



White Paper

Rise of the tablet

How it will impact workplace performance

Introduction

The arrival of the tablet has changed everything.

The fascinating thing about a tablet is not just its portability, connectivity, speed and looks. It is the point where the skin meets the screen at the fingertip. It creates an intimacy and a sense of control lacking in a keyboard or mouse. A user can actually touch and feel the content on the screen, move it around, combine it, tap it to dig deeper, and peel for layers of information behind it. It is fast. It is light. It is portable. It is connected, and it is always fresh.

But tablets also present a challenge. They require individuals to think and rethink the way information is presented and the ways people learn. To take advantage of the tablet's promise, the concept of learning and how learning is supported in the workplace needs to be re-visited. More than just a fad, tablets can have a profound impact on workforce effectiveness.

The rise of the tablet

The tablet is more than a short term success. It is part of the trend towards powerful, portable computing, and importantly towards the touch screen experience. Looking ahead, more than half of computers shipped worldwide will not be PCs, but mobile devices: tablets, smartphones, and non-PC netbooks. Interestingly, PCs are now trying to imitate tablets.

What's driving the rapid fire growth of tablets? It is a combination of widespread wireless connectivity, explosive popularity of social networking, and ease of use, spurred by touchscreen technology.

That last point is crucial. Users now expect to be online, accessing information and communicating, wherever they are. This is true not just of the new generation entering the workplace; the largest single area of growth in Twitter is among the over 50s. Smartphones and laptops have trained people to be mobile. Now they want to take these devices to their logical conclusion—the tablet, which combines laptop screen size, computing power, and portability.

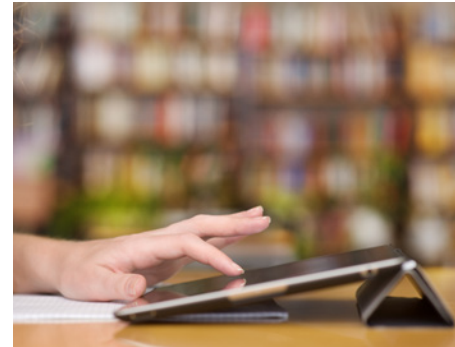


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More than just another tool

People do not need to be trained to use a tablet; they just pick it up and use it. That much is clear in everyday conversations as people can be seen chatting casually as they look up a website or find information via an app to prove their points, passing around the tablet as they would a piece of paper, without thinking about it.

However, the tablet is more than just a convenient consumer device. It can be a vital link to corporate activity when top executives are traveling or otherwise out-of-pocket. With an Internet connection—even a wireless one—the business can be run remotely on a tablet that links to the home office network. In contrast to how it would have appeared a decade earlier (i.e., nearly impossible), this no longer seems very strange: we expect to be mobile and to have instant access to the information, people and applications we need.

Will tablets ever supplant laptops as the dominant tool for productivity? Just as laptops have supplanted workstations over the past few years, the tablet is expected to be the default working tool in the future. The sales data certainly point that way and as costs fall the trend towards tablet adoption continues. Whereas changes to laptop specifications are incremental, tablets are still in the early stages of their technological journey. As innovation comes, prices, which are already lower than for PCs, will fall and adoption will spread.

Implications for performance and learning at work

The term ‘mobile workforce’ covers a wide variety of job roles, including the obviously mobile such as field engineers and salespeople. It also, however, includes those who do not spend all their time at a desk but whom we might not normally consider to be ‘mobile,’ such as doctors.

Consider a doctor making a round in a hospital ward. She is introduced to a patient with certain symptoms which point toward a particular diagnosis; however, she wants a second opinion. At this point she may consult a colleague (if one is on hand) or she could consult a reference work to check her diagnosis. Normally that reference work would be a book on a shelf in an office or available on her computer. With a tablet, however, the book can be with her, ready for immediate consultation. Furthermore, if the reference work is online, it can include comments and advice from fellow professionals in her hospital and beyond. There is no reason why it should not also provide a link to those professionals via some form of instant messaging. The tablet’s camera enables the doctor to show her colleague any visual symptoms. It might also allow the patient to talk directly to a colleague and confirm the diagnosis.

In the past, salespeople simply had to know the key selling points of their own, and competitors’ product ranges. The only way of doing this was through memorization. Today, however, it is no longer possible for salespeople in most areas to know everything about their products. Often it is impossible even to remember enough about them. Customers entering a conversation with a sales person may have access (via mobile devices) to product information at a great depth, putting them at a substantial advantage in the negotiation. To do their job, the sales person needs access to the same information, information that he or she will not have been able to memorize in advance across all product ranges.

Tablets provide the ideal way to deliver this data instantly—in the hand, on the spot, at the moment of need. Pointing with your finger is completely natural; using a mouse isn't. In fact, this is so natural that users focus on outcomes, not on the process of achieving them. People will instinctively use these devices all the time for learning at work. They just won't call it learning.

Learning has been mostly decided by managers and timetabled by a central department. This top-down approach misses the ongoing input from frontline staff, where the rubber meets the road.

The democratization of learning

Learning and development to date has largely been a top-down process. Learning has been mostly decided by managers and timetabled by a central department. This top-down approach misses the ongoing input from frontline staff, where the rubber meets the road.

The new trend is to blend community learning with formal learning. Corporations can blend e-learning, workshops, and formal classrooms with informal collaboration through a corporate social network embedded in their learning technology environment. This allows them to tap into the residual knowledge at all levels of the organization. They see these online 'water cooler conversations' as a vital part of learning at work, a significant source of new ideas, and a major enrichment of their corporate know-how.

Tablets and smartphones accelerate the democratization of knowledge, as they make it easy to ask and be answered. Moreover, they allow an almost instantaneous exchange among many. For these conversations to bear fruit, it is crucial not to police the content, yet at the same time prevent loose talk. If managers have a role here, it is to ensure that employees understand how to use their time in social conversation wisely. Employees, when given trust, are the best regulators. Believe it or not, they know what rubbish is and have little tolerance for it.

For the learning and development department, though, there are other challenges raised by the advent of tablets and the spread of informal learning through social communities.

Implications for organizational learning

Another profound impact of tablets on the learning and development department is the way it will have to present learning content.

Individuals have—perhaps due to the overload of information—become less tolerant of complexity in information or delay in finding it. There is little patience for long winded discourse, complicated texts or digging for data and even a 30 minute e-learning course feels too long. Information is desired instantly and absorbed at a glance. People do not want to stay passive and just listen; they want to actively participate and find immediate results.

The drive for immediacy is amplified in corporate settings where speed or the lack of it often determines success or failure. The tablet has the capacity to satisfy our personal and corporate need for speed. However, it cannot create content, as surely as it cannot brew coffee. To succeed in this unfolding race for knowledge at a glance, Learning and Development will have to re-examine its approach to capturing, codifying, distributing and evaluating learning. It is important to step back and re-examine the basis of instructional design in the corporate environment. A transition is needed to move from teaching detail and measuring retention, to providing on the spot performance support within a conceptual framework and measuring results in terms of business outcomes.



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