



WHITE PAPER

8 Key Components of Modern eLearning

(More than just courses and platforms)

Executive Summary

Fact: To have a successful eLearning program, you need to think about more than just buying video content, or even buying an LMS.

Yes, both video content and a quality LMS are needed to get things off the ground, but more is needed. How those videos are created and presented, and what activities, practices, and attitudes surround them, make the difference between a mildly ineffective program and a successful one that supports a true learning culture.

To be clear, this whitepaper is not a pitch for the newest eLearning products, or a list of trends to watch for in the coming years. Rather, we intend it to be an exploration of those things we see as being at the core of modern, effective eLearning. While we might mention a new technology here or an eLearning trend there, our focus is on those elements that, today, are necessary to make eLearning successful (and that go beyond purchasing a good video library or LMS).

The following eight elements fit that focus. In fact, they overlap and work together as part of a much larger eLearning puzzle.

Modern eLearning is not just the application of videos or digital technologies to learning.

It is an approach to learning based on eight critical components.

The critical components include theory (Adult Learning Theory), format (Relevant Content, Microlearning, Blended Learning, Learning at the Point of Need), and goals/requirements (Management Support, Retention, Engagement).

These components are interlocking and overlapping pieces of a much bigger picture.

Seeing that picture will prompt L&D departments to design programs differently, shop for eLearning providers differently, and measure the success of training differently.

1. Adult Learning Theory

Most training programs are modelled after school classrooms: A group of learners sits in a room and either listens to a lecture or watches a video about a particular topic. Classrooms themselves developed over time to accommodate teaching large numbers of kids and teenagers. Adults in a workplace environment want and need to learn differently.

There is an entire area of education research called Adult Learning Theory that investigates how adults learn, and how to make training more desirable and effective. Some of the findings to come out of Adult Learning Theory over the past few decades include:



Adults are often self-motivated to learn new material—if they can immediately see how that material is relevant to their goals and interests.



Adults need to be able to connect with experiences. This means both relating material to their own lived experiences, and using learning activities with a strong experiential component (role-playing, simulations, and so on).



Connecting with experiences in these ways is beneficial, as adults can bring more context to what they are learning and more maturity to group activities.



Learning for adults is very much a process, and this process works best when it starts with information that appeals to your specific audience, and then moves on to activities that challenge assumptions and explore other points of view.

So why do the principles of Adult Learning Theory matter for modern eLearning? It should be influencing both instructional design and training program design at every step. Successful training programs leverage adults' eagerness to learn relevant material, their need to connect with experience, and the overall goal of transformative change.

Much of the rest of the critical components reviewed here are ways to do just that:
Create training programs and materials that leverage how adults actually learn.

2. Relevant Content

It's no mystery: People learn more and retain information better if they are motivated to do so. Part of an employee's motivation will come from engaging and appealing content. If a person feels the information is useful and it is presented in an interesting way, he or she will pay attention.

An even larger part of motivation, however, is context. People need to know the training they are involved in has a greater purpose. They need to feel not as if it were just another hoop to jump through, but a thoughtful step toward some greater goal. That goal can be personal or professional, as long as it is meaningful.

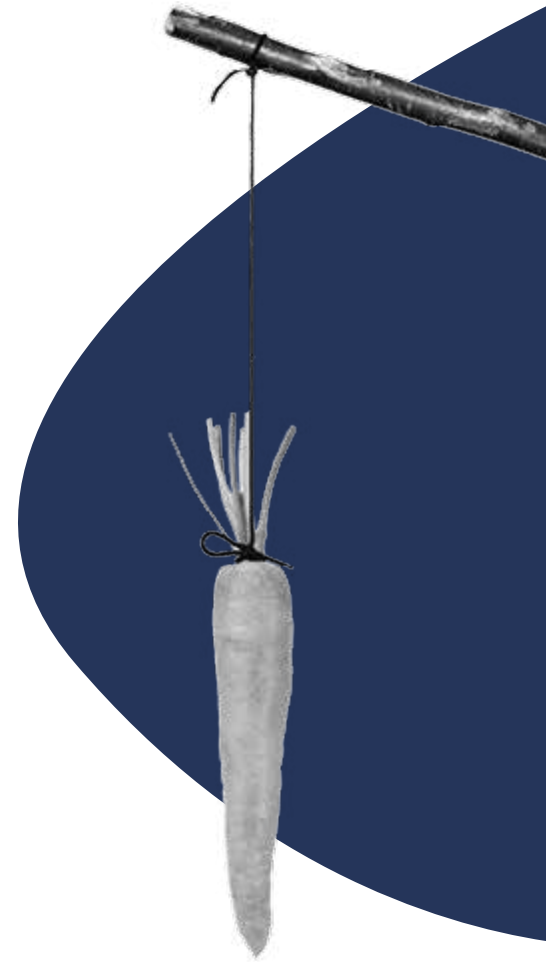
In fact, a large part of any good training program should involve connecting relevant content with employee goals. This means going beyond what is merely needed for compliance.

For example:

Because of promotions or team changes, employees might find themselves in roles that require new skills they have not yet developed—like public speaking, business writing, business math, or managing a team.

Some employees might be go-getters eyeing a management position. Is your training program equipped to teach them the skills they will need, like communication, decision-making, negotiations, and mentoring?

An employee might be struggling with something in their personal life (which is also affecting their work). Imagine them having access to helpful courses on, say, personal finance, health and wellness, stress management, or whatever else might be helpful in their situation.



Relevant content should always be a first priority, even before design. That's not because design is unimportant; it's that no amount of bells and whistles can rescue a piece of content that does not solidly connect with your audience. Consider this. Users will willingly pore over dozens of text-heavy web pages seeking medical information on an illness or injury. The design might not be worthy of the Louvre, but it does not matter because the content is highly relevant to them. Your own training content should be as indispensable as accurate medical information!

A large part of any good training program should involve **connecting relevant content with employee goals.**

3. Management Support

Before you implement any training program, you should be sure you have full managerial support behind it. That goes for modern eLearning, too.

What happens during the first few weeks after learning a new skill is critical. If learners attempt something they learned and are shot down for it, they'll never do it again. If they do something they learned and no one seems to care, they'll realize it's unimportant and let that hard-won knowledge fade away. Any gains made through training can be either reinforced or extinguished, depending on the organization's culture and management practices.

In other words, managers need to be an integral addition to whatever eLearning tools and programs you plan on using. Realize that this might require your managers to receive additional training as well!

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Examples of Management Support:

- Setting a "learning positive" tone during onboarding.
- Helping L&D promote courses and drive participation.
- Rewarding information sharing and training.
- Providing feedback about employee behaviors and performance gaps.
- Supporting and encouraging self-directed learning.
- Starting a mentorship program.
- Setting a good example.



When outcomes (and their indicators) are tied to successfully performing new behaviors, there is a much greater chance those behaviors will be reinforced.

This is the core of management's role in training!

4. Microlearning

Microlearning is the process of delivering bite-sized content to learners that they can consume all at once and apply what they've learned immediately. It's a gold standard in modern eLearning... though there are many organizations that misunderstand its purpose.

Most companies assume that microlearning is needed because attention spans are short, and getting shorter. Thus any training materials should be as short as possible.

Both of these assumptions are wrong. First, there is some evidence that attention spans are actually getting slightly longer. Think about it. If people were not able to pay attention on a single thing, we wouldn't be binge-watching Netflix, playing complicated computer games, or absorbing long-form content. (For a fuller exploration of this point, see our article ["If People Have Such Short Attention Spans, How is it We Can Binge-Watch Netflix?"](#))

So why does it appear that employees have so little time and attention? Mainly, it's because our workplaces, and the nature of our job themselves, fill our days with so many more distractions. Research out of the University of California, Irvine found that employees spent, on average, only 11 minutes on any given project before being interrupted by another task or request. Even more problematic, each time a worker was distracted from a task, it would take 25 minutes (on average) to return to that task.



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What about the second assumption, that training materials should be as short as possible? It turns out that there can be such a thing as “too short.”

A study out of the University of Rochester looked at the amount of time students spent watching videos of various lengths for online courses. The researchers did find that attention began to wander when videos were longer than 9 to 12 minutes; but they also found that students did not engage fully with instructional videos that were too short.

Interested readers can learn more about these and other studies in our white paper, [“Microlearning: Important Trend, or Flashy Fad? What the Science Says.”](#) The more general point relevant to modern eLearning is that training materials should conform to an ideal runtime, parse information into meaningful chunks, and be properly reinforced.



If people have such short attention spans,
how is it we can binge-watch Netflix?

5. Reinforcement

Learning is not just coming into contact with information. Both knowledge and skills have to be rehearsed if they are to be remembered and applied, a process we've referred to above as reinforcement.

Reinforcement is crucial to modern eLearning because forgetting is a part of human nature, an inevitable outcome of the ways in which our brains work. Fortunately, scientists have discovered quite a bit about when, how, and why we forget things we've learned.

So how does a training department reinforce the knowledge and skills gained through training?

To be honest, answering that question could fill a book in and of itself. To get started, there are some handy tools you can use to begin building a training retention aspect into your eLearning programs. (Cards on the table, HSI has made a point of developing these training reinforcement tools for clients to use.)

A Few Training Reinforcement Tools



Downloadable Student Materials:

Like a course summary, outline of key points, and application questions they can discuss with their manager



Reminder Videos:

That review key points on a topic closer to the time-of-need (or after a period of time)



Questions and Quizzes:

That push learners to recall, apply, and re-remember important information



Quiz Contests:

Can take quizzes to the next level and reward employees for remembering information



Simple Signs:

To help cue correct behavior, especially where safety topics are concerned



Using Data Intelligently:

By, for example, identifying courses or topics that are difficult, and breaking down the content into smaller digestible bits

6. Blended Learning

Gone are the days when instructor-led training and eLearning are seen as being at odds. There are several ways in which computer-mediated instruction can be successfully added to, or combined with, more personal face-to-face instruction. In fact, the combination has several advantages for both learners and trainers, as well as the business overall.



For Learners, Blended Learning:

- Provides a more personalized training experience.
- Offers 24/7 access to training, anywhere.
- Makes more efficient use of learner's time.
- Allows more self-guided learning.



Trainers benefit from blended learning, too... if they are willing to fully embrace it as a part of modern eLearning. For example:

- In-person training sessions can focus more on activities and discussion, leaving the more boring and repetitive task of lecturing for video instruction.
- Time spent creating content can be spent fielding questions and working on the "bigger picture."
- Frequently refreshed content can help future-proof training expertise.



Finally, blended learning is good for the business overall:

- It reduces training costs.
- It also reduces disruption in the actual workday, leaving employees more productive.
- It is easier to track employee use and progress, and demonstrate training ROI.

For more on including blended-learning techniques in your modern eLearning program, we recommend our eBook ["A Guide to Blended Learning,"](#) which has tips and ideas for easing into blended learning and letting instructors make the most of their newfound time.

7. Engagement

When employees are fully engaged with training material there are a number of benefits: information is retained longer, employees are happier and more invested, and a true learning culture begins to take root. All of these effects in turn make it easier to grow the organization.

Engagement is notoriously hard to get, however. Employees tune out when content is boring or irrelevant. Or the visuals are outdated. Or the tone is condescending. Or the examples are far-fetched. Or the dialogue is not natural-sounding. Or...you get the point. It's almost as if employees are looking for any excuse not to take training seriously.

So what is needed in a modern eLearning program to boost engagement? In our article on the topic, we outline ["10 Tips to Improve Learning Engagement"](#) generally, but there are some tips that apply especially well to eLearning:

Engaging (and Entertaining) Elements:

Content should use elements that have been scientifically proven to be engaging: live presenters on camera, creative use of sound effects and graphics, music, and, of course, the occasional use of humor. eLearning content can be entertaining!

Existing Social Networks and Friendly Competition:

Every employee has workplace friendships and connections—leverage them! For example, let learners share what they are viewing so they can encourage their network to do the same, just as they do on social media. Or introduce a little friendly competition with a leaderboard.

Other Interactive Features:

Interaction does not have to be a button to push or a game to play. Features that enhance retention (like quizzes) can support engagement, too. There are other features beyond those: a “save” feature, a notes/annotation feature, readily available script texts, and learning tracks.

There's also one key element not much discussed in that piece, but worth examining here: self-directed learning.

Recall what was presented in the Adult Learning Theory section above. Adults can be highly motivated to learn, if they can immediately see how that material is relevant to their goals and interests. With self-directed learning, learners are allowed access to a large library of material so they can determine what is most relevant (and engage with that information at their own pace).

When learners are given access to information and allowed to self-enroll in courses (or learning tracks), it both gives them a sense of freedom and encourages them to learn skills beyond what they've been assigned. And isn't that learning engagement in its purest form?

8. Learning at the Point of Need

Here are a few telling statistics that explain why the eLearning industry has taken the path that it has over the past decade or so:



42%

Of employees access content at their work desk, 47% do so during weekends and evenings

30%

Of employees will access a piece of content when sent an alert or update

27%

Of employees access content going to and from work

52%

Of employees tend to access content right at the point of need

Having accessible content at the exact point of need is perhaps the best way to make eLearning work for your organization. Many learners want the opportunity to brush up on a topic when their need arises. For some examples:



A salesperson could brush up on closing techniques right before a sales call.



A manager who needs to counsel an employee to explain their work is not up to standards may review a course on concerned conversations.



A subject matter expert asked to write a blog post could brush up on business writing.

Learners want the opportunity to brush up on a topic **when their need arises.**

Piecing Together the Critical Components of eLearning

It should be obvious by now why we called these components—they are all parts that work together to create successful eLearning programs.

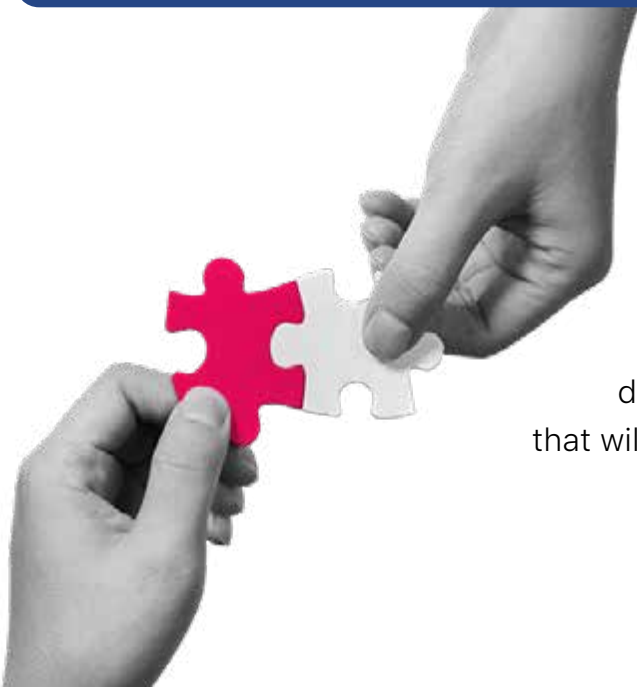
Think:

When content is made relevant, and presented in an entertaining way, it caters to the ways in which adults learn and retain information (according to Adult Learning Theory).

Adults connect more with experiences, which means that management participation will be an important part of any training program, along with engaging interactive content. Discussing a video as part of an instructor-led class can support the employee experience as well.

When modern eLearning tools make content available at the point of need, it really does free the learner to consume content when needed, where needed. This makes both self-directed learning and blended learning that much easier, and in turn helps engagement and retention (again according to Adult Learning Theory).

If learning truly is a process, it cannot be captured by a single training session or eLearning video. It needs further activities that encourage retention. Beyond those, blended learning can greatly enhance the learning process, too.

A black and white photograph showing two hands, one from the left and one from the right, holding two interlocking puzzle pieces. The piece on the left is red, and the piece on the right is white. The hands are positioned as if they are about to fit the pieces together.

In other words, all of these components are interlocking and overlapping pieces of a much bigger puzzle. Getting a grasp of each allows you to see the bigger picture. When you do, you'll design programs differently, shop for eLearning providers differently, and measure the success of your training differently—and that will make for a better learning culture that will grow your company.

Further Reading

For a more “philosophical” exploration of what eLearning actually is:

[“What is eLearning?”](#)

For more on the various theories of adult theory (and how they should influence instructional design):

[“What is Adult Learning and Why Is It Important?”](#)

A more in-depth dive into the science behind microlearning:

[“Microlearning: Important Trend, or Flashy Fad? What the Science Says”](#)

A review of training’s role in the overall “learning ecosystem”:

[“What is a Learning Ecosystem? And How Does it Support Corporate Strategy?”](#)

[You can also download our free eBook on learning ecosystems.](#)

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