
Mobile Learning – The Silver Bullet for Your Learning Organization

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For years, creating the ultimate learning organization where learning is continual, corporate-focused and germinates from every component of the company, was out of reach, impractical, cost prohibitive and made only for lively MBA student case study discussions. Not anymore. There is a technology platform, which also happens to exist virtually everywhere today, that enables organizations to reach this zenith point of learning. It is called mobile learning, aka, mlearning, and it WILL transform the way companies approach learning and training and think about mobile devices.

What is Mobile Learning?

Before discussing how mobile learning will transform businesses, it needs to be defined. Essentially, **mobile learning is informational content this is accessible or created from a mobile device**. Next question - what is deemed a mobile device? Mobile devices are defined by three criteria:

1. Form factor - A mobile device must fit comfortably in the palm of one's hand.
2. Connectivity – It connects to a network, either via a cellular or a wireless network (Wi-Fi) or by a hardwire.
3. Power / State – It is “always on”, meaning that it is *intended* to be left on all day.

By this definition, a laptop computer is not a mobile device. Also, a mobile device does NOT necessarily have to be a telephone, but can include PDAs (Personal Digital Assistant), such as the HP iPAQ.

How Will Mobile Learning Transform Businesses?

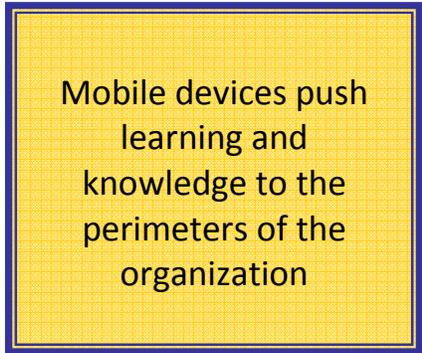
The optimal way to recognize the value of mlearning and how it transforms business relationships is to see it in action. Based on extensive examination from countless discussion hours with users and executives within organizations investigating and utilizing mlearning, the following case study, which is based on an actual business, showcases the concrete value of mlearning:

Company A, call it Acme Products and Services, has a customer - Jane Customer. Jane's office is located in a city which requires one to fly to meet her, roughly once every quarter. The purpose of the meetings is to obtain feedback on current products; gather new product requirements; update her on new product information and upcoming training schedules; inform her about national marketing campaigns; and pry for competitor product and pricing information.

In preparation for the meeting, while waiting at the airport, Acme's representative begins reviewing key documents and emails from her mobile device, which is loaded with an application that securely connects with the company's Intranet. From the mobile device, the representative can review a prior email from Jane on a specific question she asked on product specifications; obtain high level statistics on marketing campaigns; learn about what other colleagues are saying about competitor pricing; and obtain the latest training schedule.

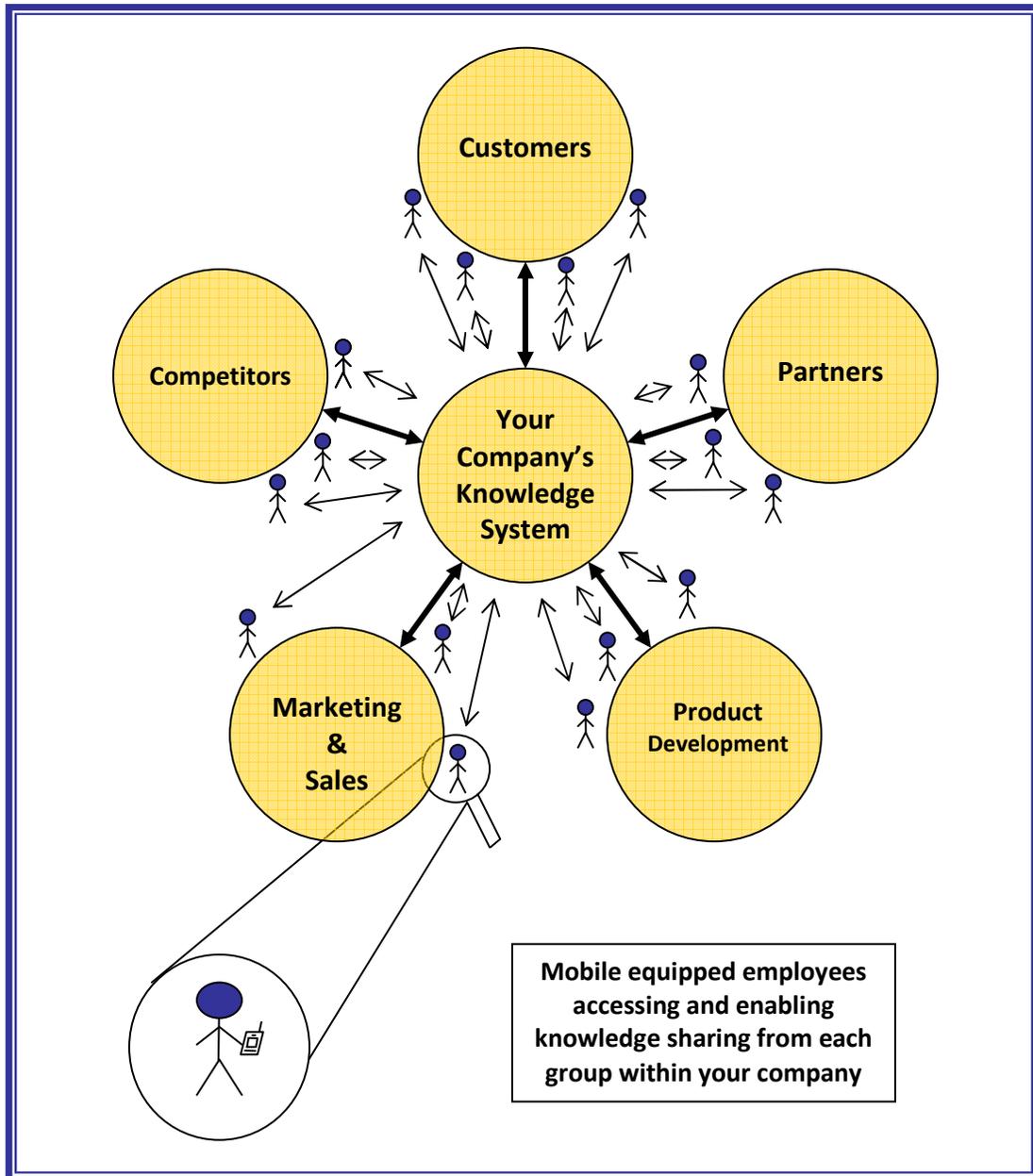
After a successful and engaging meeting with Jane, where a myriad of topics were discussed ranging from competitor marketing plans to product feedback, the representative's desire is to notify colleagues back at the office about these hot issues. While heading to the airport for the return flight, she pulls out her mobile device; securely connected to the company Intranet; and begins diffusing information to colleagues (and the chain of command) about competitors, pricing, product feedback, new specs, marketing losses and whatever other information that might be valuable. Since, the system pushes updates in real time to employees' mobile devices, instead of creating an email distribution list, upon "publication," the posting is immediately available on the company Intranet for employees across the company to view.

From this case study, some may argue that real time knowledge is unnecessary to sustain a competitive edge or that a laptop could have performed the same function as easily. That may have been true in the past, but not in today's competitive environment. Business class 101 teaches that customer contact and feedback are vital factors to a company's vitality. But this just does not "cut it" in today's "Twitter Culture." Today's business leaders now understand the value of the ***speed with which relevant information is created, accessed and disseminated***. It is precisely because of this new operating model that mobile devices offer superior accessibility and information distribution capabilities over other computing devices. Mobile devices (and mobile learning) are the essential tools in this new information model – they enable information to be pushed and knowledge to be shared from every group and all stakeholders throughout an organization (see the figure below). Mobile learning "un-levels" the playing field.



Mobile devices push
learning and
knowledge to the
perimeters of the
organization

The Mobile Device-Equipped Decentralized Mobile Learning Organization



Why Mobile Learning Will Transform Businesses?

Mobile learning no longer can be ignored as just a powerful business productivity enabler. Mobile devices sealed their value as a computing tool years ago by extending the range of business productivity beyond the office. However, the vast majority of business users only utilize their mobile devices for

Mobile Devices – The “Swiss Army Knife” of Technology Tools

effortless email and calendaring – productively noble applications. However, most of these businesses are nowhere close to reaching the full potential and utility of these devices. Now is the time for organizations to push the application envelope for employees’ mobile devices and enter the realm of mobile learning. The forces that will inevitably lead organizations down this path are not only compelling, but also are tsunami-like in their force.

Force Factor #1: I need to use the pay phone?

The United States has an estimated 276.6 million mobile phone subscribers, according to the CTIA (The International Association for the Wireless Telecommunications Industry). This represents roughly 90% of the US population.¹ The statistics are a mere formality; a glance around the environment leads to the simple conclusion that mobile devices and, specifically, mobile phones are ubiquitous.

Force Factor #2: There’s a voice coming from my mobile phone?

The days of using mobile phones just to make phone calls are over. With the thousands upon thousands of innovative software applications on the market available for download hosted on the current generation of computationally fast mobile phones, these devices’ functionality has expanded far beyond their original use as just a phone.

Force Factor #3: Instructions? I don’t require instructions.

This much is clear, the Millennium Generation (sometimes referred to as Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2000) is innately skilled at leveraging and maximizing technology to their advantage. There is no “getting up the speed” for this future workforce, for they are fully equipped NOW to gain from technologies that are literally “in the palms of their hands.”

Force Factor #4: What’s the meaning of life? One second, let me Google it from my phone.

The Millennium Generation also can be referred to as the ‘Now Generation,’ perhaps even the ‘Reference Generation.’ That is, they expect to have information available “at their fingertips” **at any time, on demand, from wherever they are.** This expectation for real time access is met largely by their mobile / smart phones, which are always powered “on” and with them 24 hours a day / 7 days a week.

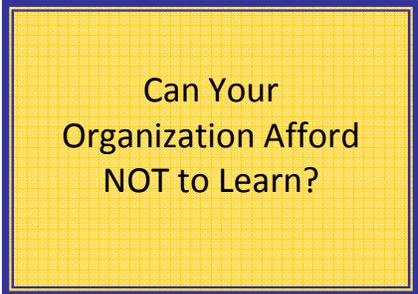
Force Factor #5: Fat Pipes in the Sky

It’s one thing to have mobile devices in the hands of employees; it’s another thing to make sure data and information gets to them quickly and consistently. One only has to trace back a few

¹ Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association. "Wireless Quick Facts." *ctia.org*. Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association, Oct. 2009. Web. 09 Nov. 2009.
<<http://www.ctia.org/advocacy/research/index.cfm/AID/10323>>.

years and to recall when data streams to phones were weak and spotty. That just is no longer the case as wireless infrastructure companies are pushing the technology limits and already are building next generation networks (i.e., 4G – 4th Generation) that are fully enabled to deliver voice, data and streaming multimedia to users anytime, anywhere at speeds of over 100 Mega bits per second.

The planets have aligned in such a way as to make it virtually impracticable to ignore mobile learning. Companies are engaged in a highly competitive battleground for customer dollars and mindshare, and ***employees must be absorbed with sharing and disseminating “value information” from every corner of an organization – THIS is the ultimate goal for a learning organization.*** The time to institutionalize this mind-set with an innovative mobile learning program, which enables this level of sharing, is now. The real question to ask is: Can my organization afford NOT to learn and engage my customers? The next section discusses just how to begin your mobile learning plan.



Can Your
Organization Afford
NOT to Learn?

How to Make Mobile Learning Work?

There are a number of variables at play when it comes to formulating just how to commence a mobile learning initiative. Many keys for success are considered “standard best practices” (SBP) for developing, integrating and implementing any successful technology initiative, while others are specific to mobile learning. First the SBPs:

SBP #1: Solidify executive level support – from an executive sponsor who comprehends the value of the mlearning program and supports the urgency of the implementation.

SBP #2: Secure operational stakeholder support – from key groups, including end users, information technology staff, and the learning / education team.

SBP #3: Identify the technology champion – within each stakeholder group and resource them with tools to pioneer the requirements effort and the overall program among their constituents.

SBP #4: Communicate frequently – with the stakeholder team (including the executive sponsor) throughout and beyond the development and implementation timeline.

SBP #5: Develop success metrics – and provide the executive sponsor with specific return on investment numbers as frequently as possible.

These five SBP’s form the firm underpinnings upon which a mobile learning program will stand which, incidentally, must endure through and after the development process. Without any one

SBP in place, a mobile learning program will encounter roadblocks or setbacks that delay implementation or worse yet, lead to failure.

The next sets of practices (“mobile learning best practices” or MLBPs) are specific to cultivating a mobile learning program centered on enhancing employee learning and sharing information:

MLBP #1: Position the mobile device as a productivity tool – allow users to embrace their devices at work (remember – they can’t live without them in their personal lives). Allow the devices to be their company life-line – encourage full utility. ***Mobile learning is more likely to succeed if there is a social aspect to learning.*** Positioning mobile learning only as a formal training program will curtail usage and curb the devices’ usefulness.

MLBP #2: Identify users’ “moments of need” – conduct CSI-level investigative research – this will lead to a crystal clear understanding of when, how, and where users operate their mobile devices and what (i.e., applications) they utilize on them. Research also will identify the specific types of information and training relevant to users’ job performance.

MLBP #3: Design content for mobile – assuming training or information content will be valued and accessed by users from their devices by simply “converting” existing content to mobile is a fire path to the program’s expiration. Content ***must*** be designed to account for the devices’ form factor (screen size), computing power and battery life and should include building / utilizing mobile friendly navigation features, file formats, and file lengths. Anything short of this design will fail!

MLBP #4: Test mobile on the IT infrastructure – a solid, robust information technology infrastructure is imperative for supporting mobile devices. Do not assume mobile will “plug and play” into the network. Plan, pilot, and test before launching a program organization-wide. Assure standard company security protocols and policies are followed – scan for malware; upload patches; track device usage; etc. In fact, all mobile learning success stories point to one conclusion – ***standard company IT security policies apply to mobile devices.*** There is no need to re-invent the wheel.

With the SBPs forming the foundation principles; these MLBPs constitute the girders of a successful mobile learning initiative, an initiative that must be preceded with the development of a meticulously researched holistic plan. This plan must account for each juncture of the program’s life cycle – from formulation of the organization’s attitude and approach to mobile learning through pilot development. It must address instructional design, device usage and management and ongoing operations. In fact, each phase is governed with specific practices and do and don’ts for how to implement a mobile solution for the organization.

 **Conclusion - Can You Afford NOT to Learn?**

Reverting back to the critical question: Can organizations afford NOT to learn and leverage a technology that will take computing and business productivity to the next level? There exist numerous success stories of companies enriching their employees with these tools. Fight the inertia – the forces are already at play – it is only a matter of time before mlearning becomes a standard learning platform in your industry.

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