

Chapter 16

Corporate Training Goes Virtual: A Hybrid Approach to Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

Eighty million members of the Millennial Generation are knocking at the door of Corporate America. Can traditional “chalk and talk” corporate training techniques adequately address the needs of a generation that views the world through a digital lens? In this chapter, the authors will explore the learning styles of Millennials and how virtual world platforms can mesh with the learning styles of these new workers. They review existing literature on virtual learning and identify the types of conditions that argue for an immersive digital platform as opposed to a traditional face-to-face or distance learning encounter. They conclude by outlining a specific scenario (within the domain of pharmaceutical sales training) that illustrates how corporate educators can deliver both types of learning using a hybrid real/virtual platform.

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PAPER (AND PENCIL) TRAINING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

The Millennial Generation is eagerly knocking at the door of Corporate America. These 80 million members of “Gen Y” are optimistic, confident, multicultural, and goal-oriented. They excel at multitasking, like to collaborate, and enjoy cooperative activities. Most importantly, they are avid social networkers, bloggers, and videogamers. They see the world through a digital lens and often appear to be more comfortable interacting with a colleague’s Facebook page or virtual world avatar than conversing in face-to-face situations.

Can traditional “chalk and talk” corporate training techniques adequately address the needs of these new knowledge workers? Can existing training programs accommodate learners who have grown up holding a mouse or joystick rather than a pencil? These “Digital Natives” will change the game for companies, and employers need to anticipate these changes now. Forward-thinking organizations from IBM to the U.S. Army already are experimenting with new 3D immersive learning platforms that synchronize with the dynamic recreational environments in which young people immerse themselves every day.

Virtual environments hold tremendous promise for corporate training, but they are not a panacea. Nor is it likely that they will entirely replace traditional in-person techniques (at least in the near future). To reflect this reality, we advocate a *hybrid approach* to curriculum development that “cherry-picks” the best aspects of each domain and appeals to multiple learning styles. Furthermore, we propose that these factors vary significantly depending upon the type of learning the organization needs to stress. At this point it is important to make a distinction between education and training. The purpose of education is to increase insight and understanding; it teaches the “why.” Training on the otherhand increases skills and competence; it teaches employees the “how” of a job (Stack & Lovern, 1995). Whereas both

types of instruction can be delivered with the use of 3D immersive environments, the emphasis of this chapter is corporate training.

In this chapter, we will discuss the learning styles of Millennials and explore how virtual world platforms can mesh with the learning styles of these new workers. We also will explore the different types of learning that need to occur in the corporate world, and review attempts others have made to transfer each type of learning to a virtual environment.

In particular, we will emphasize a dichotomy of *content* versus *experience*-based learning. Content-based learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and mastery of concepts (lectures), while experience-based learning refers to the acquisition of skills, and mastery of interpersonal contingencies (role-playing).

We identify the types of conditions that argue for an immersive digital platform, as opposed to a traditional face-to-face or distance learning encounter. We then develop a specific scenario within the domain of pharmaceutical sales training that illustrates how corporate educators can deliver both types of learning using a hybrid real/virtual platform.

Learning Styles of the Millennial Employee

The emergence of new information and communication technologies has significantly influenced the way we learn, and the way we teach. As Table 1 illustrates, each new generation develops technological innovations that eventually find their way into corporate classrooms.

For the Millennial generation, born after 1982 and raised in a digital world, immersive communications technologies are an integral part of everyday life. By preschool, kids are exposed to the Web and virtual education. By middle school, the Web is a frequent resource for homework assignments. Exposure to the technology increases throughout high school, and for many students, the

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