Microlearning: 
The Building Blocks of Personalization
Microlearning is a response to finding the ways people learn best.

While having short pieces of training isn’t a new concept, it’s one that has become even more relevant in our fast-paced, tech-driven world. Whether on its own or part of a larger curriculum, microlearning is made for the challenges of today, helping you personalize learning, re-engage your workforce, improve specific skills and effectively measure results. All of this can be done in a way that keeps your training affordable and nimble. This guide will help you understand the different ways microlearning can enhance your education initiatives as well as when and how it should be used.

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What is Microlearning?

The idea of microlearning is in fashion these days and has the potential to revolutionize our approach to employee and consumer education, but there are many misconceptions around the concept. It’s not just short training, but rather training that is only as long as it needs to be. Microlearning breaks training up into short, focused pieces, and can be used on its own, with other microlearning courses, or as an element in a curriculum.

Using smaller, bite-sized bits of information to teach a skill or concept has been around for decades, even if we didn’t call it microlearning then. “Remember chunking? It is a nice, working-class word that has been used for several decades to describe how information is combined into smaller groups for purposes of creating mnemonic structures. We believe microlearning provides us with new opportunities and better tools for leveraging such chunks,” said Michael Noble, Allen Communication chief learning officer.

However, with the advancements in technology, microlearning has become even more relevant to the needs of learners today. The internet has created new media for learning, allowing on-demand information and easy-to-find answers to specific issues.
Why Use Microlearning?

Your learners are used to being engaged and supported when and where they want. Microlearning can help your training adapt to meet your learners’ expectations. One of the biggest problems companies now face is lack of employee engagement. Although engagement is at its highest point since 2000, opportunities still exist to raise engagement across the board. Less than one-third of employees are engaged, more than half aren’t, and more than 17 percent are actively disengaged.

These attitudes hurt your company. Gallup estimates the cost of lost productivity just from the actively disengaged employees to be between $450 and $550 billion a year in the United States. Companies in the Towers Watson Global Workforce Study that had high employee engagement saw nearly three times the same-year operating margin than those with low engagement. At the same time, the cost of developing and delivering training is increasing because companies recognize the need to offer personalized learning to diverse audiences across multiple delivery methods.

Microlearning can help you keep learner attention through short, focused pieces. Moreover to truly impact engagement, microlearning gives your information a more flexible accessibility model so content can be accessed at the point of need, not through a laborious linear curriculum. By making relevant, accessible snippets of information, you support employees in their roles and personalize the learning experience by creating building blocks of information.

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What’s the Big Deal?

Although we have used elements of bite-sized media for many decades, you may have noticed a new emphasis on microlearning. Why? As our lives and jobs have become infused with technology, the type of information has changed and the way we find and use it has changed.

In the past, when you wanted to repair the ceiling fan, you had to hire someone or go buy a repair book. Now with a quick search you can find hundreds of YouTube videos and infographics that give you exactly the information you need in a way that’s convenient. You don’t need the history of fans or a lesson on blade composition. You need a short, relevant tool to fix the fan.

The same thing is happening to your learners and they’re bringing that to their workplaces. One global athletics retailer recognized the need for quick, reinforceable lessons when teaching their marketing team how to build consistent brand plans for events or products. Using microlearning, they walked learners through multiple scenarios, then had the learner take control of properly constructing a brand plan for a new product.

You now have a busy, mobile workforce that is used to easily finding targeted information to solve their specific problems. Microlearning courses, or micro elements within larger courses, keep your learners’ attention with quick, easy reference information that is relevant to their needs. In short, as Allen Communication CEO Ron Zamir said, “Microlearning enables the restructuring of curriculum in building blocks personalized to learner needs.”
What are the Benefits?

Now you know how microlearning can change your training, why should you use it? What benefits can you expect to see and what should you design your training to achieve?

**BETTER TRACKING.** When you can teach a specific concept, skill or behavior, you can attach a specific metric to it. Microlearning allows you to more directly track the effectiveness of those courses.

**INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY.** When you can teach your employees something in 10 minutes that in the past you would have taught in 90 minutes, they are more engaged with the information and take less time away from work.

**IMPROVED RETENTION.** While microlearning pieces can be used as initial teaching tools, they’re also easily turned into reference tools to help employees remember key information.

**MULTI-PURPOSE.** You can use shorter pieces as customer education. While you wouldn’t show a two-hour ILT session to a customer, a 5-minute product overview can be easily repurposed for external audiences.

**MORE AFFORDABLE.** Microlearning is often more affordable than longer courses, so you can see the impact on your bottom line.

**ADDED FLEXIBILITY.** When you can restructure, repurpose and review micro assets, this gives you flexibility in how and where you build your curriculum.

One international manufacturer of surveillance equipment and software saw many of these benefits when they launched a mobile-first sales wizard. Their microlearning wizard was made to help their salesforce easily put together solutions for sales meetings, and get quick, relevant information about the tools they would recommend. Because this wizard was made for tablets, the salesperson could then use the program with potential clients, showing them exactly what they need to know about each piece of equipment. By using microlearning, they increased their sales team’s knowledge, added flexibility to the process, increased sales productivity and created a dual-purpose asset that could be used for client education.
How Can You Use Microlearning?

There are many ways to use microlearning to drive your employee engagement. The flexibility of bite-sized media means you can not only use it as an independent piece, but at any point in your course or curriculum—as an introduction, refresher, leadership, callout, follow-up, on-the-job tool, or really any other element of the course.

A few of the ways microlearning can enhance your training program:

**DRAW ATTENTION.** Using a short video, an eye-catching graphic or action planner in contrast to a larger course catches learner attention, emphasizes its importance and showcases a relevant resource they can later refer to.

**TEACH ACTIONABLE ITEMS.** The brevity and focus of microlearning provides a technique to teach specific actionable items in a straightforward, easy-to-implement way.

**PROVIDE EASY REFERENCE.** Making shorter pieces means those pieces are easy to refer to when your learners need a refresher. They don’t have to find the relevant piece in the original course when you pull out a small piece as a resource.

**CREATE PERSONALIZATION.** You can use microlearning pieces as building blocks to construct a course or curriculum that is fit to each learner. This also allows learners to select what information is most relevant or necessary for their needs.

**BETTER TARGETING.** You can target distinct skills, behaviors or knowledge with microlearning. If you have high product turnover, microlearning gives you nimble information. When your leadership team is strapped for time, quickly give them what they need to know. If you are changing something that will impact people in a specific way, prepare them the relevant information.

An international fast food restaurant saw many of these benefits when they created a mini course using many microlearning techniques. They were able to target specific skills, then track metrics related to those skills, such as reduction in time to make specific food items and reduction in number of remakes. Many of the tools in the elearning course were also converted to hard copies for on-the-job reference materials. The course helped new employees more quickly gain confidence in their skills and improve job performance.
How Do You Deploy Microlearning?

Technology has made other ways to deploy microlearning limitless.

While we usually associate microlearning with elearning, really anything that’s broken into bite-sized pieces can be made into microlearning. Instructor-led training (ILT) can involve microlearning through a quick game, action planner or simulation, you can use microlearning in many ways in person. And technology has made other ways to deploy microlearning limitless. Mobile apps, videos, infographics, diagrams, and websites are just a few of the many ways you can give your audience bite-sized information.

When Shouldn’t You Make it Micro?

Microlearning may not work for every situation. For example, if you are onboarding someone into a new position with a long, nuanced history and a variety of complex duties, that person will need a sophisticated understanding of the principles and concepts that govern the role; a 3-minute course will not be able to provide that depth.

A good rule of thumb is to evaluate how and where the contextual background for any topic resides. Microlearning that depends on more abstract context that doesn’t exist in the real workplace may lack the crucial relevancy for it to be absorbed through bite-sized pieces. However, even in those cases, microlearning principles of brevity and focus can be applied in brief moments of a larger course.

What Now?

We make microlearning that works. Ready to build great training?

Talk to us

So you know microlearning can engage your audience and you want to start testing it, but where do you start? Analyze your training to see where you need more emphasis, better focus, improved metrics or more flexibility. Start by pulling out the key insight from that into a bite-sized piece. Try a new medium like video, graphic design or a game. Microlearning doesn’t have to be expensive or time-consuming to create. Jump in and see how you can build an engaging, personalized learning solution with microlearning.