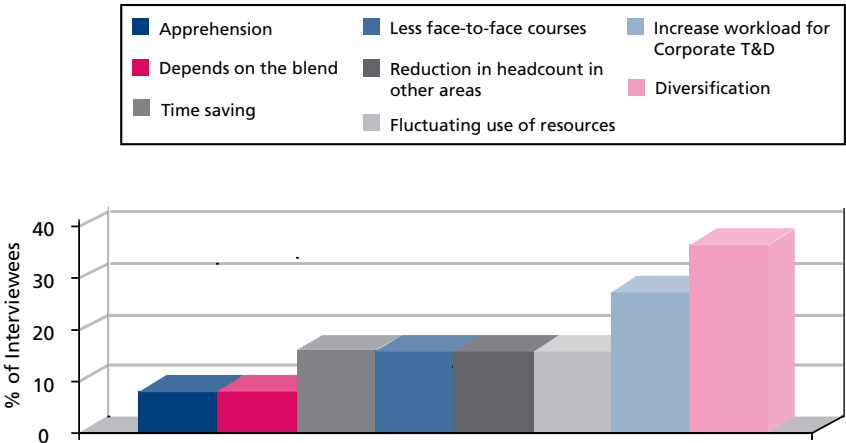
If training is to become more self-directed there is a clear need to examine and, if necessary, change the culture of the organisation towards training. If the culture is not supportive then employees are not going to use their freedom to maximise their development.

The degree of control will no doubt be the subject of considerable discussion over coming years as technology expands the choices available to employees. One major international organisation originally had a series of 'learning journeys' for employees to follow but is now looking to make these more mandatory. At the other extreme, a major retail organisation considered that organisations will need to relinquish control but remain supportive in a no blame culture.

6.5 Impact on the training and development function

Most organisations considered that it is the nature of the training and development function, where one exists, that is being most affected by the adoption of blended learning. Blended learning requires very high learning design skills but much less face-to-face training delivery skills.

Figure 10: Impact of blended learning on training and development function



The respondents still seem to be assessing this change but by far the greatest impact was expected to be the diversification of the training and development role and the skills required. One example of this diversification is that trainers may be required to become learning coaches rather than course deliverers.

As noted by the HM Prison Service College, "Many trainers come from a traditional background and blended learning may be seen as an attack on what they know and how they work, for example the self-directed nature of much blended learning. This can result in a degree of apprehension during adoption of the approach."

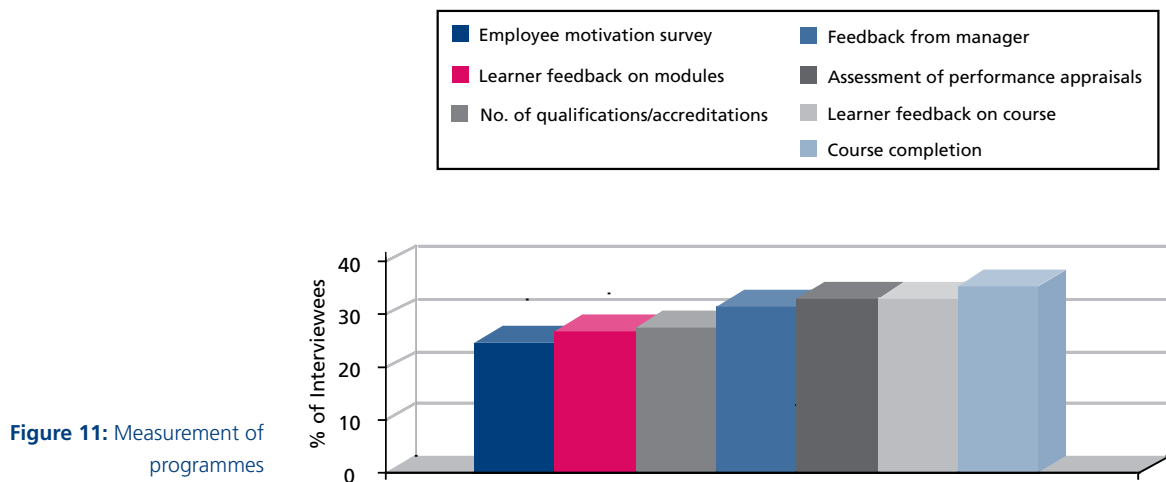
As technology enables more effective deployment of traditional forms of knowledge-based learning (e.g. query-driven databases or tablet-reading devices for books/articles), as well as new forms of learning such as virtual worlds, then the integration and design of programmes will become more complex, requiring the tools and mechanisms to direct the learning, rather than a trainer or assessor.

A possible rise in the training and development workload could come from the need for trainers to spend more time designing online elements of a programme, combined with an increased need to act as coach/learning mentor.

This change may mean some re-skilling of the training team which may bring some apprehensiveness to staff. This will need to be carefully managed to achieve a smooth transition.

7. Measurement and Blended Learning

Like most training interventions, measurement of success is difficult and is often not even attempted. Where measurement is carried out, the techniques are those already familiar such as evaluation of learning by participants and learner utilisation of the programmes.



As was found in the previous study on online learning, the capability of building assessment into online programmes is not widely used. It is to be hoped that in future the potential for online learning to incorporate assessment will lead to much greater understanding of the effectiveness of learning programmes and the inclusion of seamless measurement into the programmes themselves.

Similarly, the objectives of learning programmes can be carefully defined during design and measures of those objectives included in the programme. If, for example, a learning programme aims to improve a manager's ability to motivate staff and/or improve productivity then measures of resulting motivation and outputs could be included. If the goal is more tangible i.e. to be able to understand a balance sheet, then the programme itself can assess and adapt itself to the level the manager has reached. See 'Measures of Workforce Capability for Future Performance,' Chartered Management Institute (July 2006).

8. Future Directions and Conclusions

8.1 The Future

The organisations participating in this research believe that the use of blended learning will grow, with new technologies speeding up the process and becoming integral in the everyday working of an organisation. This will involve:

- a greater integration of online and other technologies to provide the best aspects of both
- a focus on informal learning as a continuous process, rather than one-off isolated blocks of learning completely separate from 'real' work life. HBOS, for example, has adopted blended learning in order to achieve sustainable learning – as they believe that an isolated learning incident is less likely to be successful, and the human brain learns well when it has time to assimilate information (i.e. with the use of pre-course material)
- the need for careful and skilled design of programmes to achieve objectives, in addition to skilled delivery of training
- fewer face-to-face sessions but much more learning in the individual's own time
- the need for mechanisms for sharing knowledge informally, such as blogs, newsgroups, forums etc.
- self-directed learning – with the individual becoming more responsible for his/her own development
- a far greater access to information on demand, replacing, to a large extent, the need for memorisation of facts and data.

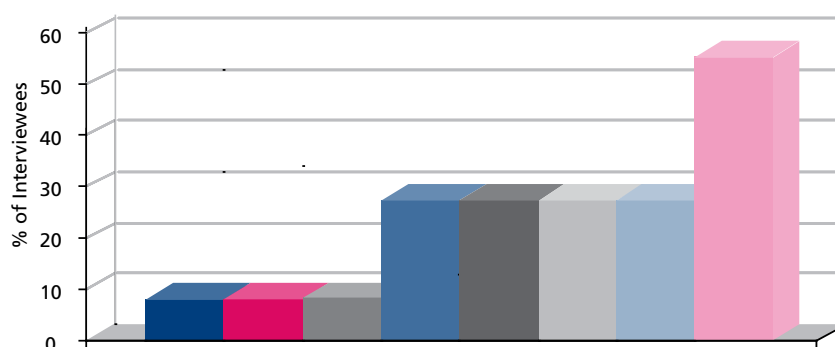
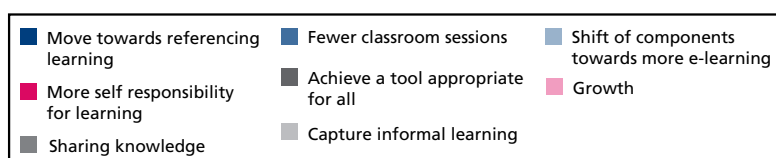


Figure 12: Future of blended learning

One key theme appears to be that online learning experiences will become more socially interactive and so remove that feeling of isolation that was identified in terms of traditional e-learning.

Another key theme is what is termed 'referencing' which refers to the fact that there is a vast amount of knowledge stored digitally. The problem for an individual learner is how to find and access the right information. Referencing and query tools will increasingly open up such knowledge to learners. Organisation I feels the future of blended learning will see a shift away from structured courses towards sharing and referencing. Training and development will help people to learn what they need to know and when, but the major mechanism for learning may be by utilising online or other resources.

Recording and measuring such informal learning then becomes a challenge for the training and development functions, especially if they are trying to justify the cost of the tools needed for more personal informal learning.

The participants consider that there will still be a need for 'face-to-face' training but the time for such programmes will be reduced as they are supported within a blended learning process.

Case Study 3 – Future trends for blended learning

The National School of Government feels there will be more online solutions with fewer classroom sessions. Indeed this shift is already starting to happen and such solutions are particularly useful for large departments with little option for other efficient methods of delivery. They feel that people will start to take much more responsibility for their own learning, as with more solutions becoming available more cheaply people will be able to access web-based solutions on an 'as and when' basis.

However, for organisations this can make it difficult to pinpoint what has been learned. As a result, there needs to be more emphasis on outcomes and individual performance rather than monitoring of inputs. The outcome of this way of learning may lead to some individuals building up individual learning portfolios and formalising their learning. This shift of control and responsibility was illustrated when one fast-track employee started a relevant Facebook group outside the organisation.

This is an example of a move towards people taking responsibility for their own learning; a cultural change in learning.

The case study organisations appreciated that new technologies will be used for online learning, yet, there is considerable uncertainty as to how some of them could be integrated into the learning environment. As was illustrated in our last report, developing online learning that uses, for example, gaming technology, is currently extremely expensive and is only likely to be used by the largest organisations in the near future. Some of the organisations interviewed are already using a wide range of technologies. Organisation I, for example, uses online knowledge sharing, wikis, coaching, face-to-face, workshops, action learning, and mentoring as well as Microsoft Sharepoint and blogs.

Similarly, although some organisations are using virtual world and other Web 2.0 technologies, the complexity of setting up and using them will have to reduce significantly before they are widely adopted.

The continued expansion of bandwidth will assist in expanding online learning methods e.g. discussion groups, use of video conferencing for learning and the referencing tools mentioned above.

As technology continues to develop and costs reduce, there will no doubt be developments that feed into the training environment that have not yet even been considered. For example, the integration of LMS and online portal technologies stand to lead to a more integrated learning environment in which structured and self-directed learning are not delivered by separate mechanisms.

The fact that individuals in their everyday lives are using, and becoming familiar with, technologies such as gaming, mobile video, on-demand TV, massive multi-player games and information sources such as Wikipedia and Google suggests that there will be little resistance to major advances in learning technologies and, in fact, some pressure on training designers to utilise them fully. Organisation F is already finding that technology needs to provide different options 'for a generation with more choice and shorter attention spans'. More engaging media-driven learning resources will be needed.

The University of Hertfordshire believes that blended learning is an integral part of the future. Establishments could choose not to use the approach but will be providing a poorer experience for students/employees who are used to new technologies and expect them to be present. This generation has been given various monikers including 'digital natives', where technology is an integral part of their lives, as opposed to those from an older generation who have been described as 'digital immigrants', i.e. those who have not grown up with such technologies. If universities or companies do not embrace the use of blended learning, young people may choose not to join those universities/companies.

8.2 Conclusions

Looking at what has changed since our research in 2007, this latest report presents blended learning as a present reality and an accepted part of the organisational learning and development environment in a way that was not true last time, when there was a strong sense of the jury being out on blended learning. In addition, there is a much stronger sense of structured learning, self-directed learning and experiential learning being consciously integrated by organisations as part of a blended learning approach, whereas a year ago these three elements seemed more on parallel tracks.

There is no doubt that the use of blended learning is on the increase. The simple combination of 'face-to-face' programmes and e-learning has both shown the benefit of combining more than one type of learning and brought e-learning into the mainstream training arena.

There are still challenges however - both technical and cultural. As well as a cultural change amongst employees, where they see learning as an important and ongoing process, the training and development function itself will have to adapt to a new role. This may be the biggest barrier to blended learning as the skills required to design

effective blended learning are very different to the delivery skills traditionally required, and valued, in training professionals.

It is to be hoped that the perception of blended learning will not stop with just two elements but both trainers and employees will see the benefit of including other, perhaps more experience-based learning into the process. Organisation F, for example, feels there is a shift towards more experiential learning rather than formal learning with most success seen in learning skills and then being able to put them into practice. An organisation can then show ROI and benefits to the individual in terms of their development.

The research demonstrates the continued growth of managers at all levels using online technologies to select and access their learning resources. Through the case studies we are now seeing the evolution of a more integrated, blended learning offer, where both online resources and traditional face-to-face training and development are offered as a complete learning experience. It is by clearly identifying the desired learning outcomes and mapping this to career paths that organisations can seek to align personalised blended learning experiences to ensure they are building the management and leadership capabilities required to drive performance.

Given the increasing integration of web-based technology in everyday life, the challenge for those who have not adopted a positive approach to blended learning is whether they will now seriously examine this powerful tool or let their competitors build competitive advantage through a better trained workforce which is learning on a continual basis, as a natural part of working life and with the significant advantages of a range of online and other learning environments.

8.3 Practical recommendations

It is clear from the report findings that many of the practitioners in this field see blended learning as key to employees undertaking more self-directed learning. Harnessing the knowledge of the individual probably depends on cultural change occurring, thereby allowing knowledge – both tacit and explicit – to be successfully developed and shared throughout the organisation.

The following are examples, arising out of the current research, in which organisations are using ‘blended solutions’, and demonstrate how the move towards blended learning can be introduced incrementally.

1. **Put assessment online.** One of the simplest places to start is to move a test or assessment online. For example, a traditional instructor-led course can still be retained, but a multiple-choice test could be moved online. This will allow training departments to automate scoring and make it easier to track and report scores.
2. **Follow up with a community of practice.** Create discussion forums for learners to access during and after training. This can enable learners to stay in touch with fellow classmates and to ask questions, share insights and post resources. A ‘threaded discussion’ can benefit employee and employer – collating and enhancing individual knowledge and understanding, as well as providing a tool to review and build upon infrastructures, training courses and delivery methods.
3. **Make reference materials available.** Provide links to reference materials for learners to use after any training or learning programme. These links can enable learners to explore topics in greater depth and reduce reliance on traditional forms of information that can become outdated in months.
4. **Deliver preparatory online learning.** Organisations can introduce preparatory work that must be completed before attendance at a face-to-face or other format of course is permitted. Online preparatory work can save costs such as those as printing and sending materials, as well as providing the facility for employers to track progress and learning to ensure that attendees show up prepared.
5. **Provide online office hours.** Online office hours can be used to supplement the learning process. This can provide a human touch for employees (learners) who can get help from a real person to answer questions, help individuals devise strategies for learning in a self-paced mode, or even to provide moral support.
6. **Use mentoring/coaching as a tool.** Online or face-to-face coaching can be used as a way to ‘extend the classroom experience’. Arguably, learners have a need for someone to correspond and interact with after any class or training to help with problems they encounter in the field. A mentor or coach can help address this, and questions arising thereof can also be used to improve face-to-face classes.

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7. **Access experts.** As a follow up to face-to-face classes or other modes of learning delivery, a live virtual classroom programme including aspects such as application sharing, white boards and document-sharing with related 'experts' can stimulate further learning and help problem-solving.
 8. **Maximise communications and messaging.** Using e-mail based communication during and after learning events can be a powerful tool towards encouraging a community of practice. It also has simpler practical benefits such as sending learners attachments with new information, pointing individuals to additional resources and suggesting more advanced training and development.

Appendix: Research Methodology

The research was conducted by the Centre for Applied HR Research (CAHRR) at Oxford Brookes University Business School. In-depth interviews were carried out with large employers who are major users of e-learning and represent sectors from aviation, telecoms, retailing, hotel, banking, transportation, financial services, defence, education and training, manufacturing and public sector including HBOS, the Association of Train Operating Companies, HM Prison Service College, National School of Government and the University of Hertfordshire.

In parallel, a survey was undertaken among a stratified sample of 10,000 individual Institute members. The sample was drawn from all functions and levels of management and from organisations of all sizes, from micro-businesses to larger organisations with over 5,000 employees. These managers were sent an online self-completion survey in August 2008. In total, 1,087 managers responded.

This report has been prepared by Professor William Scott-Jackson, Terry Edney and Ceri Rushent from CAHRR, with support from Ian Myson, Jo Whitbourn, Petra Wilton, Vidal Kumar and Patrick Woodman at the Chartered Management Institute.

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