

A Centralized Knowledge Base Means On-Time, Every-Time Learning

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Most organizations want to increase productivity and enable their employees to perform their job functions with a higher level of proficiency. A blended approach to learning and knowledge sharing is one method of achieving these goals. E-learning can be enhanced with knowledge sharing and just-in-time access to information, which companies can leverage to impact their strategic business objectives.

According to Massood Zarrabian, CEO and president of OutStart, there is a formality surrounding the learning community's idea of e-learning. There is structural design, curriculum, learning paths by occupation and tests to verify and validate competency. But these things do not, by necessity of their existence, always fulfill a learner's information needs. "If you look at the past five years of learning, people have been focused on solving their administrative problems through content development and deployment," Zarrabian said. "It's not really about the content. At the same time, a lot of people are learning from subject-matter experts. There's a lot of interaction that happens through e-mail, for example, but a lot doesn't get captured." He explained that by bringing the worlds of formal learning and informal, or ad hoc learning, together, companies can increase the impact of their learning initiatives and drive business success.

By incorporating ad hoc learning into a knowledge-base, businesses can create a kind of Amazon.com environment for training, Zarrabian said. Instead of relying on CDs, books and movies, learners can have access to all of the information they need, when they need it, without need of an expert. "Instead of going to the expert multiple times on the same question, why don't we create a knowledge base around that question the first time?" Zarrabian said. "From then on, people won't go and interrupt the expert or wait for the expert."

Answers can be captured in a knowledge base that grows as the people who develop learning research those areas where learners have the most questions. That way, subject-matter experts won't be overwhelmed by multiple requests for the same kind of information. Their time, formerly spent responding to queries, can be better spent building a knowledge base to enable more knowledge sharing among learners.

What should be included in the knowledge base? According to Zarrabian, the knowledge base should contain a bunch of answers the expert knows people are going to ask for. "I'm going to use tools that I use every day: Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, e-mail," Zarrabian said. "You populate the database—a repository that is bits and pieces of information that you believe people are going to ask." Zarrabian explained that when colleagues come to the expert, the system could work inside the knowledge base instead of going to the expert for answers. "As it finds the information, it will respond to the colleague's question," he said.

Zarrabian said this method isn't much different from accessing a Web search engine. But going beyond keyword searches, which bring up a lot of unrelated and unwanted information, learners should be able to search concepts. This more advanced version of a search engine would be able to respond to queries in terms of the

learners' questions. "It's like creating a virtual community through knowledge bases that combines training, knowledge bases and forums into solutions," Zarrabian said.

A centralized knowledge base translates into productivity increases and bottom-line dollar gains, and learners benefit from the immediacy of focused, accurate retrieval of information as needed. Zarrabian explained that the centralized knowledge base also helps with time-to-market issues. "If the knowledge base responds to you, you're going to get a response in seconds," he said. "If I have a question about something, I don't need to go through 45 minutes of training. I don't need to go to a classroom. I just need my questions answered.

"People have talked about bringing knowledge management and learning together," he added. "Everyone predicts that some time in the future, those two are going to be together. The problem is that 'knowledge management' is a very difficult phrase to define. What is knowledge management? Look at how people learn from others. We call those 'communities' or 'forums.' People also learn because there are tidbits of information available in e-mails. People learn because there's formal training available that they go take." To take e-learning to the next level, Zarrabian said, "we're trying to bring communities, knowledge bases and learning together."

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