



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### **The Pros and Con-texts of Learning**

*Improving the quality of learning initiatives by contextualizing them*

A recent Forrester report states, “We will once again be in an environment where demand outstrips supply, especially in highly sought-after skill areas. Companies should proactively be creating training and development plans and establishing recruiting pipelines well in advance of need.” The advent of technology has resulted in the creation of so many new jobs that organizations find it highly challenging, if not impossible, to keep their employees fully trained at all times.

#### **The challenge of learning**

A learner is required not only to adapt to new technology, but also to keep his or her skill level current. In such an environment, what learners require the most is real-time access to learning content. Also, because it is natural for a learner to opt for the path of least resistance in his or her pursuit of information, organizations must foster a learning-friendly corporate culture. However, this is easier said than done.

Instead of enrolling in classroom sessions, learners prefer to turn to online search engines like Yahoo and Google where information is just a click away. In order to undo this disinterest in formalized learning, initiatives should be more specific, more focused on individual needs and job requirements and more direct. In other words, learning must be relevant and offer ‘proximity.’ As one trainer says, “Adding proximity and relevance can be compared to the difference between riding a bike and driving a car!”

#### **All in the context!**

Trainers believe that relevancy makes learning contextual. It is this ‘context’ that allows an organization to better understand a learner, his or her job role and performance, knowledge and experience levels. By empowering the learners to decide how, when and where to learn, contextualized learning improves real-time access to learning content.

The core elements that define contextualized learning are empowering learners, a culture of organizational learning and embedded learning.

#### **The all-powerful learner**

Training departments will continue to address organizational objectives through courseware and content. Trainers will continue assessing learners in terms of the extent to which skills and knowledge levels support organizational objectives. However, with time, learners will grow more in command of when, where and how to learn. They will soon have the authority to decide the amount and type of training that they would require to make themselves more valuable for the organization. For instance, a learner might choose a part-time, online training session over a weekend workshop to learn about the latest operating system.



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An empowered learner can determine what learning options can be of value to him or her, and subsequently the organization. He/she will also be aware of the learning options that may prove unnecessary or wasteful. By avoiding such options, the learner can make better use of his/her training hours. Some trainers confuse empowering learners with abolishing classrooms, which is not the case. It only means that a learner, in return for the time spent in classrooms, will demand a more complete and satisfying learning experience.

### **The learning organization**

With contextualized learning, organizations can adopt best practices and new technologies better. Certain experiences have a longer and greater impact with regard to developing competencies in an individual. With contextualized learning, trainers can identify and incorporate those 'experiences' to allow a relative newcomer to the organization to perform with the flair of someone with years of experience!

With an increase in the rate of technology adoption and experiences that boost competency development, organizations can catapult themselves ahead of their competitors.

### **The work-embedded learning culture**

An ideal way to increase learning consumption is to understand an employee's role in the work process and devise ways in which learning can be embedded into this work process. Contextualized learning helps by asking the employee, "What work do you do and what do you need to do the work well?" and not, "What am I going to teach you?"

### **As close as one can get!**

The other aspect of contextualized learning deals with offering proximity. In order for that to take place, there must be a high level of integration and easy access to all learning resources. That would require organizations to focus on more than just "training" their employees. Allowing learning initiatives to evolve along the core elements of change - design and delivery, alignment, management, culture and technology - is equally important.

**The two D's.** When learning offers both relevancy and proximity, the focus of design and delivery shifts from topic-based to task-based. With more task-based learning programs, trainers will find it easier to support on-the-job performance. Traditional learning is more of a formal event with trainers aiming to cover specific topics in a given time (for instance, workshops on conflict or time management), regardless of whether or not an individual may require proficiency in them. However, the design and delivery of task-based programs is such that a trainer can anticipate and plug those knowledge and skill gaps.

**In line.** Organizations are growing increasingly aware of the importance of aligning business objectives with an employee's job role. This alignment is necessary to allow organizations to maintain focus on innovation and growth. Additionally, it allows an



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employee to understand how learning impacts job performance. As a result, a learner is more than willing to participate in learning initiatives.

Instead of identifying skills sets and developing learning programs around them, a better approach would be to identify job roles and equip an individual with the critical skill-sets to allow him or her to perform better. This can only be done when business priorities are in alignment with job roles. Such an approach guarantees a higher rate of learning success.

Well-managed is half done! It is important for the upper management and top executives to understand how contextualized learning can provide better business value (in terms of an increase in ROI). Learning initiatives can address urgent business issues only when learning officers partner with heads of business units and key appointment holders (CEO, CIO). While the top brass still believes that the traditional, formalized learning approach (learning with a book or in a classroom) is more effective, it is up to trainers to convince them that learning is most effective when embedded in work.

When building a business case for contextualized learning, it is also important to support this shift from a formal to an informal learning culture with a restructuring of the evaluation system. To measure the impact of contextualized learning, organizations must consider new methods of ROI evaluation and not evaluate learning success in terms of learner participation and satisfaction alone.

**A cultured organization.** Contextualized learning is all about understanding a learner's work environment. Therefore, organizations must foster a learning culture to encourage an exchange of task-based best practices and information.

**Tech-power.** Some tools and technologies that learners are already comfortable with are cell phones, e-mail, portals and the Internet. These tools are important to task-based programs because they support person-to-person interactions. While encouraging the use of existing tools and technology, organizations must be open to new technology that can easily be integrated into work processes.

Contextualized learning allows organizations to reinvent their learning initiatives to focus more on learner needs and skills that will help learners perform their jobs better.