



What Keeps CLOs up at Night?

Faster training doesn't mean better results.

Disruption, courtesy of the internet and YouTube

Chief Learning Officers (CLOs) are a diverse bunch. Corporate education professionals work in almost every industry, the non-profit world, and government. If you run an Education P&L or corporate university like I often do, what's probably keeping you up is the numbers, the numbers (and the numbers). But regardless of whether they face internally or externally, for the CLOs I've spoken with, one issue has percolated to the top of a lot of their "worry" lists recently.

More and more, CLO customers are asking the same question: "Can you give us the training we need faster and in bite-sized chunks, like we can get on YouTube?" For anyone who has ever learned how to slice a pomegranate on the Internet, it just feels (to our customers) that we should be able to get whatever training we need, at that moment, with a simple search.

The phenomenon of "can you train us faster?" is nothing new. I can't count the number of times over the past 15 years I've had a customer ask me to deliver five days of content in a single day (my answer is still "let's work backwards from the outcomes you want"). But YouTube and other microlearning channels have dramatically accelerated this trend. Instead of just "faster please," we are now being asked to deliver large amounts of content in a just-in-time format. Demand for "boot camp" style software training is waning, as businesses put greater and greater emphasis on time to productivity metrics.

Sometimes I wish I could compress the three or more weeks of the intensive training my new employees need into a short video – with music and dancing! It'd be so great to see my stakeholder's face light up as I say "all your new hires need is to watch this 15 minute music video, and they'll be all set!" Yes, there are jobs where this is the case, but in the technology industry, where employees often have to master complex software, there's no magic bullet.

That said, what we can do is leverage the changes in individuals' preferred learning style in the YouTube era in order to move the needle on time to productivity.

Employees are more willing than ever to search for their own answers. Because of our collective experience and success in searching for needed information online, training can be redesigned to optimize the use of search. Instead of teaching the required skills, CLOs can now focus on teaching employees how to educate themselves. Here are three tips to reduce time spent in the classroom:

Teach the tools

Technical training is never intended to cover every situation a new employee might face on the job. The intention is to provide enough skills or knowledge to get employees started. Researchers from the Center for Creative Leadership claim that employees learn 70% of their needed skills on the job, 20% from coworkers and 10% from formal training.¹ This guideline can be a useful reminder when designing on-boarding training and attempting to reduce time to productivity.

Sean Champion, Vice President, Learning Services at The TriZetto Corporation encourages his team to “teach the tools, rather than the content.” The objective is to create a framework for employees where they can identify appropriate business scenarios and the actions they will need to take for their customers. Employees are trained to search for the appropriate resolution steps for each action.

For example, when training employees or customers on “common software troubleshooting techniques,” there are dozens of potential business processes – too many to teach them all in one class! Instead, employees learn to identify issues and then search for the appropriate solution to the issue, rather than learning every solution in class. Case studies of a few sample issues and common search techniques prepare employees to confidently search for the information customers need.

Focus on reusability

If the focus becomes teaching employees to search, then the answers they seek have to be both easy to find and perfectly clear. Technical training can be broken down into very small content objects. A growing trend within the learning industry is microlearning, which is bite-sized content delivered in media-rich formats designed to teach a specific concept. Instead of thinking in terms of modules and lessons, design around individual tasks, and bundle these videos or job aids into units. These same task demonstrations will become your library of searchable answers. Remember that when people search in the future, they will not be looking for a 30-minute video on every possible situation (unless the video has an index as well), so keep them simple, quick and targeted.

Optimize your learning management system

If you want to optimize employees' ability to find answers for themselves, you're going to need to get organized and have a great learning management system (LMS) for employees to use. Obviously, many companies are creating wikis to organize corporate data. But what if you want to track what's being searched and who is learning what? What if you want to organize it by job function and ensure that everyone is on the same level?

¹“The 70:20:10 Model for Learning and Development,” TrainingIndustry.com

If you really want to optimize your learning, you'll need to optimize your LMS. Start small by creating a library of content objects, organized by role and by task. Do NOT make employees find the videos or job aids by searching through their entire original course. No one wants to do that, trust me! Instead, keep the initial course as it is, but create additional content objects that are simple and organized by task. Tag each task carefully so they are easy to find. Allow employees to "favorite" their most commonly searched objects, and create a homepage shortcut to the task library for them.

You also need to consider the user experience. If employees are searching for information while on the road, your content must also be optimized for mobile access. The courses should be easy to find, download and complete. All too often, organizations implement a mobile learning program without considering the mobile users' learning experience. In a world where almost anything can be consumed and managed on a mobile application, your learners only expect the best.

It's also important to think about how you can enable learners to collaborate and share information across your learning platform. If you have the capability, some learning teams allow employees to create their own videos and post them to the library as well. This sharing is great for wrapping specific business processes around your content, and often provides better insights into areas your learning content doesn't cover.

A fully optimized LMS is one of the most important steps for giving learners control over their professional growth. But not all learning technology providers offer robust search and optimization features. Many organizations find that their learners struggle to find content. One report unveiled that 34% of respondents said "lack of effective tools (such as search) makes it difficult to find the most useful information." When it comes to selecting an LMS provider, do your homework and make sure it has the features and functions to compete with the growing expectations of your learners.

Now get some sleep!

CLOs will never be able to eliminate new hire training. The truth is, our stakeholders don't want to figure out training for themselves. They just want the training to take the absolute least amount of time possible. They want the tools to find answers for themselves and create a culture of constant education and organization-wide sharing.

If you can take advantage of the love people have of discovering answers for themselves, you will answer the call for both education and efficiency and perhaps you'll get some sleep at night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Art Mirrow is a software education leader who has run training businesses for some great companies, including Plateau Systems, Kenan Systems and SAP since 1998. He currently consults with training teams to help them evolve and grow their business. Art fantasizes about living in a yurt in Central Asia with his family. In lieu of that fantasy, you can find him at his home in Arlington, Va.

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1880 Campus Commons Drive
Suite 275 North
Reston, VA 20191

info@meridians.com
1-844-MKS-CORP
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