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### Learning: In Context

*An improvement over existing learning models*

#### Key Learning Points

- Employees continue to find it difficult to retain and apply what he or she learns during training sessions.
- The new learning model should ensure that learning is prescriptive, relevant and delivered when required.
- Contextual learning enables employees to access appropriate learning content, providing relevant information at the time of need and allowing them to immediately address the situation at hand

Sportsmen frequently attend training camps. Here they learn, practice and demonstrate their key skills. Still, a major question remains - can these sportsmen apply all that they learned during these camps when on the field? In short, are the tips and strategies applicable in real workplace situations?

#### Catch 22

While most sportsmen do exceptionally well during their training camps, most find it difficult to deal with the pressures and repercussions of the real game. Organizations face similar challenges. Employees continue to find it difficult to retain and apply what they learn during training sessions. Thus, training seldom has the desired impact on performance improvement. However, this inability to convert learning and practicing to on-the-job performance improvement has little to do with employee competence levels.

#### Changing Scenarios

With the knowledge economy growing rapidly, today's learner is expected to learn and retain large chunks of mission-critical knowledge. Additionally, to apply knowledge that would improve performance, a learner has to sift through large volumes of data and glean relevant information from a range of delivery vehicles that include the Internet, intranet, classroom training, portals, newsletters and knowledge bases. This approach to performance improvement may frustrate the learner by being painstakingly tedious and at times humanly impossible!

Organizations must find new knowledge deployment approaches to ensure that training gets converted into application, which in turn increases on-the-job performance. A few deficiencies in the existing learning models affect their ability to meet the demands of the emerging knowledge economy. What are these deficiencies?

#### A Count Up

**Incomplete - need identification.** A common employee response to the question, "What type and amount of knowledge can improve your performance the most?" is "I don't



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know.” This is because existing learning models do not educate or assist learners in identifying their learning needs. Most employees are unaware of how their performance is measured and what they can do to improve their performance levels.

**Difficult access.** While identifying learning needs is difficult enough, knowing where to find the knowledge that addresses the need is equally, if not more, difficult. From knowledge bases to subject matter experts, the Internet, intranet, co-workers and learning management system, a learner often has to conduct long arduous searches to find what he or she needs. With the average attention span clocking ten seconds, most learners give up before they locate relevant or adequate information.

**Tracking trouble.** Organizations seldom emphasize maintaining a complete record of all the informal and formal learning that takes place within the organization. Even though large volumes of datasheets, e-learning courses, reference guides and training documents are consumed, their use and users are often untracked. Consequently, organizations can never be accurate about existing knowledge levels or determine the exact number of employees who already possess performance improving knowledge.

**Verification worries.** The existing learning model may allow organizations to identify learning needs and deliver appropriate content. However, organizations find it difficult to measure employee comprehension and retention levels. This inability to measure the transfer of mission-critical knowledge even for key roles is the biggest disadvantage of existing learning models.

### **The Need of the Hour**

Earlier, organizations could make up for the aforementioned deficiencies with a combination of an LMS and e-learning. Learning executives have now realized that it takes much more than developing a course or building an LMS to get employees to access the learning they need.

Organizations need to improve their existing learning models. The new model should ensure that learning is prescriptive, relevant and delivered when required. A new learning model that meets these criteria is contextual learning.

### **In Context**

Contextual learning enables employees to access appropriate learning content, providing relevant information at the time of need, allowing them to immediately address situations on hand. Recent improvements in portal technology have changed the face of contextual learning. Today, a portal can "understand" what it takes to perform a task to the optimal level and deliver required and relevant learning at the time of need. Such a portal allows more functions than using a combination of performance improvement tools and context-sensitive learning content.

A contextual learning model ensures access to highly personalized content as it is sensitive to an employees' roles, responsibilities and tasks, both historic and current. For instance, when an organization conducts a sales training program, the knowledge delivered to an employee would consider the type of work he or she does, the products he



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or she sold and is now selling, the customers he or she is dealing with, previous training, skills and competence levels, performance review ratings, his or her strengths and areas of improvement.

### Comparisons

Organizations use a combination of ad hoc sales training, new-hire training and annual sales meetings to deliver sales training. Ad hoc training addresses an immediate learning need by delivering specific and topical content developed for a particular product, customer or situation. New-hire training is highly generic, where every sales representative learns the same things about the organization's tools, systems, customers, products, services and sales models.

The annual sales meetings are by far the closest an employee can get to personalized content. With a contextual learning model, an employee can do much better. For instance, a sales representative accesses the organizations' portal to track a new sales opportunity. The portal then does the following:

- Processes data from different sources such as the LMS, HRMS, CRM and other knowledge bases
- Uses contextualization tools to determine what qualifies as prescriptive learning content
- Delivers highly personalized and relevant content to the learner
- Displays links to quick reference guides on effective sales strategies, product specifications, product introductory training courses and the names of representatives who have successfully sold the product

Thanks to technological advancements and improvements in existing learning models, organizations can link mission-critical knowledge to on-the-job performance improvement. Such a combination allows employees to think, train and work simultaneously.