Digitally Minded
are you Fit for the Future?
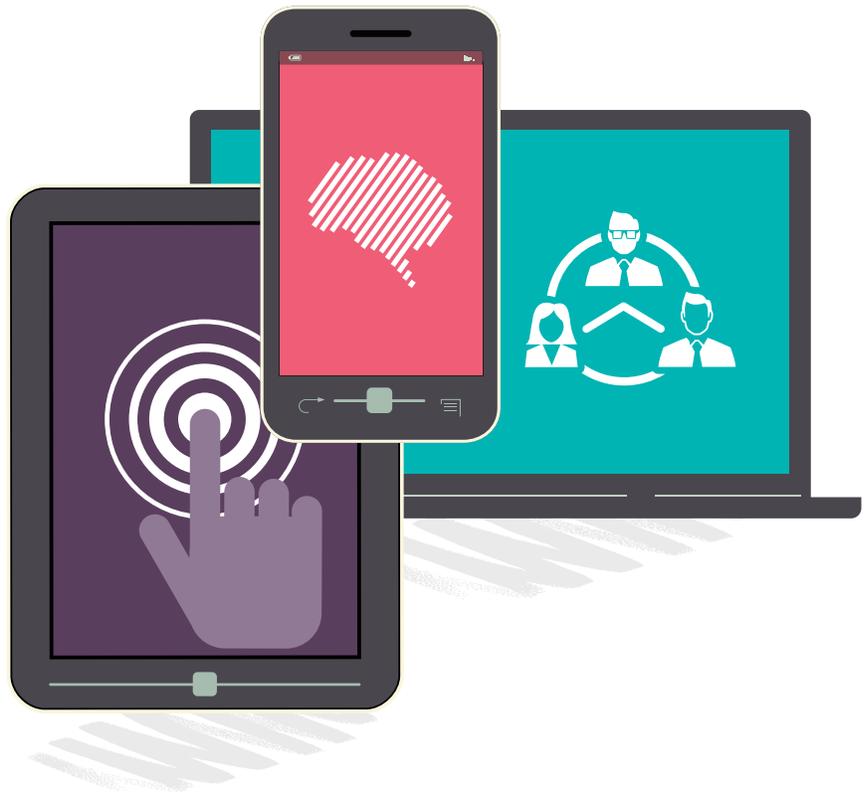
The success of any organisation is primarily determined not by its strategy nor its product range but by its people. Ensuring that individuals have the skills and knowledge they need to be productive is therefore an important challenge for every organisation. The problem is that people are different. Employees have different learning needs, different skills requirements and different learning preferences. Digital learning is a cost effective solution that can help you to meet these diverse needs.

A wide range of digital learning options are now available, including online courses, virtual instructor-led training, webinars, digital books, learning apps, infographics, TED talks, YouTube videos, animations and 'telestrations'. Each of these can be used as a standalone resource or they can be combined in many different ways to support and enhance your learning and development interventions.

This paper examines the evolution of digital learning, the benefits it provides and some of the challenges in bringing those benefits to fruition. It also includes examples of good practice and it advocates that if you want to become 'fit for the future', you need a new mindset that is open to the possibilities of digital learning.

Technology's impact on learning

Technology-led developments have had a significant impact on the delivery of learning. For example, video-based learning, computer-based training, e-learning and online learning have all enabled individuals to access 'learning content' outside of a classroom, other than by reading a book. The self-paced nature of these options offers convenience and flexibility to learners, as they can top up their skills or pick up on key refresher points, at their own pace as and when needed.

In the early days of technology-based training, the learner was on the receiving end of linear content. There may have been interactivity but the training was an individual and private experience, through guided courses. The evolution of web 2.0 technology allowed learners to collaborate and to create and share their own content. It also opened the door to new digital options such as web conferencing, virtual classrooms, social networking and streaming video.

However, it's important to remember that technology is only an enabler in the learning process; the real focus should always be on the learning content. To construct a worthwhile experience for learners, the interesting questions to ask are: What skills do people need to learn? What are the circumstances under which they will willingly wish to acquire those skills? And how can technology assist in that process?

The digital advantage

Digital learning assets have the potential to:
1. Make learning more accessible. Today, when almost everyone has a smartphone or a tablet - and is accustomed to gaining instant access to information - organisations have a new opportunity to provide every employee with high quality learning content and just-in-time performance support on-demand, anytime and anywhere.

2. Enhance the effectiveness of learning by appealing to different learning styles. Studies into how the brain works show that we each have our own preferences when it comes to learning. In other words, there's a style of training that suits each of us best. Learning styles are often described as being visual (seeing), auditory (hearing) and kinaesthetic (doing). However, psychologists admit that almost no one falls neatly into just one of these brackets. Certainly, some will prefer face-to-face training, while others will prefer action learning, reading or watching learning content. If the training we're given matches our preferred style, we learn more naturally. By introducing digital learning options, you'll therefore enable more people to learn in a way that suits them.

3. Excite learners. In the battle to be seen as an 'employer of choice', organisations are understandably keen to differentiate themselves. Providing innovative learning and development is one way to achieve this. The essential 'soft skills' required in the workplace haven't changed over time - working life is still about people dealing with people - but the way in which employees want to learn these skills has changed. Young people, in particular, will expect you to provide elements of digital learning, as they've grown up with technology. Many employers are also tired of providing the same old training. There's an appetite to create something new, to excite people, to stimulate interest and curiosity. Digital learning can tick all of those boxes.

4. Offer greater choice. With digital learning, you can now effectively offer employees a 'pick and mix' menu of options that can enhance - or even replace - some of your face-to-face provision. Essentially, digital learning can be used before, during, after or even instead of classroom training, depending on the need. In other words, organisations can now offer each learner a personalised learning experience: "here are the options, what learning journey would you like to make?" Everything can now be centred on the learner. In the same way that Amazon offers recommendations based on past purchases, learners can be directed to appropriate digital assets, based on their ratings of the content they've benefited from. This can enhance their learning experience and motivate them to discover and appreciate different approaches or perspectives.

5. Show the impact. A wealth of data is available with digital learning. Organisations can therefore compile and analyse management information on which options have been used by which people. This can help with evaluation and also to further understand individual learning preferences.

Making it work

Just because digital learning options are available doesn't mean that they'll automatically benefit your organisation. Certain challenges will need to be overcome, such as:

1. Choosing and curating the right content. A great deal of choice exists with digital learning, so help may be required to determine exactly which digital learning options will meet your specific needs. It's not as a simple as shoehorning your classroom content into an online course. The challenge is to provide the right content in a format that people want to receive. This will depend on the learning requirements and on your openness to the possibilities. The right combination of digital learning options can support and enhance a personalised learning experience for individuals, giving people true flexibility in how they learn.

One thing's for sure: your digital learning must be easy and fun to use. Today's employees expect digital content to be well designed and instantly available. This means that any content must be designed and developed from the learner's perspective. Always consider how they'll interact with the content and what experience they'll gain.

2. Neophobia. This is the fear of anything new. People are sometimes unwilling to try new things or break from their routine. Procurement teams will understandably have questions, particularly if there's no precedent in the organisation for buying digital learning. For example, they'll ask: Will it work? Is it reliable? Can you justify the investment? Is it value for money? Gaining an insight into the effectiveness of digital learning in different organisations can help you answer these queries, particularly if you can show the impact on the performance and motivation of learners.

3. The infrastructure impact. Will your digital learning be Cloud-based, hosted externally, an app or SCORM-compliant content on your learning management system? A range of choices are available and, reassuringly, some will have little or no impact on your IT infrastructure.

In practice

Faced with a client requirement to train people across different countries, with different learning styles and preferences, we created a series of digital, self-directed learning 'books' with multimedia content and activities that individuals can access on demand from any device. Designed in a visually-engaging, interactive format, these digital resources enable staff to access targeted learning content at their own pace, including videos, online resources, downloadable PDFs and practical tips, exercises and reminders. The digital books provide an enjoyable, easy and cost effective way to help people to continually learn and improve as they do their jobs.

Digital assets can also be used to support organisational development events. For example, we created a large-scale event to communicate a client's 2020 vision to its staff. As part of this, we developed a range of digital assets, including video content to deliver key messages in a more imaginative and fun format than the standard 'talking heads' footage that other companies use. The impact was immediate and inspirational.

'Fit for the future' mindset

With digital learning, any assets you create can be easily updated. However, becoming 'fit for the future' isn't about having future-proof content. It's more of a mindset. It requires a new way of thinking about the possibilities of delivering learning, a belief in the potential of digital assets and the courage and vision to try a novel approach that can appeal to different learning styles.

Can digital learning meet the needs of your organisation? Whether you're a multinational corporation or a small business, it stands to reason that people will be more effective in their roles if you can provide essential learning, in the format they want, at the point of need. Open your mind to the possibilities of digital learning. Make it another weapon in your armoury.

If you're interested in how we're helping our clients to deliver digital transformation, increase their effectiveness and generate tangible business improvements, please contact us:

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