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## Blended Learning: Finding What Works

**January 2004 - Josh Bersin**

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Blended learning is the latest buzzword in corporate training. It sounds so simple—mixing e-learning with other types of training delivery. But now that Internet training is so widespread, where does it fit? What are the best ways to “blend” delivery types? Will the term “blended learning” replace e-learning?

In 2002 and 2003, we set out to understand these issues and conducted a study of more than 30 corporate blended-learning programs to understand what works.

### **Blended Learning: The Next Big Thing**

In the late '90s, everyone jumped on the e-learning bandwagon. In reality, the promise was a little immature. Internet-based training grew up in the IT world, where people are used to spending hours in front of their computers.

Now we know that different problems require different solutions (different mixes of media and delivery), and we believe that the key is applying the right mix to a given business problem. Hence, blended learning is effectively replacing e-learning.

Unlike traditional education, corporate training exists primarily to improve business performance. We are not in the business of making employees smarter, but rather in the business of increasing revenue or reducing costs. We deal primarily with adults—people who want and need to learn just enough to become more effective at their jobs. The science of teaching adults via the Internet is still being developed. We know that people learn in different ways, and that different media apply to different people.

Blended learning is really the natural evolution of e-learning into an integrated program of multiple media types, applied toward a business problem in an optimum way in order to solve the problem.

### **Blended Learning Optimizes Resources**

As we talked to companies embarking on blended learning, we found them asking the same question: What combination of tools and media will give me the biggest impact for the lowest investment?

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In some cases—like Cisco’s reseller certification program, which reaches nearly 900,000 people—the audience is so large and the problem so complex that a major Web-based curriculum is needed. In others, like Siemens’ global change in accounting practices, the audience was nearly 10,000 financial professionals, and a simulation-based solution was needed. These projects cost millions of dollars to develop and are cost-justified based on the large audience and huge business drivers.

In other cases, however, when a company like Kinko’s rolls out a new product to its field sales offices, a conference call and a series of job aids will do the trick.

The key to blended learning is selecting the right combination of media that will drive the highest business impact for the lowest possible cost. So how do you choose the right mix?

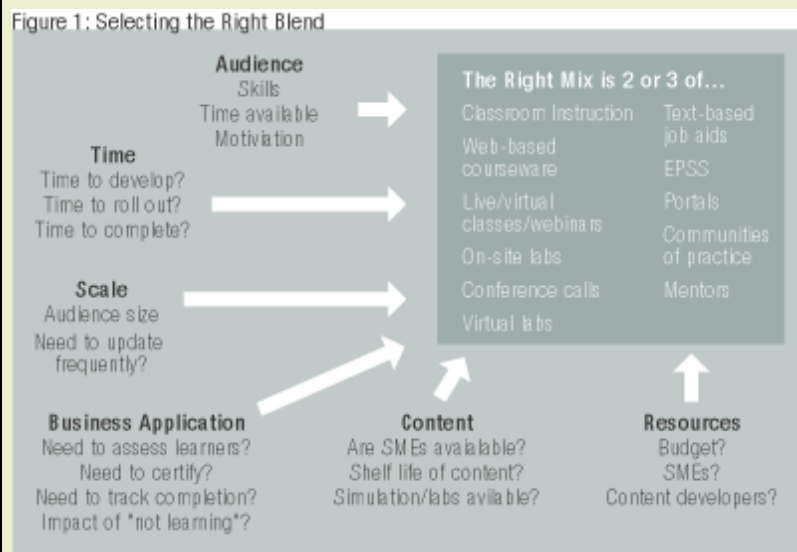
There is a variety of methodologies. One of the simplest approaches is to create electronic content and “surround” it with human, interactive content. This approach of “surrounding” e-learning with human interaction enables you to create high interest, accountability and true assessment of the results of the e-learning program.

Many companies used this approach when rolling out enterprise resource planning (ERP) application training. An initial conference call and series of meetings were used to explain the project and why the new system was so important. After that, the users took an online course, and then there was a follow-up meeting and evaluation by the manager before the system was actually rolled out.

#### **Media Types: Strengths and Weaknesses**

To make blended learning more powerful, you can start looking at all the media as options: classroom training, Web-based training, webinars, CD-ROM courses, video, EPSS systems and simulations. Other media that are less exciting but just as important include books, job aids, conference calls, documents and Power Point slides.

The highest-impact programs, such as the training program provided for new sales reps at British Telecom, blend a more complex medium with one or more of the simpler media. A Web-based course for introduction followed by a real “hands-on” interactive class is an obvious mix. See Figure 1 for some considerations to make when selecting the right blend.



In fact, we developed a “media selection guide,” which can help companies identify which media to use for a given problem. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Selecting the Right Blend**

How to Design and Architect your Blended-Learning Program—Media Selection Guide

Media Type	Instructional Value	Scalability	Time to Develop	Cost to Develop	Cost to Deploy	Assessment Capable	Trackable
Classroom-Based Training	High	Low	3–6 weeks	Medium	High	Medium	Low
WBT Courseware	High	High	4–20 weeks	High	Low	High	High
CD-ROM Courseware	High	High	6–20 weeks	High	Medium	High	Low
Conference Calls	Low	Medium	0–2 weeks	Low	Low	No	No
Webinars	Medium	Medium	3–6 weeks	Low	Medium	No	Low
Software/Online Simulations	Very High	Medium	8–20 weeks	High	Medium	Low	High
Lab-Based Simulations	Very High	Low	3–6 weeks	High	High	High	Medium
Job Aids	Low	High	0–3 weeks	Low	Low	Medium	None
Web Pages	Low	High	1–8 weeks	Low	Low	None	None
Web Sites	Low	High	1–8 weeks	Low	Low	None	None
Mentors	Medium	Low	2–3 weeks	High	High	None	Low
Chat/Discussion/Community Services	Medium	Low/Medium	4–6 weeks	Medium	Medium	Low	Low
Video (VCR or Online)	High	Medium	6–20 weeks	High	High	None	Low
EPSS	Medium	Medium	8–20 weeks	Medium	Medium	None	Medium

### Think About the Business Problem

One finding from our research was that once you make “media” or “blend” decisions, you are essentially doing portfolio management. Just like the problem of balancing your 401(k) account, you need a methodology to help decide when to use a

webinar, when to use a conference call and when to build a complex simulation or online course. When you create a financial portfolio, you start with your goals, then factor in risk, time and budget. In blended learning, the factors are similar:

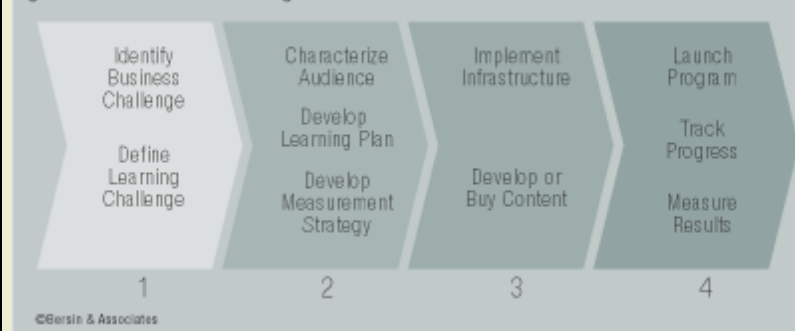
- What is the business problem or goal? (E.g., need to increase sales revenue for a new product.)
- What is the learning problem that you believe is creating this business problem? Can you be sure it is a learning problem? (E.g., need to train sales reps on value proposition and pricing of this new product.)
- What are the characteristics of the audience? (How much time will they have to use the content? What connectivity will they have? What kind of learning style do they need? What do they respond to? How motivated are they?)
- What are the characteristics of the content? (How long before it is out of date? Are we informing, developing skills or creating competencies? Where is this content? What SMEs do we need?)
- What kind of measurement do we need? And how much measurement does the business problem justify? (Measurement is expensive—what do we really need to measure to solve the business problem? Completion? Scores? Certification?)

Each of these questions can be thorny. But you cannot hope to answer these questions rationally without understanding what business cost, benefit and processes you need to be successful.

### Technology—Not as Easy as People Think

Here is an amazing fact: Nearly every company we talked to talked about the many technology hurdles they had to overcome. In the process diagram in Figure 3, the third step identifies how companies implement infrastructure. Infrastructure is very problematic in most corporations.

Figure 3: The Blended Learning Process



Some of the places that can trip you up include:

- Some learners do not have high bandwidth connectivity because they are in foreign countries or remote locations—therefore, some content will not run.
- PCs have different browser versions and plugins, so content standards must be set that specify browser version, plugins, bandwidth, memory and CPU speed.
- LMS systems are expensive and complex to implement, and if you rely on LMS-driven features for your program, you may find some are missing (e.g., assessments).
- When you deploy a large program, you have to be ready for massive throughput in a short period of time.
- Measurement is difficult if you haven't thought about what metrics you want to measure up front.

### Deployment Processes

The single biggest issue we found that companies spent time and money on is the marketing, launch and deployment process. In order to be successful, you must develop an integrated go-to-market plan for your program. This must include:

- Executive support so that line managers give workers time to take courses.
- A launch program (webinars, phone calls, e-mail blasts) so that people understand the importance and urgency of your program.
- Education for local coordinators so line managers and line training people can support the program. You cannot launch a company-wide e-learning program alone, nor can you get it done from your corporate office.
- Rapid feedback. You will find problems immediately. They must be addressed in hours, not days. If someone cannot get content to work, they are likely to leave and never come back.
- Business process integration. You have to think about how this training integrates with the company's existing business processes. For example, in one company, the salespeople were not given time by their managers to take training because they were too busy. How are you going to get people to take time for training? Do you need to integrate training into people's performance plans? Are you going to give out certificates? Bonuses?
- Marketing. Too much is made of marketing e-learning. The real marketing is all of these steps. Sending out e-mail will not do it. You have to be sure you have answered these questions: Why would busy workers stop what they're doing to take this course or program? What's in it for them? Once you know that, how do you communicate it to employees and their managers?

#### **Controlling Costs: Build Your Own Content**

Many companies outsource major e-learning projects—sometimes spending millions of dollars. One of the companies in our research spent millions of dollars creating a business simulation that trained financial professionals how to use new accounting principles. In this particular case, the problem was global, and the cost of failure was very high, so it was worth the cost. If you have a very large audience and a very big problem, you can cost-justify a lot of the money for content.

The simple cost equation for blended learning is the tradeoff between development cost and delivery cost. For Web-based training, for example, high development costs can be amortized by low delivery costs if the audience is large. For classroom training, lower development costs and higher delivery costs are justified when the audience is small.

In most cases, however, we found the opposite. Companies are now developing Web-based content for hundreds of dollars per instructor hour. How do they do this? They often hire a vendor to “teach” them how to build courseware. Then they get a small team together, three to four people, and build the content internally. This appears to be a major trend.

One company developed a major SAP upgrade program that was business-critical across more than 10,000 employees for a total development cost of \$75,000. This is less than \$7.50 per employee for development cost—the cost for lunch in most big cities. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Development Processes

- There are no standard tools.
- In-house development is 1/2 to 1/5 the cost of outsourced development.
- Develop in-house:
  - Content with short shelf-life.
  - "Disposable" content.
  - Informational content.
- Outsource:
  - Highly instructionally rich.
  - Very long-lasting content.
  - Simulation-based solutions.
- You can drive content development costs below \$1,000 per course hour.

Development Costs	
Minimum Cost	\$35,000
Cost per course hour	\$4,000–\$22,000

There are no "standard" tools used overall.

Companies are bringing content development in-house with excellent results.

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### Huge Impact Is Possible

The most fascinating of all findings from the Bersin & Associates research was that blended learning has huge and measurable business impact. Most of the companies studied said that the blended-learning programs they built solved problems that were impossible to solve in any other way.

The biggest benefits of blended learning include:

- **Scale:** You can roll out a new initiative or program to global audiences and reach more people than ever possible before. This is the promise of e-learning, and it is true.
- **Speed:** If you need to train people within months, you can reach thousands of people simultaneously. Although there is a fixed time to develop content, the time to deploy is fast. If the business problem is now and the content will become stale, blended learning is the answer.
- **Throughput:** If your training problem is bottlenecked (one telecommunications company had such a backlog of training that technicians were driving around in trucks drinking coffee for weeks waiting for new-hire training slots), you can eliminate that bottleneck and improve training throughput by orders of magnitude.
- **Complexity:** Many training challenges are just too complex for a single Web-based course or PowerPoint-based webinar. If the material is complex and your business need demands that people internalize and change their behavior, using multiple media will get much higher completion and results.
- **Cost:** Many companies have found that e-learning may not really save as much money as they thought. By the time you buy and implement an LMS, buy tools and a content catalog and start building a lot of Web-based courses, you may find that the total cost has shifted from instructors to infrastructure and Web development. By using the blended approach, you can avoid this explosion. One of the companies in the research starts with job aids then moves up the scale to more expensive media only if the problem demands it. By thinking about every problem as a blending challenge, you can select the lowest-cost media that solves the problem.

### Bottom Line

Blended learning is here to stay. I believe it is the natural evolution of e-learning—understanding the business problem and selecting the right “portfolio” of technologies and processes to drive impact. As companies focus on understanding the processes of blending media, they will find that e-learning is more powerful than they ever thought.

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