TECHNOLOGY AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
BLENDING WITH THE END IN MIND

TECHNOLOGY EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

The intersection of technology and human behavior is full of promise but hard to predict. At the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City, people were amazed by a new invention called television. The potential of this new technology appeared limitless. Radio, movies, newspapers, books, and magazines all seemed destined for quick obsolescence. But they are all still here, each having found its separate peace with human preference. For example, dramatizations moved away from radio in favor of TV, but storytelling remains strong in the domain of movies and books.

Other times, technical innovations change everything, leaving the things they replace to museums. Remember how ubiquitous buggy whips once were to transportation and slide rules to computation? Automobiles and calculators erased these outmoded tools from our world.

At the outset of the 21st century, web-based learning platforms started to take form, and pundits immediately predicted learning would never be the same. Some foresaw a shift away from classroom-based learning; others predicted its total demise. Which would e-Learning be—the evolution of a complementary component in the educational mix, or a revolutionary replacement for instructor-led classroom training?

Experts trumpeted the inevitable and immediate dominance of e-Learning. For example, an article that appeared in the January/February 2000 issue of The New Corporate University Review cited an estimate from ASTD that by the next year, 63 percent of organizations would offer employees courses over the Internet and 77 percent would provide training via their intranets. At about the same time, International Data Corporation (IDC) predicted 1,000 percent growth over a three-year period for the U.S. corporate e-Learning market. In 2001, Cisco Systems concluded that “organizations that implement e-Learning provide their work force with the ability to turn change into an advantage.” And former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich, singing the praises of e-Learning, declared that “classroom training is a 19th century artifact—if not an artifact of medieval times.”

Yet, the e-Learning explosion has thus far failed to materialize. According to the most recent ASTD State of the Industry Report, while the percentage of classroom learning hours delivered real-time by instructors has decreased from more than 78 percent in 1999 to about 53 percent in 2006, the
percentage of technology-based training hours is still less than 40 percent (though it is up sharply from its 1999 level of 14 percent). (See Figure 1 below.)

What prevented e-Learning from becoming as big as some thought, or growing as quickly as they predicted? Much of the reason can be attributed to the now-popular notion of “blended learning.” Or put another way, we now know that e-Learning has more in common with TV than calculators. On the learning tree, e-Learning is an evolutionary new branch, co-existing with prior modalities. It is not a revolutionary replacement for all that came before it. It has promise as well as pitfalls. It is best used in a thoughtful blend of learning tools chosen for the task at hand.

This article seeks to help the reader understand how to leverage the promise of technology-assisted learning tools while avoiding a few inherent pitfalls. More importantly, it examines the potential of blended-learning designs (beyond pure Web-based training) for developing better leadership and people skills, offering several suggestions for best practices that can lead to increased organizational success.

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**THE PROMISE OF E-LEARNING**

While e-Learning has failed to replace classroom training (and we suspect there will always be a place for classroom learning), it has experienced steady and impressive growth. In fact, according to one estimate, the size of the global e-Learning market has ballooned to more than $30 billion. But perhaps more important than the numbers is the extent to which e-Learning has evolved into an important, even indispensable component of learning initiatives.

The reason for this, we at DDI believe, is that the promise of e-Learning is coming to fruition, if more slowly than many had previously predicted. Among the factors that have contributed to the rise of e-Learning for organizational development:

- **Reach and scalability**—In many cases, e-Learning is less a “best option” than a necessity. With the worldwide, instantaneous reach of the Web, e-Learning can extend far and wide with huge economies of scale. Training departments today are asked to do more with less, which often means making training available to highly dispersed workforces, including those working remotely and those in international locations. The economic benefits of e-Learning make it an extremely attractive option—in some cases, the only viable approach—for delivering training on a large scale across multiple locations. In this way, e-Learning has increased the overall capability of organizations to provide training as never before.

- **Consistency**—Another attractive advantage of e-Learning is its consistency and uniformity when compared to instructor-led training. No two facilitators are alike in their delivery and emphasis, and...
everyone has good and bad days. But a well-designed online course presents itself consistently to everyone every day. This is an increasingly important advantage to organizations with cultures built around quality and lean process approaches that also must provide training across multiple time zones and international borders. With electronic curricula, there is also the advantage of instant correction or editing without the need to toss old printed inventory.

> **Convenience and lower cost of delivery**—Most forms of e-Learning are asynchronous (i.e., the course can be completed at learners’ convenience; there is no need for learners and/or facilitators to be co-located in space or time). Also, most online courses take less time to complete than their traditional classroom counterparts. The result: less time off the job, no travel, facilitator, and venue costs, and much greater flexibility for the learners and the organization.

> **Improved technology**—Technology continues to improve, and the infrastructure needed for effective electronic delivery is now widespread. More powerful computers, high-speed connections, digital sound and images, and generally more sophisticated IT capabilities have become commonplace.

Many of the barriers that previously discouraged organizations from investing in e-Learning have begun to fall. There once had been a confusing maze of standards, platforms, browsers, and media players; over time, this situation has improved through the adoption of industry standards (e.g. SCORM) and easy-to-use commercial products (e.g., Flash and Internet Explorer).

> **Ability to leverage existing investments**—In recent decades, organizations have invested an enormous amount of money into computers and networks to automate critical functions such as accounting, engineering, research, communications, etc. One of e-Learning’s advantages is that it provides another way to gain benefit from our organizations’ investments in the computing infrastructure.

> **Growing acceptance**—A generation of workers has grown accustomed to having computers at their desks. What’s more, over the past decade they have incorporated e-mail and the Web into their daily work, often in indispensable ways. The result of this exposure to workplace technology—to say nothing of the technology in people’s homes—is a greater comfort level with electronic communication of all forms. While this may be particularly true for younger individuals who have been immersed in technology their entire lives and who have grown up interacting with the Web, studies also show that technology comfort has grown in older generations. Technology-assisted learning is now an accepted part of people’s lives, whether at home, school, or work.

> **It’s a virtual world**—Our world is becoming increasingly virtual, and the practice of leadership is following suit. One of the most rapidly growing needs in the field of leadership development is how to help leaders be more effective in a virtual role. Team members work from home in the next town, or from their offices in far-flung cities. Teleconferencing, videoconferencing, application sharing, group document editing—all are increasingly prevalent in the work world. An ancillary advantage of
e-Learning is that it helps leaders become more comfortable with electronic and virtual means of communication.

> **New capabilities**—At the same time that infrastructures and comfort levels have grown, online learning systems have become more user-friendly, intuitive, and interactive, thus delivering an improved learning experience. Many experts now freely use the term “e-Learning 2.0” just as we hear about “Web 2.0” to describe the latest evolution of the Internet. Social networking and user-created content technologies have expanded the array of tools available to creative learning designers. (Examples include threaded discussion forums, blogs, wikis, RSS readers, and personalized social platforms.)

**PITFALLS INHERENT TO E-LEARNING**

Even if yet unfulfilled, the promise of technology is real. But there also are a few pitfalls associated with its application for learning and development. Some of these are related to shortcomings or limitations of the technologies involved. Others are tied to the mistakes organizations make when plotting their development strategies. Consider the following:

> **People are social learners**—From early infancy, humans are hardwired with a desire to learn from other humans: at first from parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family members; later, from teachers, instructors, professors, and people met through life experiences. Every infant begins to learn at the sight of the first face and the sound of the first voice. We’re social beings; we enjoy learning from others, and that desire stays with us through adulthood.

It’s not that people can’t learn from manuals, books, audio recordings, and online courses—and even personal experience—but they also learn a great deal from each other (and from a skilled live facilitator). It’s often the exchange of views and interweaving of perspectives in group training situations that brings the training alive, reinforces its relevance, and encourages learners to retain and apply their new knowledge and skills on the job. On a more basic level, as social animals, human beings need human interaction. This is just as true for training as for everything else.

Interestingly, classroom training continues to flourish where one might least expect: in the technology realm. The world’s large software and systems manufacturers have learned that even when “techies” are learning about technology, they want and need at least some group learning and social interaction in facilitated workshops and practitioners’ clinics. While these learners would appear to be the most accepting of e-Learning, it seems that even they relish and benefit from the human interaction found in a classroom setting.

> **Low learning tension**—Another pitfall to e-Learning relates to the “social learner” issue. One’s presence or absence in a classroom is public; so is one’s performance. Since childhood, peer pressure and learning competition often have helped to keep learners on task. But with online learning, there is a sense of learner isolation and anonymity. While there usually is some kind of learning management system (LMS) tracking the learner’s presence and performance in the background, consciously or unconsciously, it doesn’t feel like a public process (and it
probably shouldn’t). I recently heard a learning “guru” reveal “e-Learning’s dirty little secret”: online course abandonment rates exceed 50% worldwide. (Online mastery testing might be even more suspect in terms of “learner response integrity”—a euphemism for cheating.)

The good news is that there are some factors improving this situation. For one thing, online courses are becoming more interesting and engaging. Another mitigating factor is the growing tendency to tie online learning to other more socially involving modalities in blended solutions. But the most important difference is that HR professionals are learning how to ensure that learners see the personal benefits of the learning initiative as well as how to gain managers’ and senior leaders’ support for reinforcing the importance of the initiative.

> **Not suited for all purposes**—This shouldn’t be a surprise. Most learning and development methods work better for some topics than others. Electronically assisted learning is no different. Its strength generally lies in presenting conceptual, cognitive, and procedural content. (Examples include technical training, professional compliance, new product orientation, and customer/user online manuals.) Text, graphics, and video can be nicely and naturally used to overview new information, and conditional branching as well as resource links can expand understanding to detailed levels. Knowledge checks and mastery tests can measure comprehension and provide remedial work as required. However, when organizations rely on e-Learning for soft skills training, they haven’t matched the proverbial hammer to a nail. It’s simply the wrong tool for the job.

Typically an asynchronous modality, e-Learning isn’t easily used for learning that requires human interaction for practice, feedback, and skill building. Soft skills training isn’t about learners acquiring knowledge, but rather about changing their behavior. The acquisition of knowledge or skills does not automatically translate into behavior change. (If that were the case, we would all be extraordinary business leaders because we’ve all read the latest guru’s book!) Instead, learners need to be able to put what they learn into context and have opportunities for immediate application and practice with other learners. However, e-Learning can do a nice job covering cognitive content as a prerequisite or prework to live, instructor-led people-skills training. This has emerged as an e-Learning sweet spot. Indeed, e-Learning has become more valuable and more effective as we have better learned both how and when—and when not—to use it.

> **Uneven technology**—E-learning can incorporate the latest bells and whistles, but learners may not be able to take advantage of them if they don’t have access to the most up-to-date technology. In most large organizations, the level and sophistication of the technology infrastructure is uneven. Network bandwidth, computer power, software versions, etc., vary from location to location, sometimes significantly. And global organizations often encounter even greater challenges, including government-mandated standards and security requirements.

An example from the past (the 1990s) that still amuses me is the large PC manufacturer that made a significant investment in a state-of-the-art computer-based training program. But when the time came to implement the program to 10,000 learners, the organization realized its
internal PCs were a generation behind those it was supplying to its customers—its PCs had no sound capabilities for its newly minted multimedia training courses, so no-one could understand the content!

Those designing e-Learning solutions—and those purchasing and implementing them—must maintain the right balance between optimizing the learning experience with the latest and greatest technology and ensuring its accessibility to the intended learners. Despite continual advances in technology, some technology-related barriers persist and probably always will.

> Uneven acceptance—While the use of e-Learning is growing, its acceptance by learners is hardly universal. Older learners, unlike their younger, more “tech-tuned” counterparts, may be more accustomed to learning in a classroom environment, or to reading and studying print materials. As a result, they might resist online learning. A learner’s job, role, or work environment can also influence resistance to e-Learning. For instance, many senior leaders still personally shun computer usage as being inappropriate for their pay grade. At the other extreme, supervisors in a production environment who have little day-to-day exposure to a PC might feel uncomfortable taking online courses. Worse, if an e-Learning program is poorly aligned with learners’ cultural requirements, having been “implemented” in another country without being properly adapted to the unique requirements of the local learning population, it is less likely to be accepted by users and, therefore, less likely to have much, if any, impact.

> Absence of a skilled facilitator—Synchronous forms of training (e.g., traditional classrooms) are generally facilitated by a trained instructor. This is a significant advantage over asynchronous e-Learning. Can you imagine an online course that reads a learner’s body language—sleepy eyes, slouched posture, blank looks, silent nods—and adjusts accordingly? Or that can weave the morning’s news or the CEO’s recent missive into the lesson? E-Learning typically offers limited, discrete answers and solutions—even in relatively complex programs involving role plays and simulations. In parallel classroom situations, the facilitator can enrich learning by asking probing questions of the participants in a role play or by coaching them in a way that reveals details and nuances that a software program can’t.

A skilled facilitator can tap into learners’ needs like no e-Learning program can, spotting subtleties in students’ attitudes, learning preferences, personalities, and styles, and then tailoring the learning to meet the need. The facilitator can customize delivery to match an organization’s culture or call on company examples or analogies that will resonate with specific audiences. The facilitator can gauge an audience and match his or her pace to the time needed to cover the learning topics. Also, given the time required in the R&D development cycle between e-learning versions, training content can quickly become out of date. The effective facilitator can make the adjustments for the classroom audience not only to hold its attention, but to keep the content current and relevant.

Aside from being the training modality that gives the facilitator latitude to adjust, adapt, and tailor his or her approach, face-to-face delivery is important for still another reason: the facilitator’s skill. It’s quite true that a good facilitator can make even a poor training program acceptable;
similarly, a skilled facilitator can make an average program excellent. Contrast this with e-learning, where having even the best and newest PC will not make a poor e-learning course any better. This is the downside of e-Learning’s consistency.

> **Cost and complexity can be higher**—It can cost at least twice as much per learning hour to develop an online course. In addition to the content and instructional design issues, developers need to deal with concerns like interface design, ease of use, technology standards and integration, and platform evolution. There are a lot more “moving parts” in technology-assisted learning and blended solutions.

**BLENDING VERSUS PURE E-LEARNING**

Brandon Hall Research, a leading learning and development research firm, recently published some very interesting results of a large survey that, among other things, explored learners’ and HR professionals’ perceptions of comparative effectiveness among three platforms: pure classroom, pure e-Learning, and a blended combination of the two. The results weren’t even close. Nearly 9 of 10 (87 percent) respondents said blended solutions were better than pure e-Learning. More surprising, about 71 percent said blended solutions were better than pure “face-to-face” solutions.

> **A curious bias?**—Why this strong bias for blending modalities in learning initiatives? Wouldn’t you expect most people to prefer the social comfort of the classroom if given a choice? The answer is probably multifaceted:

- As discussed earlier, different methods are better for different topics. Most learning initiatives have multiple, complex objectives, so it stands to reason that the diversity of desired learning outcomes requires a diversity of approaches.

- Another issue is what might be called “learning fingerprints.” People like to learn differently, and sometimes even the same person finds preferences changing from day to day and topic to topic.

- Also, learners are just as interested in efficient use of time as their employers are. People like the asynchronous convenience of technology and its 24/7/365 availability. But they also understand that learning in real time with their peers is sometimes the best way to acquire certain skills. Thus, they prefer the blending of online cognitive overviews with in-class peer discussions and role plays.

- And when their organization can provide an electronic performance support system (EPSS), learners value getting “just-enough, just-in-time, just-when-needed” content as a vital component of the mix.
Finally, blended designs can provide the flexibility required by uneven technologies in remote locations, while making it easy to refresh skills and make-up for absences.

Taken together, these factors understandably persuade learners to prefer that various learning modes be blended into a singular solution.

**Blending helps quality**—For its *Global Leadership Forecast 2008-2009*, DDI processed and analyzed a massive amount of data from nearly 14,000 leaders and HR professionals. An exciting finding is that the data shows a clear correlation between the diversity of leadership development methods (a.k.a. “blending”) and the quality of leadership development. When the diversity of methods is high, the quality of development is more than 56% better than when the diversity of methods is low. (See Figure 2 below.)

It’s clear that a blend of modalities is needed to meet disparate learner needs and organizational and cultural requirements. Blending various approaches to leverage strengths and mitigate weaknesses is analogous to diversifying one’s investment portfolio. In other words, “The Magic is in the Mix®”.

**FIVE KEYS TO ENSURE BLENDED LEARNING SUCCESS**

How should solutions be blended? Is there a universal solution for all training situations? Should all available modalities, tools, and content be thrown together, helter-skelter? Of course, we all know these extremes are unwise. Can you imagine rushing home to make a meal for your family, and once there, taking *everything* in your kitchen, throwing it all into the mixing bowl, and serving it to your loved ones? Not a pleasant prospect. But how should we decide which ingredients to include and exclude, and how to prepare and present the mix to those we are trying to serve?

As we at DDI have surveyed the training landscape, talked to learning professionals and HR executives about their situations, and worked with hundreds of organizations to address their blending needs. This research informed DDI’s The Magic in the Mix® approach to blended learning. This approach employs several specific best practices that we have seen employed to ensure effective blended leadership and development initiatives.

1. Blend with the end in mind.
2. Use content that fits and is consistent.
3. Practice and application are critical for real change.
4. Managerial and executive support are imperative.
5. Be prepared for complexity.

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**Table:**

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<th>Ratings by HR Professionals</th>
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**Diagram:**

[Figure 2: Diversity of Methods and Quality of Leadership Development Ratings by HR Professionals]

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1. Blend with the End in Mind
This might seem obvious. Nevertheless, many organizations work in reverse. They start with an assumption about the modality of the learning intervention (e.g., “We are going to start doing Web-based training around here,” or “By next year, we’re going to have 50 percent of our training on the Web.”) Instead, they should start with a vision for the end result. The learning content and design must be driven by the business intent. What is the purpose of the learning initiative? How will things be different as a result of success? What is the desired end state? Is there some new knowledge or skill to be acquired, or does the organization’s culture need to be moved? How will our business or mission be affected by success or failure? Once the destination is clear, then it makes sense to design the appropriate blended learning vehicle to get there. Following are some guidelines for blending:

> Use modes that fit—For example, if the goal is related more to cognitive knowledge—understanding a new price list or a new feature of a product or service—then that could be handled very easily via a printed booklet, a short online lesson, as a topic in an online support system, or as a combination of these. But if the goal is a major culture change—the organization needs to become more collaborative or more nimble in the marketplace—a factual booklet or mini-course isn’t going to be sufficient. Success in such cases would likely require a complex blend of learning resources and management reinforcement. So in that case, the optimal blend would be something that is a much more pervasive intervention into the organization over a sustained period of time.

Often, choosing the right fit means trading off speed for quality, or breadth for depth. Generally, online self-study resources consume less of the learner’s time than would the same material in a classroom environment; thus, a broader range of topics can be covered more efficiently. Conversely, learning with others under the tutelage of an expert instructor can provide deeper, more nuanced understanding of the material and more opportunity to discuss, and even practice, its application to the real world of work. Other “fit” issues involve assessing the nature of the organization’s learning culture, the history of past technology-assisted initiatives, and the readiness of the target learners for online self-study. Understanding these realities can help guide the choice of delivery modality to meet the learning initiative’s objectives.

> Match the scale to the need—This point exemplifies a related axiom for blending success: If the desired vision or end state is significant and critical for business success, be sure the scale of development effort matches the importance of the goal. Throwing a few courses or memoranda at the target population won’t move a culture toward a paradigm shift. Be sure that HR and senior management are together in their commitment to fund a full development intervention. This might involve needs assessment, pilots, internal marketing campaigns, sustained executive involvement, realignment of systems, etc. Conversely, avoid over-engineering a complex, blended system if, in fact, the program’s goals are simple and could be accomplished with a modest investment in a focused course, or even a simple communication rather than with training.
Assure that it’s a training issue—Be sure to examine the underlying factors—beyond simply training—needed to realize the new vision. Sometimes organizations mistakenly assume that training and development are what’s needed to reach the desired end state, when in actuality it might not be a learning issue in the first place. Rather, sometimes it’s a selection issue—the incumbents weren’t chosen with the potential to succeed in the new environment going forward. Or perhaps it’s a matter of misalignment in key systems—e.g., compensation or production approaches might not support the new direction needed for ongoing business success.

Look beyond training to related components—Effective training and development can’t exist in a vacuum. A well-designed blended system must incorporate several other components to assure training success. Figure 3 below illustrates what these components are and how they interrelate.

SUCCESS ARCHITECTURE

A brief description of each of the components in the Success Architecture follows:

Alignment and Planning—Work with senior management to determine how best to align the training with the organization’s business imperatives (i.e., “blend with the end in mind”). Once the vision is established, then involve all constituencies in creating a thorough rollout plan. Beyond the other elements in the Success Architecture, the plan also must consider communication, internal marketing, and accountabilities for action.

Assess and Plan Development—It’s paramount that the curriculum being designed satisfies learners’ needs in the context of the initiative’s goals. What skills are needed? What level of skill preexists in the group? In various individuals? Several tools are available to uncover this information, including success profiling, training needs analyses, multisource (aka 360-degree or multirater) surveys, and behavioral assessments. Results gleaned from these tools can be an early step in crafting a training curriculum that targets the important needs of both the organization and its learners.

Acquire Skills and Knowledge—This component comprises the training content, be it formal course work (classroom or online), self-study, apprenticeships, podcasts, video, academic work, job shadowing, etc.

Apply to Drive Performance—If it can’t be applied on the job, any training is a waste of time. This can be a pivotal point in the training initiative, because it’s often not natural for learners to break old habits and use their newly learned skills. Effective blended learning designs proactively include elements to enable learners to “hit the road running” once they have acquired new skills. (More on this in section 3 below).

Management and Online Support—Nothing can extinguish a learner’s newfound skills more quickly than a boss who acts at odds with the new learning. Whether through overt statements such as “Remember, we always do it my way around here,” or more subtle cues and lack of reinforcement, the learner’s manager can make or break the training initiative. (More in section 4 below.) In support of managers, or as an adjunct resource in their absence, an online performance support system (EPSS) can function as an online, de facto, “just-in-time” coach, always available to provide instantly accessible advice, refresher tips, and job aids.

Outcomes Measurement and Evaluation—There is a great deal of truth in the adage, “You can’t manage what you don’t measure.” Without measures that assess effectiveness and provide insights for fine tuning, the entire blended implementation is at risk. In fact, one of the most important questions to ask during the early planning stages is “How will we know if this training initiative is leading us to our ultimate vision?”
> Make sure it all interrelates—This Success Architecture illustrates that having “the end in mind” will bring you to several of the other keys to success in creating blended solutions. The nature of the content, the degree of practice, the nature of on-the-job application, the strength of executive support, and preparations for complexity are all variables that must be tuned to the ultimate purpose of the development initiative. Let’s examine the content issue next…

2. Use Content that Fits and Is Consistent

With the proliferation of new technologies in the past 10 years, many training professionals have focused too much on the technology and too little on the quality and suitability of the content. Some organizations seem to think learning content has become a commodity—a raw material that is indistinguishable by source. But all content is not created equal. Understandable, well-researched, effective content doesn’t grow on trees, and the difference in results from high-quality vs. mediocre content can be significant. As you consider content for your organization’s blended learning curriculum, here are some guidelines we believe are important:

> Choose content that fits the audience and the need—Remember what we’ve all learned about being sure a course is a fit for the learners’ role, education, and level? The same holds true for a blended learning approach. Be sure the content is well-researched and “tried and true” (unless you savor being a lab experiment for a new content development effort). And of course, be sure the content you choose will drive toward the end you have in mind—does the content “point of view” match the goal? These are standard considerations for curricula selection, but we’ve noticed that when creating e-Learning and blended solutions, many organizations foolishly focus solely on technology issues, forgetting these essential basics of content selection.

> Assure content has been adapted to the media—Was the content adapted to the media in the mix? Content is not like water; it doesn’t easily take the shape of the vessel into which it is poured. A lot of ineffective online learning is the result of forcing classroom materials, printed manuals, or slide shows into an e-Learning medium. Another error is to use classroom video that is too long for the more interactive nature of e-Learning. Well-designed WBT courses, online performance support systems, and/or audio podcasts are created specifically for the medium being used; they generally don’t work as well when inserted into another medium without adaptation.

> Strive for conceptual consistency across courses—Is the content consistent across units and courses? Many organizations don’t think about the confusion that learners can experience if exposed to a multitude of conceptual models or points of view within and across topics. Some e-Learning curricula provide a cornucopia of guru-centered courses. Each might embody solid content from a popular author, but together, they create a bewildering landscape of inconsistent models, concepts, and terminology. Effective e-Learning curricula have units that share a consistent lexicon and point of view. Otherwise, learners can feel like confused athletes getting conflicting advice from an army of coaches. Be sure the units and courses in your development initiative are complementary rather than conflicting.
Seek consistency across modalities—Is the content consistent across modalities? Some blended programs have been patched together with components from a variety of sources, creating a confusing mix of terminology and concepts across modalities. For example, learners might take courses online with one approach, but then access to an online performance support system that reflects an entirely different slant on the topics. Or learners in classrooms might experience a different approach or vocabulary related to a topic than do those covering the topic online. Many of the advantages inherent to blended learning solutions are compromised when the elements of the mix aren’t conceptually integrated. Therefore, be sure that all the elements in your blended learning mix are “singing from the same hymnal.”

Provide content in context—One advantage of instructor-led training is that a skilled facilitator can easily position the content in the context of what is important to the learners’ work lives. In automated systems, it is important to build in some ways for the learners to do the same. For example, standard online courses might have embedded links that access corporate news stories demonstrating various applications of the learning. Contemporary podcasts could be associated in the LMS with the course curricula. Online social networking tools could bring learners together to chat about their reactions to the content and their experiences applying it to their jobs. The key is to make the content relevant in the context of the learners’ world.

3. Practice and Application Are Critical for Real Change

The objective of most learning interventions, particularly in leadership development, is to change human behavior on the job. However, too many blended learning solutions are long on the acquisition of knowledge, but short on skill building and practical application. Research and practical wisdom tell us that behavior change rarely comes from just cognitive understanding. As stated earlier, if that were the case, we would all be extraordinary leaders, because we’ve all read the gurus’ books. But reading doesn’t seem to change us much. Simply teaching concepts without ensuring practice, mastery, and application is like giving people an inoculation—a little bit of material to prevent the onset of the real thing. (Many organizations seem to feel an overview of basic leadership principles is all that’s needed to have better leaders, thus eliminating the lasting benefits that a more robust leadership change strategy could provide). A better approach is to strive for behavior change that comes from exposure to positive examples (models) with opportunity to practice the behaviors we’ve observed, receive insightful, balanced feedback, and subsequently hone our skills through successive cycles of practice, feedback, and application. Here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind:

Provide person-to-person practice opportunities, when possible—It’s easier to practice people skills with people than it is with machines. That’s the basic rub in the soft skills e-Learning proposition. Social skills, interaction skills, leadership skills, people skills—by whatever name, the computer seems to be ill-suited to train them.
So why not just keep people in the classroom when they are learning people skills? The answer is generally cost; classroom training can be relatively expensive, and it takes people away from their jobs. E-learning can occur at people’s pace, in time that is convenient for them, and without travel, venue, and instructor expenses. The promise of e-Learning is that it is a fiscally responsible and time-efficient component of the blend.

While a live classroom setting may be the best approach when possible, another option is to use “synchronous virtual” modalities such as voice or video conference calls, or virtual classrooms using software such as Microsoft® Live Meeting or WebEX™. While not perfect, employing these modalities is better than having no human interaction as part of the training mix.

> **Explore online skill-building designs**—Can e-Learning take learners beyond conceptual learning? The good news is yes, some online people skills courses are starting to include realistic skill-building exercises that challenge the learner to choose from among several options for action (the “whats”) and also (and this is critical) from among several alternative ways to interact with others in these options (the “hows”). These online simulations aren’t perfect, but there is both anecdotal and research evidence that they do work when well designed and tested.

> **Bake application into the mix**—In addition, the best of online courses conclude with a significant unit that helps learners plan for on-the-job applications of the newly learned material. These can include suggested job activities, stretch projects, and planning aids. Some application units go so far as to help learners plan how to approach their manager to request coaching, guidance, and opportunities for trying out the new skills. Also, some well-designed courses provide instructions and sample links to the organization’s related performance support system or to advanced learning opportunities. The key is to help learners move out of the theoretical and into the real world of their jobs.

> **Use “practice labs” to solidify skills**—How does an organization reap the benefits of e-Learning without losing the human touch gained through classroom experiences? A strategy some organizations are adopting is to first use asynchronous (anytime/anyplace) online courses for training the basic principles and important concepts across several interrelated topics. Then, the learners are brought together synchronously (at the same time) in a real or virtual classroom (e.g., a group webinar) to interact with each other. They discuss the concepts, practice their use together with balanced feedback, and plan for individual and group on-the-job application. This “practice lab” approach leverages the investment in the online courses by bringing the human element into the learning. The organization enjoys both the efficiency of the online mode, and also the effectiveness of group learning environments.

> **Provide online performance support**—Learners often need ongoing support to maintain their new skills, and their managers aren’t always available or sometimes even capable to provide the coaching and support needed. At DDI we are strong proponents of providing learners with
access to an EPSS (electronic performance support system) that they can use whenever they feel a need to deal with specific situations or to access refresher training to keep their skills sharp. An EPSS, if properly marketed within an organization, is an extremely powerful, practical means to transform development from a one-time training event into an ongoing aspect of learners’ work lives. After high-impact classroom or online courses for the learning initiative, the organization is able to leverage its intranet by providing online job aids and support tools related to the classroom learning. The strategy here is to make just-enough complementary content available just-in-time for on-the-job application at the time of need. Electronic content support also can be used prior to courses for preparation and acceleration in the topic.

> Establish learning communities—Blended designs also can move beyond the course and the practice lab by establishing “learning communities” on the topic via chat rooms and monitored blogs. Such forums provide learners with an ongoing environment for sharing, problem solving, and growth, thus increasing the likelihood of mastery and application through social networking.

4. Managerial and Executive Support Are Imperative

Well-designed blended solutions can’t exist in an organizational vacuum. Without the support and reinforcement from the learners’ managers all the way to senior executives, the best of efforts will be short-lived “programs du jour.” In a way, this should take care of itself if the advice above is followed to build the system with a business-related goal in mind. Executives will support a system that they believe is doing something useful in alignment with major business initiatives. If it can be demonstrated that the blended training will lead to better execution of strategy and a competitive advantage, then executives and senior managers up and down the line can be easily recruited to ensure sustainable success.

Of course, it isn’t always easy to get their ear. And once you have it, they may need your help to know exactly what they can do to provide the necessary support. Here are some ideas for driving managerial and executive support for a blended learning initiative:

- Be sure learners’ managers are fully informed as to the initiative’s purpose and importance. Include an overview or syllabus of the content and highlight how it will help their team.

- Before rolling out the initiative, convene learners’ managers in a “reinforcement strategy session” in which you seek their ideas for how best to support the learning. Ask them to anticipate the barriers to success that might arise as well as how to avoid or neutralize them. Suggest how they might coach and model the behaviors being learned by their direct reports. You might even challenge them to take the training themselves so they can be even better coaches and models for their people.

- Give the senior managers and executives oversight authority. After all, involvement builds commitment, and control builds accountability. Establish a stakeholders group or steering committee to “own” and guide the initiative. Be sure to include a mix of those who are enthusiastic as well as those who are unsure or reluctant.
- Encourage learners and managers to discuss the training experience. Some well-designed, blended programs include a specific unit that prepares learners to approach their managers for support, resources, and coaching. Similarly, many of these same programs also feature a learning unit for the managers about how to react when their reports approach them for help. This prepping of both sides of the conversation is a smart strategy; if both parties follow up with one another as they should, a strong bond of ongoing commitment to the new skills and support for them is forged. This strategy of priming both sides for a desired conversation carries built-in insurance for action: Even if one side dallies or forgets, the other is likely to get things started. Nothing cements learning as well as timely involvement with one’s boss.

- Consider having senior managers and executives serve as facilitators or faculty in the live training portions of the initiative. This sends a clear message to learners about the importance the organization is placing on the training. It also leverages the extra years of experience a manager can bring to the training in terms of examples and anecdotes. While managers’ and executives’ schedules can be challenging, by its nature a blended program might afford virtual means for their participation in terms of distance learning technologies like online webinars.

- During and after the training, send messages to the learners’ managers suggesting opportunities for learning reinforcement. For example, they might add a development progress update to their periodic team meeting agenda. Or they might reward team members who best exemplified the new skills during in a recent project.

- Invite senior executives to participate in the kickoff session by sharing their take on the potential impact of the initiative both for the learners and the organization. Alternatively, work with your communications department to create a video or podcast from the CEO or other high-level executive about how the learning content and the blended delivery methods will benefit all.

- Do the same for the conclusion of the training initiative; invite a key executive to speak at the “graduation ceremony.” Then later, when the planned measurements show desired improvement toward the objectives of the initiative, re-enlist senior managers in publicly celebrating the success.

- Accountability is critical. Seek executive support for organizational alignment through the performance management system. Some organizations have universalized performance objectives for each management level to meet challenging completion rates for their direct reports in key elements of the development initiative. Some have even tied portions of executives’ bonuses to compliance rates within the blended learning initiative.
5. Be Prepared for Complexity

We often hear that “nothing worth doing is ever easy.” Blended learning initiatives are certainly worth doing, but unfortunately, they may be the poster child of the “not easy” part of the adage. There are many moving parts, often interrelated and sometimes seemingly operating at cross purposes. Sometimes important, complex blended solutions seem to fill up and overflow our capacity to cope. The photo on the left is taken from a blended learning advertisement that carries this caption, “Does your blended learning recipre work better on paper? The benefits of blended learning have been outlined above, and they are significant. But how can we keep the complex mix from exploding in our faces?

First, we need to acknowledge what we are dealing with. We all know that traditional learning implementations have a host of issues to consider: needs analysis, content acquisition/development, scheduling, venue, faculty, financing, management support, measurement, record keeping, etc. With blended learning, those all are joined by a raft of additional considerations such as the following:

- Which content is best delivered via which modality to which learners?

- What technologies and hardware will be needed (e.g., networks, media players, browsers, PCs, iPods®, PDAs, etc.)? Do all domestic and international locations have those technologies? How do we get the right technologies in the hands of the right learners?

- Do we need to overcome any technology aversion? Do we need user training?

- Will the content and courses work with the installed learning management system (LMS), if there is one? And if we don’t have an LMS, do we need one to launch and track the learning? If so, which one do we use and how do we set it up?

- Sometimes the opposite problem exists—there are too many LMSs. Some large organizations have 5 to 10 different LMSs—which usually don’t communicate with each other very easily—spread over an array of departments and locations.

- Do learners in diverse locations have the same proclivity for online self-study? For example, Web-based training is generally more common and accepted by learners in North American companies than by those in European and Asian organizational cultures.

- How will we handle technical installations, configurations, problems, and complaints? Do we need a special technical support desk?

- How do we monitor and measure learner satisfaction, progress, and skills application across the range of learning components, locations, and topics? While most LMSs are pretty good at tracking online course completion and performance, they are somewhat less proficient at tracking instructor-led training and don’t do a very good job at all of tracking EPSS usage. Worse, tracking skill acquisition and application is almost impossible in these systems.

- And of course, have we adequately budgeted for all of this complexity?
These can be daunting issues for the faint of heart. In fact, one might think we are trying to discourage readers from venturing forth into the land of blended learning with its exploding milkshakes. To the contrary—blended learning is a powerful, compelling approach to developing leaders and individual contributors for today’s and tomorrow’s business challenges. The gain is well worth the pain. Which brings to mind another common adage to remember when embarking on a blended learning solution: “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.” Yes, blending development modalities and getting the mix right for your needs can be complicated. But the good news is that it’s worth the effort, and there are several “best practice” approaches others have used to ensure blending success:

1. **Get help inside**—Seek expert internal help on the technology considerations. Involve your colleagues in IT early and often. They not only have expertise and a desire to see technologies succeed, but they may in fact have a sense of domain ownership. It’s better to work with them than around them.

2. **Get help outside**—Consider soliciting the help of an outside consultant or firm that specializes in adapting electronic tools and technology to learning applications. The e-Learning world is still young and fluid; it’s difficult to keep up with changing standards and best practices unless it’s your full-time occupation. While bringing in a consultant might mean more expense, it could be money well spent.

3. **Set expectations**—Let your constituencies (learners, managers, executives, and partners) know what to expect. Make sure they understand that with the creative application of technology comes some complexity and uncertainty that will likely require fine tuning early in the process. Set a tone of “we’re in this adventure together” and enlist their pioneering spirit as a key ingredient of sustained success.

4. **Use the KISS principle**—“Keep it simple, silly.” While this discussion clearly shows that little about blended learning is simple, that doesn’t mean we should make it as complex as possible. Look for opportunities to simplify it any way you can. Sometimes a good strategy is to introduce elements in stages, letting the organization digest one phase or mode at a time. Piloting is important and useful for seeking ways to simplify and streamline (see more on piloting below). But maybe the most critical way to honor the KISS Principle is to avoid getting overly enamored with the “bling” of new technologies. Some organizations have seen their blending initiatives fail because of too much technology too soon. Remember the “keep the end in mind” idea. Only use technologies that are directly needed to accomplish the training’s purpose. To hear some tech-happy pundits, you aren’t blending well if you don’t have Flash videos online, podcasts and syndication feeds on all PDAs, avatar simulations in WBT courses, user-created blogs and learner chats on your corporate home page, and search engine
treasure-hunting contests each Friday afternoon. An interesting way to remember this principle is to note the spelling of the word “blending.” It has the word “end” in the middle. Take “(the) end (in mind)” out of blending and all that’s left is just “bling.”

5. Always pilot, and do it right— One of the most critical best practices for any training initiative is to pilot the program with real people to uncover its shortcomings, identify potential implementation challenges or issues, and gauge people’s reaction to and acceptance of the learning once it’s rolled out for real. Most HR leaders and training professionals understand this, yet many shortchange their piloting efforts through critical mistakes. They:

- Pilot the training using their own staff instead of tapping into the actual target learner population.
- Test just part of the program (i.e., piloting just the e-Learning portion to spot technology glitches) instead of the entire training blend.
- Fail to “test the mettle” of the management support needed to ensure accountability and learning tension.
- Don’t ensure that the technology used in the pilot is representative of the technology that will be used when the initiative is to be rolled out.
- Don’t pilot the marketing and communications that will be necessary for a successful rollout.
- Perhaps most important, don’t objectively measure the effectiveness of the pilot and, therefore, don’t confirm that the initiative will achieve its intended goal.

A pilot should not be a dry run so much as a small-scale implementation. There would, of course, be fewer learners involved than are touched through the full rollout, but that should be the only difference. Often, the first pilot will reveal a number of problems, and might even necessitate a second or third pilot. If the goals of the development initiative are tied to important business needs, then the cost of refinements before the final rollout are relatively insignificant in the long run. With blended learning, the old saying “third time’s a charm” often is prescient.

A GOLDEN AGE OF TRAINING

Given the complex learning and development needs facing today’s global organizations, and the dizzying array of training options available, one might conclude that this is an especially challenging time to be a training professional. After all, we don’t want a place in museums next to buggy whips and slide rules.

On the other hand, this is also an exciting time when the unrealistic expectations for e-Learning have yielded a more clear-eyed assessment of what various technologies can and can’t do. As a result, never before have training professionals had at their disposal such a full toolbox from which to build truly effective learning and development solutions. We are entering a golden age of training with the future holding new technological advancements for us to hone to our organizations’ and learners’ benefits. Electronic technology will surely be a growing part of our learning profession’s future, but just as surely humans will remain at the heart of it.