ELearning on the Go!

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With a noticeable decline in the number of desktop PCs being sold consecutively over the last 3 years, mobile learning is fast gaining popularity. Coupled with this trend, the plethora of powerful yet cheap hand-held devices is adding momentum to eLearning on the go. As more consumers embrace this growing trend, the learning opportunities that now exist, from an instructional design point of view, are indeed huge.

What is it?

Mobile learning, or mLearning as it is popularly called, is not simply about reading a PDF research report on viewing an instructional video while sitting in rush hour traffic. And it is not eLearning using a mobile device. The eLearning Guild defines it as:

"*Any activity that allows individuals to be more productive.....through a compact digital portable device...*"

In other words, learning on the go is NOT about whiling away time, but rather it's about using that time for constructive learning. Nor is it an alternate to traditional eLearning approaches. Rather, the use of mobile devices to facilitate learning is complimentary to other learning methods.

Why go there?

Embracing mLearning is no longer an option but a necessity if organizations want a productive workforce to stay competitive today. Most educational institutions have already switched their content to allow on-the-

go learning. Organizations with large distributed work forces find that bringing in everyone into a facilitated learning event has become expensive. They therefore prefer asynchronous eLearning and learning-on-the-go models instead.

Many governments and large corporations have also implemented initiatives for mobile learners, such as The Mobile Learning Environment (MoLE) project of the U.S. Military, GoLearn at Merrill Lynch, and the BLOOM (or Bite-sized Learning Opportunities on Mobile Devices) initiative in the European Union.

Pros and Cons

While there are both advantages and disadvantages of mobile learning, the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Some reasons to design courses that leverage learning on the go include:

- Opportunity to turn otherwise down-time into more productive time
- Deliver valuable educational material easily to quickly improve an organizations workforce
- Move to an on-the-go, anywhere-anytime learning experience
- Enable greater facilitation and cooperation between trainers and learners
- Opportunity to design learning materials that are uniquely customized for individual learners

However, an instructional designer must also be aware of some of the limitations that mLearning brings with it, including:

- The fact that not all types of courses are suitable to mobile delivery
- Not all mobile devices may support the courses designed
- Existing training materials might not easily integrate with freshly designed eLearning content
- There may be a significant one-time investment needed to ramp up for e-learners, including learning tools, technology and (possibly 24x7) support

- Less technology-savvy trainers and learners might find the learning-on-the-go model harder to adopt
- Learning delivery models may need to be significantly adapted to cater to learners that are at different levels in the same course

The right tools and design

Not every course can be taught remotely using mobile learning approaches. That's because some knowledge is just not designed for distance learning. Learning aids using mobile devices have been found to be most effective for:

- Just-in-time (JIT) learning
- Review and Refresher training
- Access to Flash Cards and Reminders
- Evaluation and Quiz-based learning
- Game and Simulation-based learning
- Quick coaching and Feedback sessions
- Learners-learning-from-learners type of sessions

However, while MLearning works great in the above scenarios, it might not be conducive where hands-on, face-to-face interaction may be required, or where extensive collaborative work needs to be delivered as part of the learning experience. This approach might not be viable where there is intensive reading and reference materials need to be consulted as part of the study program.

The right learning outcome depends on using the right tool and giving the right design considerations when developing content. Popular e-learning authoring tools available today include Captivate, Lectora, Articulate and Storyline, amongst a host of others. Each of these have their advantages and disadvantages, but all will work to deliver basic mLearning.

Some tools have excellent graphics support, while others excel in animation. Some work well with a larger number of mobile devices, others are easier to learn and quicker to use. Some may be pricier than others, while some

might not meet accessibility requirements. Therefore, like any business decision, the ultimate choice of a tool depends on the objectives one seeks to achieve, the benefits that one hopes to derive and the cost one is willing to pay for those benefits.

Tools such as those noted above however should not be considered in isolation from the instructional design considerations for the course. The Tools, Technology and Content must all be considered when it's time to design courses. Some considerations include:

- Design courseware that is supported by technology available to your learners (Device, Browser, Screen resolution, Audio/video formats, Screen resolution)
- Use design tools with features widely supported by the devices available
- Plan for an extensive support (24x7?) system
- Deliver content in "small bites" as opposed to "entire meals"
- Make allowances to cater to off-line study as 24x7 internet connectivity might not always be available
- Some learners might not have high-speed connections, therefore design courseware that's light on bandwidth
- Course design must cater to accessibility requirements (keyboard interaction, touch pad, voice recognition, handwriting input)
- Not all course authoring tools may support common navigation modes available on all devices