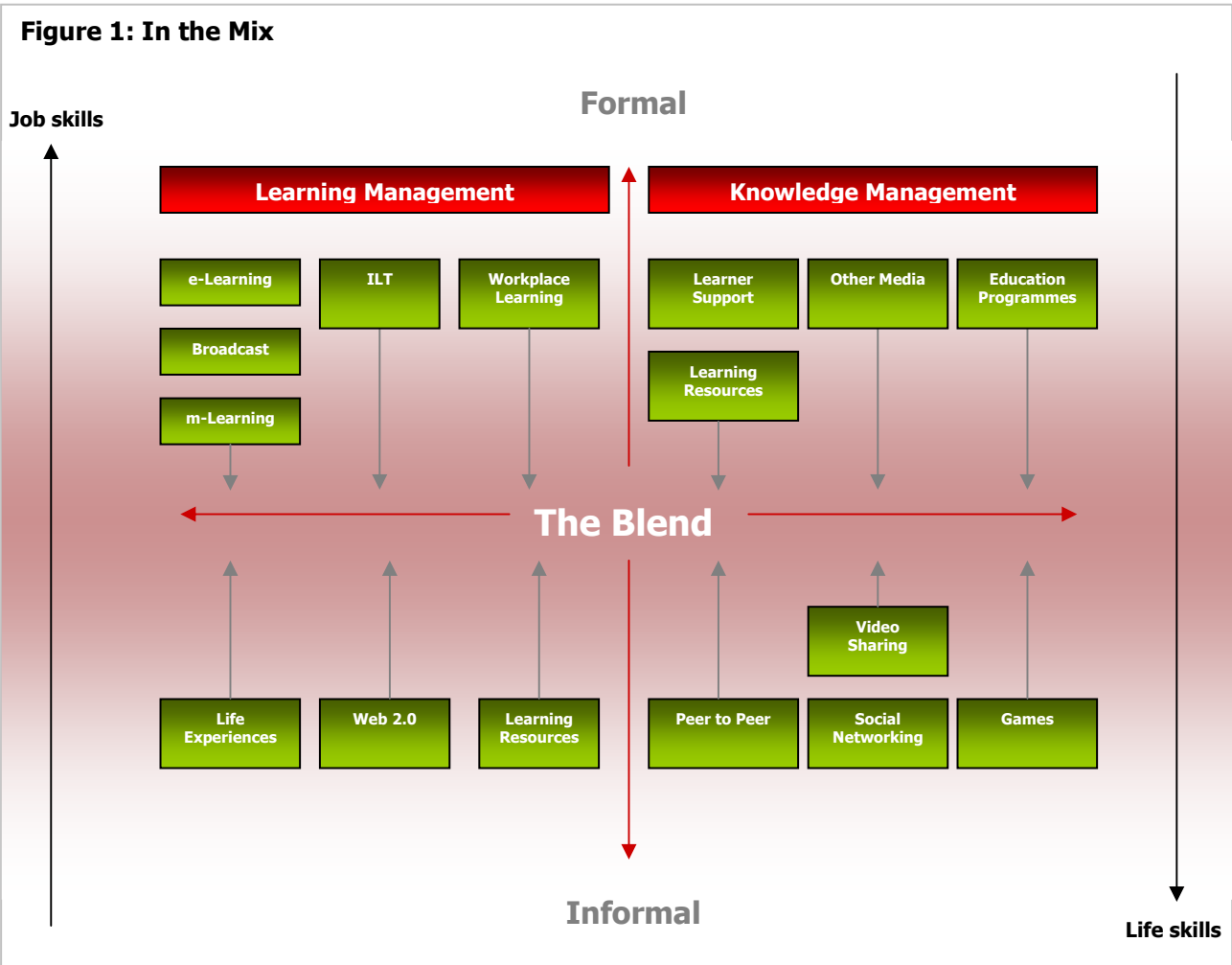


REDTRAY

21st Century Blend

Technological developments have created new opportunities for learning provision, but how does that change our definition of blended learning and the tools available to learning professionals?



Drivers for Change

As we settle into the 21st Century it's clear that technology has moved – and the next generation are already more computer-savvy than we'll ever be – but has anything really changed? Training conferences still 'educate' us in ROI, evaluation techniques, coaching and learning styles.

But things have changed and this is driven by:

- A global economy – the world is becoming smaller and the balance of power is changing.
- Open source technology – the geeks are taking over the universe.
- Informal learning – now recognised as an important part of the overall mix.

- Knowledge management – now an important element of corporate intellectual property. Never before have we had the tools for learning than we have today. Technology has given us the platform, our job as learning professionals is to proactively realise the benefits.

A New World Order

So, what do these drivers mean for corporate learning?

Individual and corporate drivers

Organisations clearly have their learning agendas, driven by operational demands and competency frameworks. But today, as individuals we have more access to resources through Internet Search Engines, social networking sites and peer to peer communication channels which all help to quench our thirst for knowledge.

Recognising informal learning

Because of technology and people's lifestyles, learning is increasingly becoming informal. 'Just in time and just enough' learning is en vogue in a world where we expect to have information at our fingertips. Since the advent of the Internet, informal learning has become more prevalent – now it's recognised as a key component in the learning mix.

A new generation of expectation

Spare a thought for the children of tomorrow – not only will they need advanced computer skills at work but they'll need pretty good IT literacy before they even start school! We're already in the age of opportunity where our children learn how to use a computer before they learn how to ride a bike – some even at the expense of riding a bike!

Now spare a thought for us old fogies. OK, so we don't fight technology, but do we really understand it? If not then we best learn quickly – e-Learning is competing with the Wii and Grand Theft Autos – expectations have risen so we need to bridge the software divide between work and play.

Making learning work

Work-based learning is about application and context. Often we can't find time to attend an instructor-led course, evaluate the results and then implement our new-found knowledge in our day job. Today, effective learning is doing it in the context of work and allowing immediate application, transfer and validation. Organisations have a wealth of knowledge – having the systems to harness and share this knowledge makes work-based learning a more powerful option.

The New Blend

In the field of learning and development we see fads come and go and hear a lot of false predictions; e-Learning never did quite replace the classroom, learning management systems never actually became the panacea we were promised and perhaps rapid development will never totally replace bespoke e-Learning?

However, nothing ever disappears completely. Technology moves on and creates more opportunity. The beauty of this industry is that our armoury just keeps getting stronger and

stronger – the challenge is to use the weapons available to us to greater effect than we have in the past.

Figure 1 illustrates some of the elements we can now use in the blend. The principles are still the same in that we must understand which delivery methods best meet the learning need and how the different elements complement each other. We still need to answer the fundamental questions:

- What formal delivery elements are available to me and how can they best work together e.g. when should I use bespoke e-Learning and when is broadcast learning (using a rapid development approach) better?
- How can I best support the learners e.g. should I offer real time (synchronous) learning support through discussion forums, chat rooms or coaching surgeries, or is asynchronous support sufficient?
- What additional learning resources should I make available to suit my audience's preferences and circumstances? Do these all need to be delivered on-line?

But we now also have a different set of challenges and questions to answer:

- How should I engage with informal mechanisms to enable learners to share knowledge?
- Do I really need to capture data on the knowledge and skills gained or can I accept that informal learning can be an essential, if intangible, part of the mix?
- Does everybody need to go through the same learning programme or should I just look at results? Training is a means to an end but learning is a lifelong experience.
- Should I support learners with the technology for informal learning to take place?
- What support do I need in my organisation to enable me to take a different approach?

Making the right choices is not a black art or about seeing into the future. It's about working out what you need to achieve and using the right tools to get there in the most effective way. As Edward deBono said "The winner is the chef who takes the same ingredients as everyone else and produces the best results."

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