The Skinny On Microlearning

A quick and easy guide to learning's hottest trend.

Introduction

There's no denying the fact that we're all busy. Taking time out of your day to read this whitepaper is likely a feat in and of itself. So in the spirit of the subject microlearning, we're going to keep this short and sweet.

Here's a quick guide that gives you the skinny on the learning industry's hip and cool new trend: microlearning.

What Exactly is Microlearning

Microlearning first hit the learning and development (L&D) scene back in the early 2000s to meet the increasing demand for shorter learning content. Microlearning is essentially learning content broken down into short, targeted, bite-sized chunks with the purpose of engaging learners and reinforcing knowledge retention. Sessions range anywhere from two to fifteen minutes, though most industry thought leaders argue true microlearning is around four minutes. These mini-lessons delivered in media-rich formats, such as videos, scenarios, whiteboard animation and kinetic text,[1] and the learner walks away with tangible, actionable knowledge on a specific subject. Traditionally, the lesson covers one subject or topic.

For example, the microlearning sessions could be:
- Quick tips for effective time management.
- Three examples of unethical workplace situations and how to handle them.
- An interactive quiz on handwashing in the workplace.

The Driving Force Behind Bite-Sized Learning

The fact of the matter is, modern learners are busy, distracted, picky and forgetful. They also want learning and training to be easier to find, shorter to consume and richer in content. L&D professionals are always looking for ways to engage and attract learners, as well as ensure they retain information and change behaviors. In this day and age where we have limited time available, it's no surprise that bite-sized learning is gaining serious momentum. Learning and business leaders are becoming more and more attracted to microlearning because:

- Employees are busy, distracted and crave targeted, meaningful learning activities. During the average 40-hour workweek, learners have about 4.8 minutes to dedicate to learning and development activities.[2] Learners are more distracted and impatient than ever before, and they demand high-quality, high-impact learning opportunities that accelerate their careers – not waste their time.

[1] "5 Killer Examples: How to Use Microlearning-Based Training Effectively," ElearningIndustry.com,

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The modern learner wants to take the learning experience in their own hands, picking and choosing the learning and training they want, when they want it.

• The human attention span is shrinking. In 2015, Microsoft released findings from an attention span study that had everyone whispering at the water cooler: The human attention span is officially shorter than the average goldfish! Yes, it's true, our attention span shrunk from twelve seconds in 2000, to eight seconds in 2015 – shorter than the average goldfish.[3] While the context of this study isn't specific to our ability to pay attention during learning and development activities, it does paint a pretty clear picture as to the state of the human mind. We're easily distracted, which is a battle trainers have fought for years. Hence the massive uprising in microlearning.

• Learning preferences have evolved. As much as we hate saying this, learners aren't likely going to sit through an hour-long training course unless it's mandatory. We know, it's hard to hear, but let's focus on the positive: It's because they want their learning short and sweet. One survey found 94% of e-learners prefer short form modules (10 minutes or less), for soft-skills training, and the same study said 65% stated that the typical e-learning module presents too much information.[4] If given the option between a 60-minute learning module filled with 10 key takeaways, or 10 five-minute learning modules with one takeaway each, learners will always take the latter. To be successful, you need to listen to what your learners want. And in this case, it's microlearning!

• It's easy to forget what you've learned. The Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve demonstrates the decline of memory retention over time.[5] He theorized that the level at which we retain information depends on the strength of your memory and the amount of time passed since learning new information.[6] The speed of forgetting depends on several contributing factors, including the level of difficulty and presentation, as well as psychological factors such as stress and sleep levels. Based on the theory of The Forgetting Curve, it's easy to make a case for microlearning. Short bursts of learning increase knowledge retention and reinforce lessons learned because it keeps the topic fresh and relevant.

Bite-sized Learning with Big Results

It's clear the way people want to learn has shifted. Not all learning requires long, dense classroom or e-learning sessions. Soft and hard skills training, as well as compliance training, can be delivered in a microlearning format and the results can be profound.

[2] "Meet the Modern Learner," Bersin by Deloitte,

[3] "Attention Span Research Report," Microsoft Canada,

[4] "RLI survey: Bite-size learning is hot at ASTD Conference,

[5] `Forgetting Curve," Training Industry

[6] "The Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve – And How To Overcome It," Sid Savara

Early adopters of microlearning have realized significant benefits from this approach, especially around increasing productivity, knowledge retention and engagement, as well as lowering overhead costs and time spent learning. (Don't get us wrong, we're not saying you shouldn't spend time learning, we're just saying you should effectively spend time learning!) The big benefits of microlearning broken down into bite-sized chunks are:

• Increase in productivity and engagement. Delivering targeted training boosts productivity and engagement because learners can get up-to-speed on a particular subject and take action at the point of need. One of the biggest areas of microlearning success is within sales team training.

• Lower deployment costs. Who doesn't like to save a little money? Research has shown that microlearning is 50% cheaper and 300% faster to develop than traditional training[7] Better, cheaper, faster and packs some serious results – that should be music to your CFO's ears.

• Better knowledge retention and performance. Microlearning drives over 20% more information retention than long-form training.[8] Proving it's far easier for the learner to retain information learned if you reinforce it in short bursts over time.

How Microlearning Improves Performance

Here's a scenario: A potential client approaches an account executive with a specific question about their product or service. The account executive doesn't know the answer off the top of their head. They remember covering the subject in training, but they've slept since then, and they're not 100% confident they can give the client the right answer. They quickly search for a course that covers the topic, watch the 4-minute video and can turn around and respond to the customer. That's the beauty of microlearning!

Adoption and the Future of Microlearning

There is without a doubt a demand for microlearning. Microlearning success has proved that bigger isn't always better when it comes to learning. But here's the rub: Only 17% of companies indicated they offer microlearning,[9] but that doesn't mean the trend isn't raising a few eyebrows and gaining traction. Companies need to adopt new ways to develop and deliver learning, and microlearning should be top of mind when evaluating the future of your learning programs.

[7] "The Bite-size Revolution: How to Make Learning Stick." MindGym,
[8] "Distributing Vs. Blocking Learning Questions In A Web-Based Learning Environment," Kapp et al., Journal of Educational Computing Research 51.4

According to Bersin by Deloitte, "Employees at all levels expect dynamic, self-directed, continuous learning opportunities from their employers."[10] Which tells us that corporate learning must make the shift from long, rigid, hard-to-find courses to short, informative and engaging courses.

Before you get started, remember that for microlearning to work, the right content must be identified and developed in the right format. Aberdeen Group points out, "Microlearning isn't necessarily a replacement for everyday learning – whether that's classroom learning, video learning, collaborative learning, or other methods used to help the modern employee. Instead, it's used to supply quick, bite-sized and easily accessible content. Microlearning is used best by employees when they have a challenge that needs an immediate resolution, or when they're facing an issue and really can't remember what's what." [11]

The future is bright for organizations looking to adopt this increasingly popular trend. With any new learning trend or idea, our advice is simple: Listen to what your workforce wants. A clear understanding of what your team members want from your L&D programs is the best way to create successful learning programs that have a lasting impact on engagement, productivity, professional development and business success.

There we have it, folks! Everything you need to know about microlearning summed up in a short and sweet summary. Heck, this might even constitute as a microlearning guide.

[9] "Learning 3.0 Survey," Aberdeen Group,
[10] The New Organization is Different by Design," Bersin by Deloitte,
[11] Best Practice: Microlearning Helps Employees Re-learn Concepts Quickly," Aberdeen Group,

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