Viewpoint

# 21st century learning: Content authoring

## Executive summary

### Who writes the materials we learn from?

It used to be a simple question, with a single answer. In any organization, one department wrote almost everything we learned from: the training department. Course, book, or job aid: these were the sources of information for keeping employees skilled and knowledgeable for their work.

### Things have changed

High-quality, well-structured "push" learning remains important for capability building in all organizations, but by itself it is no longer enough. Other ways of learning are now just as important, including social and informal learning from others. They also include "pull" learning, the learning that happens when people pull down the resources they need to help them tackle a challenge.

In today's rapidly moving modern world, how can we ensure the creation of, distribution of, and access to, these resources? It is certainly not by creating only highly structured, formal courses. They cannot be created in time, or in sufficient volume, to meet the need. Sometimes courses are needed, but in addition there must be a range of materials, some very high-quality, others produced quickly to be readily available.

This paper explores why formal courses are no longer enough to meet the needs of learning at work, and examines how learning content needs to adapt to fit the fast-changing world we live and work in.

## The changing nature of learning content

In the past, learning "content" meant "courses" and producing them was the training department's job. It was responsible for the creation of courses and for scheduling them. This took place over a period of months, and the schedule of courses was often published semi-annually or annually.

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Courses were created centrally by the department. Members of the training department would work with subject matter experts (SMEs), or would become SMEs themselves to produce the courses. This slow, centralized approach was natural given the circumstances: almost the only medium of training delivery was the classroom course. To be worthwhile, a classroom course needs several people, and to justify the act of instructors or directors pulling several people out of work, the courses had to be both rich in content and long—often days or weeks long. The inevitable consequence: these substantial courses took time to develop and check before deploying—usually months. This matched the general pace of business at the time.

Until a few years ago, this was how all training was carried out at work and is still how much training is done. But business no longer works at this pace. Technology has changed everything. The Internet, in particular, has sped up every part of business. Learning and development departments (as training departments have become known) have had to respond. To keep pace today, L&D must change its role and deliver faster than ever before—and deliver differently.

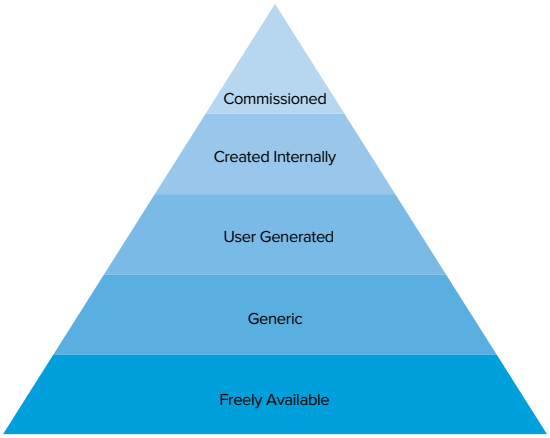
L&D can no longer be concerned with only the generation of courses. It must be more intimately involved with the business, listening to it closely, and responding with performance aids, facilitating conversations on- and off-line, and using other ways of moving relevant information through the organization far more quickly than via the old classroom-based system.

But while all this is necessary, the need for centrally produced content has not disappeared. It remains an essential part of the role of L&D. That content could be delivered through classroom courses, online as a formal e-learning course, as a self-service resource, or in other ways. Indeed, appropriately designed content can often be used in many different ways.

The question is this: given the need for speed in today's business world, how can L&D make available content that's high quality, but that is created and put to work quickly for the immediate benefit of the organization?

## Learning content and the need for speed

In today's fast-moving business world, the course is no longer the sole way of creating and distributing content. And neither, importantly, is the L&D department any longer the only source of learning content. According to learning commentator Donald Taylor, most organizations today source content through a combination of five methods:



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Once, content that was created internally was the mainstay L&D Now,  to meet the demands of the organization, and to draw on the latest information, L&D must marshal all the other types of content and put them to work.

By using these five types of content, L&D is able to expand what it provides—the first step toward meeting the organization's need for speed. Next, L&D needs to ensure that there's enough context around the content. A book on leadership is low-cost, generic content. It may have good thoughts, and be well written, by a recognized author. Without some guide to how leadership is practiced within the particular organization, however, it will not provide as much value as it might.

User-generated content (UGC) is one area in which L&D can create great content that is low-cost but rich in context. For example, the field sales team at Stanley Black & Decker regularly creates videos on how to pitch a particular power tool that colleagues can view on their smartphones. Although typically only 2 to 3 minutes in length, these snippets help viewers sell better by providing key tips precisely relevant to their context of work (sales), to the organization (Stanley Black & Decker) and to a particular situation (pitching a tool against a competitor's).

While UGC is a growing and important area, L&D departments still want to know—rightly—how they can add the most impact by centrally creating content that is context-rich and appropriate for the learning task at hand.

The answer is that centrally created content—where L&D still spends much of its time—must cover a range of content beyond the course (but including it) and must also be produced according to the particular need it meets. Whether job aids, performance prompts, short quizzes, or podcasts, some materials will be lengthy and produced with high production values, while others will be enough to meet an immediate need and little more.

Given the demand for more learning materials across a wider range, the task of producing materials centrally must become slicker, allowing L&D to ensure business needs are met creatively with as little time as possible spent on administrative tasks.

Without a doubt, learning content creation has become a good deal more complex.

## Content creation and complexity

As an organization's needs grow more diverse, creating and maintaining learning content becomes exponentially more complex. This is not merely a result of today's wider spectrum of possible learning materials, it is also driven by the speed at which things change in the business world. This is particularly true for organizations that are large, are updating products frequently, or are working internationally and need to create content in more than one language.

For example, many organizations require regular training on new product releases. A company with a mono-lingual sales force and 20 new product releases per year would require only 20 product courses annually. However, a slightly larger company with 40 new products, working in two languages, and updating those product courses once a year requires eight times as many courses:

| Products | Languages | Releases per year | Content required per year |
|---|---|---|---|
| 20 | 1 | 1 | 20 |
| 40 | 2 | 2 | 160 |



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This is a simple illustration. The reality is far more complex. Large organizations launch hundreds of new products every year, and many release iterations of existing products several times a year, not just once every six months. In addition, there are other dimensions of complexity, too. For example, products commonly vary across sales territories, meaning any new product launch requires several versions of the same content.

Although we have used products here as an example, this model applies to a wide range of materials produced by organizations of all types—information on anything from company policies to emergency procedures that is likely to be changed rapidly, to require localization, and to be maintained.

And the complexity does not end there. Once created, learning content—whether it's courses, reference materials, or anything else—needs to be maintained. Over time the materials that need maintenance quickly add up:

| Content created Year 1 | Maintenance Year 1 | Maintenance Year 2 | Maintenance Year 3 | Maintenance Year 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| 160 | 160 | 320 | 480 | 640 |

In summary: learning content today comes from a range of possible sources. Even given that L&D can and should now use external sources for some of its content, it will also have to produce some materials itself. When it does so, the pace of modern business means L&D almost certainly will have to produce and maintain far more assets than it ever did in the past. There is simply more that people need to know, faster.

## Agile, focused content production

Faced with this challenge, L&D must first consider which materials can be sourced from outside the organization. For what cannot be outsourced, it must then choose the right method of producing content suitable for each learning need. Most organizations have at least three different types of output:

- High-quality materials—for matters likely to be important to the organization for a long time.
- Rapidly produced materials—these have lower shelf life and production values, but are produced and distributed quickly.
- Performance support items—these may have a long shelf life, but will have varying production values, and will usually be short in length.

For example, power tool manufacturer TTI divides its courses into three sorts, created using different tools. TTI, which uses the Infor® Learning Management learning platform, includes a great deal of visual material when developing product training for its power tools. For products that will have a long shelf-life (such as TTI core battery systems), high-production value courses are built outside the system from scratch, using Flash and HTML 5, and are imported into it.

About one-third of courses are created using Course Creator, a tool built into Infor Learning Management. This system holds a range of templates that can include videos, pictures, tests and interactivity, and allows the TTI team to produce courses and other learning materials very quickly.



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The team also creates performance support materials—often in the form of short videos. These are imported into Infor Learning Management, and then manipulated within the Content Creator tool. Often quizzes and other extra materials are added. Many video-based courses convey specific pieces of new information and run under 4 minutes.

Given the size of TTI and its pace of innovation—in a typical year, over 300 new products may be introduced—efficiency in content production is essential. This is true for every type of learning content, from the high-quality course with a shelf life of years to the short video that will have served its purpose in a matter of weeks. TTI is able to only produce these materials fast, and to specification, by using the Infor Learning Management built-in content authoring tool.

## Why integration works

Today's L&D department has an increasingly complex role, but when it comes to content production, the requirements are clear: the team needs to understand a business need and produce and distribute content to meet that need. Anything that gets in the way of this prevents the department from doing its job.

This is why the tools for the production and distribution of learning content need to work as closely together as possible. Where content (whether commissioned, generic, or UGC) is imported, that must be a smooth process. Where a great deal of content is being created—as with TTI—it makes sense that the creation, editing, and distribution of content are handled in the same tool. This allows the L&D team to spend time on creating the right content to meet the business need, rather than on the process of importing learning content into the system.

A built-in content development tool, such as that incorporated into Infor Learning Management, will allow the production of great learning content by including functionality such as:

- Course templates
- Use of video and images
- A range of quiz and question types
- Easy import of external materials
- Ability to use images and videos in quizzes
- Ability to deliver to multiple devices
- Distributed authorship within the tool
- Distributed maintenance within the tool

Any good authoring tool should be able to do all these things. Having one that is also integrated with the organizational content distribution system makes it possible to meet that major demand of the organization today: speed.

And speed has one common enemy: wasted time.

It is easy to underestimate the amount of time L&D teams commonly waste simply getting their systems to work together. Even routine tasks that are not complex (such as transferring usage data from a delivery system into a tracking system via a spreadsheet, or changing file formats from one type to another) are simply unnecessary and can mean hours lost every week. This lost time grows exponentially (as seen above) with each extra dimension of complexity and new piece of content that requires product.



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For example: suppose one aspect of a product has changed, and this needs to be reflected across learning materials in six different languages. If the materials need to be retrieved from the learning delivery system, edited, recompiled, and then re-imported into the system, that is not a complex task, but it takes time. Even if it requires only 15 minutes per course, that is 1.5 hours of someone's day used unproductively. If the system included an integrated content creation tool, that time could be spent putting the expertise of the L&D professional to good use, rather than spending their time on administrative tasks.

One example of this efficiency at work is Toyota Motor Europe, which supports over 80,000 learners across an extended enterprise of 48 countries and 30 languages, with 2,500 courses. Toyota has been able to only maintain this level of complexity by producing and maintaining almost all learning materials within the Infor Learning Management platform.

## Conclusion

As organizations and global markets have become increasingly complex, so have the learning needs of their employees and of those in the extended enterprises. With the pace of change today, and the commercial imperative for sharp skills and up-to-date information, organizations need more learning materials than ever before.

This growing demand for learning materials at work puts L&D in a position of increased influence. To make the most of this position, L&D must focus on making the right materials available, at the right level of quality, for identified business needs. And where materials must be created, this should be done using tools that are, wherever possible, integrated. This will allow L&D to shift from working on administrative tasks to focusing on what it does best: adding value through its understanding of the business.

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