

Portable Learning: Podcasting as a Vehicle for Organizational Learning & Development

Joyce Quindipan and Christa St. Cyr, Cambria Consulting

Podcasting, a popular way to provide portable multimedia entertainment, is gaining popularity as a vehicle for training and development.

Since early 2003, podcasts – essentially audio or video files containing “bite size” pieces of content – have been a popular way to provide the masses with portable multimedia entertainment. Now this mode of communication is gaining popularity as a vehicle for training and development. For example:

- IBM produces and distributes a series of podcasts titled “IBM and the Future of...” to keep employees and business partners current on emerging initiatives across IBM’s global organization.
- Capital One provides iPods to all employees who sign up for programs through the company’s internal training and development organization.
- EMC supplements executive training by providing iPods preloaded with executive summaries of leading business books organized into playlists.
- Xerox uses “vodcasts” to train its technicians.

Integrating Podcasts into Learning

Today’s learners are being trained for a work environment where podcasts will be expected and even preferred. This is because a growing number of colleges and universities have

taken up podcasting as a way to deliver course content to their students:

- In 2004, Duke University provided iPods to all first-year students, allowing them to take advantage of a wide variety of courses and learning support offerings provided via podcasts.
- Schools such as Brown, Stanford, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Missouri School of Journalism participate in iTunes U, enabling students to access, download and organize lectures and other course-related media the way they download songs from iTunes.

Podcasts are an appealing way to provide training and development for many reasons. With its multimedia approach to learning and development, podcasting enhances the learner’s ability to readily capture, retain and apply information. Not only are they dynamic and engaging, but podcasts are also relatively inexpensive and easy to produce, compared to other multimedia options. Almost anyone can create a podcast in very little time and make it readily accessible to employees worldwide. This enables true “just-in-time” knowledge sharing and allows for unprecedented flexibility in offering learning content.

For example:

- Podcasts can help ensure consistency while providing core content across global office locations, or they can supplement standardized course material with custom content for distinct audiences.
- Depending on the audience and desired impact, information can be shared as one extensive program, or it can be divided into short content segments that standalone or comprise a series.
- A variety and blend of learning content can be included. A single program could include a lecture providing background information, step-by-step instructions on “how to”, tips and guidelines for developing critical skills or knowledge areas, and anecdotes from colleagues describing how they overcame obstacles to succeed.

Podcasts can be distributed and accessed in a variety of ways. They can be contained within a searchable library of information on the homepage of an organization’s learning and development group. Alternatively, a course instructor can distribute them directly to participants’ inboxes. Learners can also sign up for subscriptions to automatically receive the latest podcasts in a series. Learners then view individual or sets of podcasts either online or using a portable device such as a MP3 player or laptop. Because podcasts are portable, they can be listened to or viewed anywhere and at any time.

Producing Podcasts

The ability to quickly create and distribute podcasts is a core advantage to using podcasting for learning and development. However, at the same time, it raises quality concerns. Organizational development professionals need to be ever vigilant about maintaining and applying practical learning frameworks, training design principles, and

content development and delivery standards. The best way to do this is to create concrete guidelines for producing and disseminating learning content. For example, to balance the freedom employees have to create and use podcasts, IBM provides corporate podcasting guidelines for content creation and criteria for quality assurance.

If you are thinking about producing and using podcasts as a vehicle for organizational learning and development, here are some questions to think through before getting started. These questions will help ensure your podcasts are well made, well received and meet your training and development objectives.

- Is the podcast content the primary learning content, or is it intended to be supplementary? (In other words, is the content essential information learners will not be acquiring in some other way? Or is the content pre-work, background or reinforcement for other core learning content?)
- Could the podcast content be delivered more effectively or efficiently any other way?
- Will the podcast content standalone, or does it fit logically into a broader library of podcasts?
- Will the multimedia aspect of podcasting make the content delivery more interesting or memorable?
- Can podcast content be created in a way that ensures clear, concise delivery and maximum impact while at the same time minimizing the amount of time required to listen to or view it?
- Do you have the right “talent” and mix of people (e.g., on and off screen subject matter experts) to produce the podcast?
- Recognizing that podcasts are not the “be all and end all,” what else can you offer learners to support or reinforce your podcasting efforts?

Conclusion

An emerging component of a multimedia approach to learning and development, podcasting enhances the learning experience. As leading-edge companies and universities have begun to demonstrate, podcasts can be

integrated as a core component of a comprehensive approach to learning and development. Doing so enables maximum impact for the learner during knowledge transfer.

Joyce Quindipan is a Partner at Cambria Consulting. She specializes in designing technology-enhanced systems, processes, tools and enterprise applications for selection, performance management, training, and professional, career and organizational development. Joyce's innovative learning solutions have included in-basket assessment and development simulations, intranet and web-based performance management and improvement systems, and on-the-job learning application tools. Her clients have included Accenture, BP, Cisco Systems, Eisai Pharmaceuticals, ExxonMobil, FDIC, The Gap, JPMorgan Chase, Mercantile Bank, Microsoft, Nike, Sun Microsystems, US Customs Service, and Wachovia. Joyce holds a bachelor's degree in Mass Communication from the College of Communication at Boston University, and a master's degree in Administration from the Woods College of Advancing Studies at Boston College.

Christa St. Cyr is an Associate Consultant at Cambria Consulting. She is a project contributor on a wide variety of projects, including recruitment and selection, performance management, and employee and leadership development projects. She researches client business and HR related issues, conducts survey analysis, and develops course and resource guide content. Christa also participates in building Cambria's interactive practice. Her client work includes engagements with Cisco Systems, Mercantile Bank, MetLife, Microsoft, United Technologies and Wachovia. Before joining Cambria, Christa worked with The Boston Consulting Group and The American Chamber of Commerce, Brussels.