The Immersive Learning Trifecta:

FINDING SYNERGY AMONG THE RIGHT CONTENT, INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY, AND DELIVERY MODALITY

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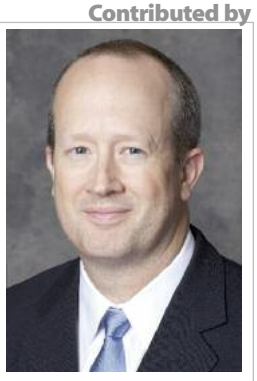

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You may remember a class in high school or college where you were simply expected to learn facts and regurgitate them during test day. How much of that content did you remember the week after the test? Unfortunately, you probably also know of a training event in your professional life where the process was basically the same — you were exposed to some knowledge or skill in a didactic fashion and maybe even assessed on it, but, chances are, you didn't remember most of what you were taught, and you certainly didn't know how to apply it to your job.

A 2012 Bersin and Associates report estimated that U.S. corporate training groups spent $67 billion in 2011. Pharmaceutical companies, and companies in all industries, can squander this large investment in employee development by making the mistake of designing training that focuses on relaying knowledge or skills in a vacuum, thus resulting in the inability of people to apply what they have learned to their everyday jobs.

Simply expecting professionals to connect the dots between the rote definition of some knowledge area or skill and how to apply it in the real world doesn't work. Instead, the training itself should show learners how to apply knowledge or skills in their specific professional settings. This is called "immersive learning", and it can help greatly increase the return on the investment of time and money in training.

Within a pharmaceutical company, immersive learning is ideal for a variety of customer-facing roles, including sales representatives, account managers, medical science liaisons, reimbursement business managers, health economics and outcomes experts, and every combination thereof. For these roles, the customer interaction is the situation in which most of their learning needs to be applied, so their knowledge and skill training should be framed within these situations.

But, once you recognize that immersive learning is the best path, how do you make it happen? What differentiates a successful immersive learning program from one that will fall flat? The success of an immersive learning program hinges on the synergy among three key components: the content, the instructional strategy, and the mode of delivery.

Content

You may be used to hearing "content" defined as the facts and processes that will be taught to the learners. This is the traditional information-centric approach. But, it's important to remember that the majority of training in any professional setting — and especially training for customer-facing roles — has the ultimate goal of creating or changing behavior. Many training programs fail before they are delivered because they don't acknowledge this fact and, instead, deliver information-centric training.

The content of an immersive learning curriculum needs to be defined not as a list of terms and information but as desired workplace behavior. This requires examining the work behavior and understanding exactly what people need to learn to be able to exhibit that behavior. This is not to say that information, such as how the cardiovascular system works or what the steps of the selling model are, will not be imparted. On the contrary, this information will be learned, and learned much more effectively, because it is framed in the context of the behaviors expected of the learner, for example, intelligently conversing with a physician about the effect of a drug on a patient's heart function.

Trainers who think about content as behavior influence rather than information may find themselves eliminating many facts and figures from the training because it doesn't support the learning of the behavior. This may seem like a bad thing to training professionals used to the information-centric approach where the axiom is the more info, the better. But, if the goal is to teach a behavior, extraneous information only removes focus from what is really important for the learner to know to succeed in his or her job.

Once the content (essentially the topic of the learning event) is defined, the training professional can then determine how to present it.

Instructional Strategy

Instructional strategy is simply the teaching method a training professional decides to use when covering a specific piece of content. For example, will your training be a didactic lecture? Will it be an interactive team exercise? Or will it be a combination of several strategies?

The choice of instructional strategy is critical because it brings the content to life. Think of content as the active ingredient in a drug. Without the delivery mechanism, such as a tablet, injectable solution, or cream, the active ingredient can't get into the patient's body to help him or her. The same is true of learning content — the instructional strategy is how the learner receives the content.

Choosing to employ an immersive learning strategy is only the first step. In order to make it work, companies must get four things right:

1. Setting: Designing an environment and situation that closely resembles where the learning will be applied is important to successful immersive learning. Even some of the most trivial aspects of the application environment can affect how well training participants are able to learn something. It is important to make the training environment match the real-world environment as closely as possible. For example, for a live selling role-play simulation, it would be beneficial to have the role-plays take place in a more intimate setting that better resembles a physician's office, rather than a large, open hotel ballroom. For an e-module about hospital account management, the

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graphics should display a hospital setting, rather than a blank or generic background.

2. Task: Actionable real-world insights come from real-world experience. With a selling simulation, for example, the goal should be to put sales representatives into a selling situation that mirrors as closely as possible the way they engage with a physician in an in-office dialogue. Time needs to be put into the design process to ensure attention is paid to the small details that make the physician scenarios as real as possible, including the physician's practice setting, background with the product class, treatment approach, and personality.

3. Behavioral outcome measurements: In order to determine whether training has been successful, it's critical to assess whether the previously defined behavioral outcomes were achieved. This can include role-play assessments or coaching interactions where managers use well-defined behavioral criteria for scoring, or even application questions in an e-module that require the learner to think through an example and apply knowledge, rather than simply call up memorized facts.

4. Required resources: The resources needed could range from time allocated to training (and away from other work), to money for travel, to a specific software application on the learner's laptop or tablet. In any case, it's important to know up front what is needed to execute the training as you design it.

By designing all these — the setting, the task, the measurements, and the resources — with a focus on workplace behavior, the learner will be able to immediately see how he or she can benefit from the training event in his or her role, a factor that can be very motivating to even a reluctant learner.

Modality

Immersive learning is possible in both live and technology-based instructional environments. Naturally, some modalities are better suited for certain types of interactions than others. It is important to consider what different modalities can offer for an immersive learning program. One thing to be considered in choosing a modality for immersive learning is the range of response options needed.

Because immersive learning puts learners in realistic situations, the training needs to allow them to respond to those situations to determine their ability to apply the knowledge and skills learned. While live training offers the opportunity for an infinite number of responses, distance learning limits responses to a pre-defined list.

If the learner is giving responses, he or she also needs to receive feedback from the training to indicate whether the best path was chosen. This helps mirror the real world, because customer interactions don't end with the representative answering a question. Again, with a live training environment, a knowledgeable facilitator can provide an unlimited range of feedback, while in a computer-based environment, the feedback must be limited to a few different options depending on the response the learner chooses.

On the other hand, one advantage of distance learning is that e-courses or virtual simulations can use branching techniques, so the individual learner can experience a course multiple times and have it play out in multiple different ways. The individual may go back and take three different pathways to see how things play out depending on the decisions that are made or the individuals with whom the learner chooses to speak. A single live training event doesn't allow for this.

Another advantage of e-learning is that the facilitator is not a limiting factor. For live training, the quality of facilitator can make or break the learner's experience. E-learning offers a controlled, consistent experience that is not dependent on a trainer's knowledge, background, or ability.

We mentioned earlier that the right setting is a key component of an effective immersive learning strategy. The advantage of distance learning is its ability to simulate real-world environmental factors more cost effectively, easily, and practically than a live environment. A company using a live simulation could go through a potentially expensive and time consuming staging process to simulate the real-world environment. However, this is rarely done. Most live events require learners to suspend disbelief and imagine themselves in a physician's office, board room, or hospital.

It's important to remember that a training program does not have to be limited to just one modality. Ultimately, a blended solution across a learning continuum would likely trump any single event. For example, it may make sense to design a curriculum that includes interactive e-courses on the front end prior to a total-immersion live training event, followed up by in-field reinforcement. There is no reason the entire learning continuum can't be immersive. Allowing the learner to experience a real-world-like simulation in an e-module to learn core concepts and then practice it with peers in a live event adds richness to a training program that can't be achieved with just one live immersive event. After the event, mobile technology can be introduced to provide additional real-time reinforcement as the team members encounter situations. Mobile learning solutions are an ideal way for training participants to receive refreshers on concepts and activities that they can immediately apply. For example, if sales representatives have a managed markets reference tool on their mobile devices, they can be prepared to address questions related to access and reimbursement at the moment they arise. It doesn't get much more immersive than that.

Conclusion

A mistake many pharmaceutical organizations make is to focus training on conveying information, rather than teaching or changing behavior. To meet the ultimate objective of team members performing a desired behavior in the real world, knowledge and skills must be taught in the context of real-world situations.

The more the training can have participants actually model desired behavior in a realistic setting, the more it becomes ingrained and the easier it becomes for team members to continue the behavior once they enter the real world without reverting to old habits.

Creating an immersive learning program isn't automatic. It first requires careful definition of the behavioral objective — that is, the content to be taught. Then, the instructional strategy must be fleshed out in terms of setting, task, outcome measurement, and required resources. Finally, only after those two areas have been clearly defined, the right modality should be chosen for delivering the training.

At a time when the pharmaceutical industry is looking for lower-cost ways to deliver training, it is important for organizations to make sure they are getting the most value possible from the training solutions they implement. Immersive learning is a cost-effective solution because, by putting people in situations similar to those they will encounter on the job, participants come out of the training far more prepared and ready to return to the field than they would be had they simply been fed facts and information devoid of context. PV

Pharmaceutical Institute is a provider of specialized training programs for the pharmaceutical and biotech industry. For more information, visit pharmainstitute.com.