



HOW *BLENDED* LEARNING DRIVES ON-THE-JOB
PERFORMANCE
IMPROVEMENT



Blended learning represents a powerful new way for organizations to train their workforces.

But a significant challenge remains: How do you make blended learning more about *performance improvement* and less about *learning*?

In the corporate training world there has been a division between those who think most learning should be delivered through online technologies like the World Wide Web, and those who cling to the belief that effective training can only happen in traditional, facilitator-led classrooms. More and more, however, those sides have come together to find that a strategic “blend” of the two strategies delivers more cost-effective learning than either method can on its own.

The prevailing industry definition of blended learning emphasizes the combination of Web-based training with facilitator-led classroom training. At Wilson Learning, we believe this standard application only begins to address how new approaches to learning can fully impact employee performance.

Blended Learning at Wilson Learning refers to the strategic combination of multiple learning methods and technologies in a way that improves performance on the job, not just achievement in the classroom. Our approach to blended learning not only creates a more convenient and cost-efficient way for employees to learn; it increases the probability that new skills will be used on the job and impact business results. Rather than relying on traditional, classroom-only learning approaches, blended solutions feature a sequence of electronic, face-to-face, and on-the-job performance support activities within a single learning process, mixing both self-directed and facilitator-directed strategies in a symphonic learning composition. Elements of blended learning can include online or offline skill assessments, self-paced Web- or intranet-based learning, traditional facilitator-led workshops, Webcasts, online discussion groups, on-the-job learning, electronic or face-to-face coaching, and more.

While many in the industry focus on the one-dimensional distinction between self-directed e-learning and classroom learning, Wilson Learning believes the power of blended learning rests in its ability to flex and adapt to customers’ unique performance improvement needs and technology infrastructures. We understand that learning can take place in a wide variety of ways, and we collaborate with customers to determine which methods will be most effective for their specific situations.

THE RATIONALE FOR BLENDED LEARNING

When it comes to improving the interpersonal skills critical to executing business strategy — sales effectiveness, negotiation, leadership, customer service, teamwork, and more — organizations find blended learning has many advantages over other approaches:

— **Blended models capitalize on the strengths, and mitigate the weaknesses, of individual learning delivery methods.** While self-directed e-learning — where people learn at their own pace without a facilitator — is well-suited for teaching core knowledge to distributed employee groups, it can’t deliver the kind of guided interpersonal skill practice and performance coaching possible in a facilitator-led classroom. While it’s true that perhaps 10 to 15 percent of people can improve interpersonal skills simply by reading about how to do it, the other 85 to 90 percent require hands-on practice in the presence of an expert coach to properly develop those skills. Combining the two approaches in one performance improvement process — self-directed learning for core knowledge, and facilitated learning for skill practice and application — offers the best of both worlds for interpersonal skill development.

“The most efficient and effective way to acquire skillfulness is the same for everyone: 1) Students are quickly educated about the results they are being asked to achieve and the skills they will have to execute to obtain those results; 2) They practice, with a coach who can cut down trial-and-error time, until they achieve fluency. In the hands of a good facilitator or coach, step one takes 5 to 10 percent of the time. Step two takes up the other 90 to 95 percent. Step one is education; step two is training.”

— James C. Georges,
“The Myth of Soft Skills Training,” *Training* magazine

— **By transforming learning from an event to a process, blended strategies improve performance on the job, not just achievement in the classroom.** Knowing something is one thing; applying it effectively on the job is quite another. Without opportunities to use the new skills in the workplace and see the performance improvement that results, people quickly forget information acquired in two-hour Web tutorials or four-hour classroom seminars — or worse, lose the motivation to use that new knowledge. By reformatting and extending traditional learning processes — without adding to employees’ cumulative learning time — blended solutions ensure that first learning experiences are followed by a second or third, allowing knowledge to develop into behavior change and take root in the workplace.

— **Blended learning offers a greater choice of learning options.** Not everyone prefers to learn in the same way, at the same time, or in the same place. Nor does every organization possess the technology infrastructure, expertise, or means to deliver each type of learning. A self-directed e-learning portion of a blended strategy, for example, allows learners to access content when convenient to their schedules, requires no travel, easily “scales” to accommodate more users, and allows for repeated use by employees to master new content — something not possible with class-

room training. If people prefer to interact with facilitators and peers as part of a learning experience, but don’t want to travel, they can do so through user-friendly Webcasting or other online learning options. Others find face-to-face skill application workshops a perfect complement to self-directed e-learning, providing the kind of human interaction and facilitated role-playing not possible in the virtual world.

— **Blended learning reduces the course “abandonment” problem sometimes associated with self-directed e-learning.** When self-directed e-learners abandon online courses before completing them, it is often due to poor learning incentives, lack of accountability for completing content, or inability of poorly designed courses to hold their attention. Wilson Learning believes that by providing engaging, realistic, and instructionally sound e-learning, then making mastery of that content a “gate” for moving on to other steps of a blended initiative, there is added motivation and accountability for people to complete self-directed content. People need to feel that learning is an “observed moment” in their careers — a distinct instance in which it is highly visible whether they are merely participating or actually engaged as proactive learners — and blended strategies help to provide that.

A BLENDED LEARNING SOLUTION IN ACTION

What does an effective blended learning solution look like in action? Consider a solution developed by Wilson Learning for an organization in the computer industry. The company wanted to introduce a new consultative selling strategy to its sales force, a process designed to build enhanced strategic and interpersonal skills that create a sustainable competitive advantage. The organization had to get its large, widely dispersed sales force quickly up to speed on the new process, while ensuring that salespeople's first consultative experiences with customers were positive ones. There also was great need to reduce the time and expense it took to get salespeople trained.

While a self-directed e-learning strategy could teach the core components of the process without requiring extensive travel or time away from the job, it couldn't provide the level of real-world skill practice essential to ensuring salespeople would effectively use the knowledge in the field. The blended learning solution Wilson Learning developed for the organization looked something like this:

— The process kicked off with an interactive Webcast (a facilitator-directed online meeting) to introduce the business context for the new skills, explain the new learning system to salespeople, and set standards for performance. The technology eliminated the need for participants to travel to a central location for the meeting, but still allowed them to actively participate in the session. Participants were briefed on the strategic importance of the new sales process and how consultative selling would help them become more effective salespeople.

— The next step was for salespeople to undergo a multi-rater skill assessment to identify their specific learning needs. Current or former clients were asked to complete an online assessment, which provided invaluable feedback on salesperson proficiency in key facets of the new sales process. Results helped to shape individualized learning paths for salespeople, determining content areas they needed to emphasize and those that required less attention due to established competency.

— Guided by the assessments, salespeople took a series of self-directed, Web-based learning modules covering each stage of the new consultative selling process. The modules consisted of bandwidth-friendly tutorials, exercises, and short skill practices, and included knowledge testing "gates" salespeople had to pass to be certified. The content featured stories from real-world sales scenarios that brought the learning experience to life. As active learners, salespeople analyzed different situations, selected the best alternatives, and reviewed characters' thought processes. Salespeople also were provided with tools to create a detailed customer calling plan that incorporated the consultative selling philosophy — an integral part of the next step in the blended learning process.

— In a highly interactive, one-day, facilitated skill application workshop, salespeople took part in hands-on exercises and activities to build upon their self-directed e-learning. Participants completed skill practices, where they applied their new knowledge to a current sales opportunity or an existing account.



BLENDED

LEARNING AT

WILSON LEARNING REFERS TO THE STRATEGIC COMBINATION OF MULTIPLE LEARNING METHODS AND TECHNOLOGIES IN A WAY THAT IMPROVES PERFORMANCE ON THE JOB, NOT JUST IN THE CLASSROOM.

AS NEW LEARNING

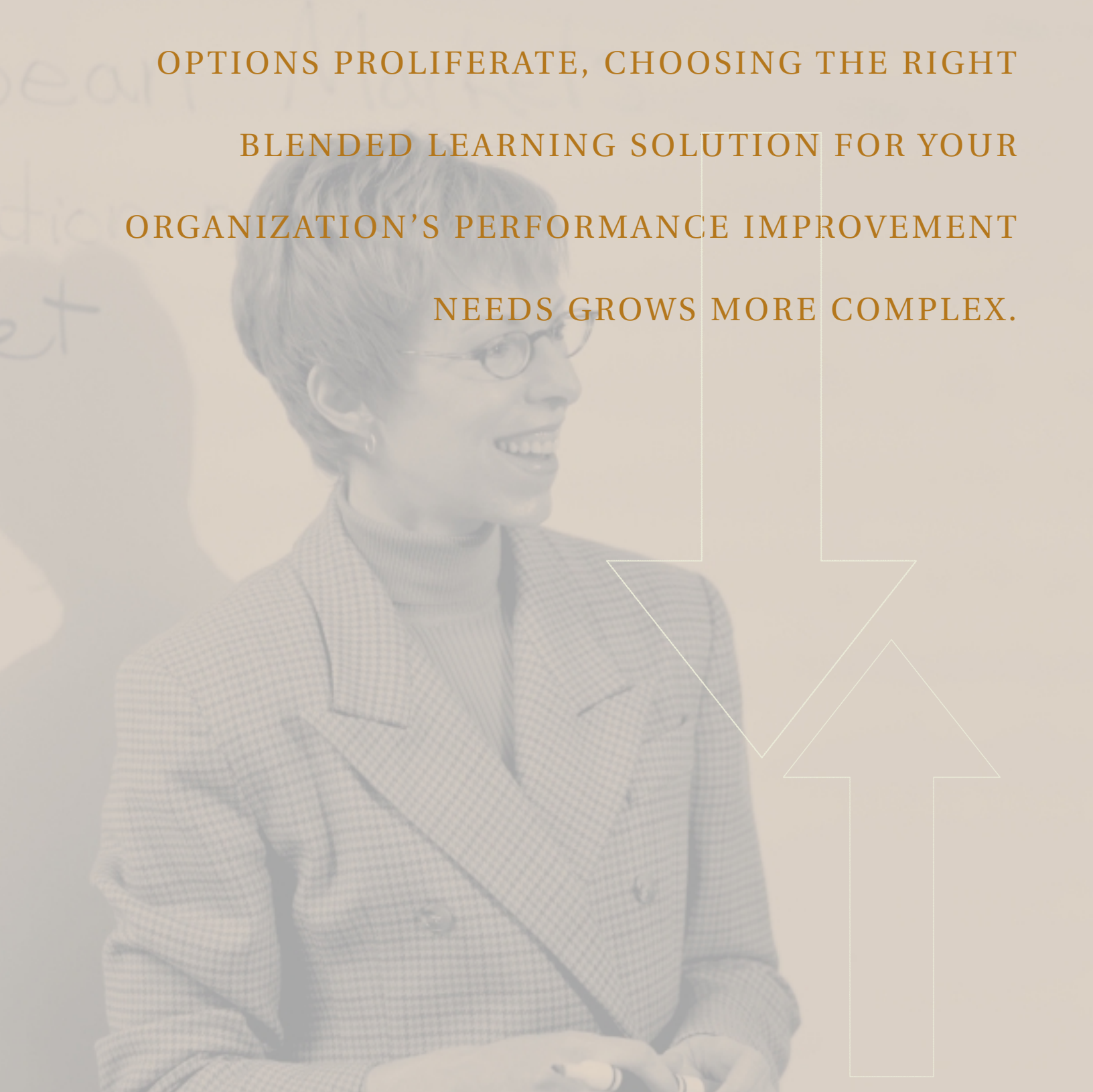
DELIVERY

OPTIONS PROLIFERATE, CHOOSING THE RIGHT

BLENDED LEARNING SOLUTION FOR YOUR

ORGANIZATION'S PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

NEEDS GROWS MORE COMPLEX.



—To better understand their crucial role in driving use of the new process in the field, sales managers participated in interactive, facilitator-led Webcasts. These coaching-skills sessions provided immediately applicable tools and knowledge to build on managers' current expertise while instilling new mastery of coaching capabilities. The Webcasts helped sales managers establish their role as coaches and leaders, and provided the tactical skills to develop a team of high-performing salespeople.

— Finally, both salespeople and sales managers received implementation guides that provided a transition plan for ensuring the use of consultative selling skills on the job. The guides laid out a specific plan for implementing and reinforcing new selling behaviors during the first few weeks that salespeople were back on the job.

Using a traditional training approach, this content would have required three full days of classroom work, or 24 hours of learning. When converted to a blended approach, learning was condensed to 16 total hours, much of it accessed by salespeople at their convenience in 30-minute segments. In most traditional training models, about one-third of total learning time is devoted to coached skill practice. In this Wilson Learning blended approach, more than 65 percent of time was allocated to real-world skill practice for learners.



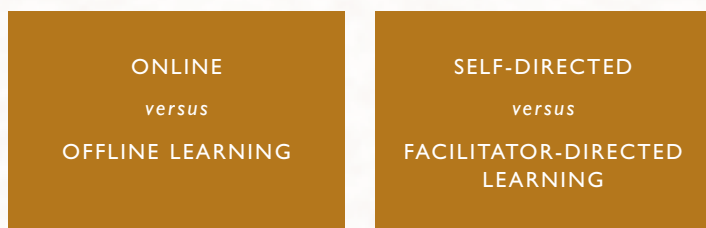
This example represents but one way to structure a blended learning approach for developing interpersonal skills. Wilson Learning understands that learning can take place in a variety of ways, depending on organizational culture, preference, and capability. In the blended example above, for instance, certain offline learning activities might be substituted for online exercises, or facilitator-directed learning could replace some self-directed activities. The sequence of learning events also might be reordered based on specific performance improvement needs. These decisions rest on variables that include an organization's learning culture, technology infrastructure, geographic distribution and size of learning audiences, the speed with which learning must be delivered, and more.

The timeline for blended learning will extend beyond other approaches, allowing for improved integration of learning and employees' daily work responsibilities. The amount of content and cumulative participant learning time approximates what might be delivered in, for instance, a weeklong classroom-based sales training course. The advantages of this reconfigured learning process not only are a reduction in employee time out of the field and in the delivery costs associated with classroom-only training, but also enhanced performance improvement. The longer the period of time people have to review, integrate, and practice new knowledge or skills — the longer it is “top of mind” — the greater the odds it will “stick” on the job.

New technologies also make it easier to track and manage the online and offline components of a blended initiative, which on the surface may seem a super highway of diverse learning activities. Skill assessment outcomes, learning event scheduling and registration, employee progress through self-directed e-learning courses, training test results, and the like are all centrally stored for easy access by line managers or training directors with the benefits of today's computer networks, whether they be in-house or rented through external providers.

WILSON LEARNING'S BLENDED LEARNING OPTIONS

The full richness of Wilson Learning's blended learning solutions is best illustrated in the matrix at the right (Figure 1). The matrix represents the two key factors that determine choice of learning methods:



What learning method you choose will depend on your specific performance improvement objectives and other key variables. Each delivery approach has its strengths and weaknesses, depending on the level of performance improvement sought. If delivering fact-based information that requires knowledge recall is the objective, and scalability, consistency, and efficiency of learning delivery are important factors, then self-directed e-learning may be sufficient. If facilitator guidance and live participant interaction are crucial to meeting performance improvement objectives, but learning-related travel is deemed cost- or time-prohibitive, then Webcasting may be the appropriate method. If it's important that learners receive practice in applying interpersonal skill knowledge to real-world job situations, and that they move from basic understanding to skill mastery, then facilitator-led classroom workshops take on added importance. We have defined four distinct approaches for blended learning, each delivering unique value:

— **Self-directed online learning.** Activities include learning tutorials, skill assessments, skill practices, job simulations, and tests that learners complete at their pace, without a facilitator present, via the World Wide Web, corporate intranet, or non-networked technologies like DVD or CD-ROM.

Wilson Learning's self-directed e-learning content features job simulation, digital storytelling, and interactive instruction that creates engaging and realistic experiences for learners.

— **Self-directed offline learning.** Tools include paper skill assessments, worksheets, instruction manuals, selected readings, skill application activities, on-the-job observation, and other self-directed experiences that don't require computer assistance. These easily transportable options often are used as pre- or post-work for facilitator-directed learning.

— **Facilitator-directed online learning.** Facilitators actively guide groups or individuals in synchronous (real-time) or asynchronous (anytime) online learning activities. Synchronous activities include "virtual classrooms," where distributed learners log onto password-protected Web sites and connect with online facilitators by phone, view PowerPoint slides or software applications, use online whiteboards or breakout rooms, and pose questions via audio or text messaging. Real-time Webcasts are used to coach or reinforce newly acquired knowledge or skills from a distance, with expert facilitators answering questions, offering guidance, or providing additional learning support.

In asynchronous applications, online facilitators oversee the work of self-directed e-learners, moderating bulletin board discussions, answering questions via e-mail or instant messaging, monitoring group participation levels, and providing feedback on assignments.

— **Facilitator-directed offline learning.** Facilitators lead traditional workshops or seminars that focus on skill application, learner interaction, and opportunities to practice in real-life situations. This delivery approach also includes more informal learning support, where facilitators or managers observe, coach, and reinforce new knowledge or skills in learners' job settings.

ONLINE LEARNING

OFFLINE LEARNING

SELF-DIRECTED

- Web- or intranet-delivered learning objects (*tutorials, skill practices, job simulations, and tests*)
- Electronic performance support systems
- CD-ROM or DVD-based learning

- Field exercises including paper skill assessments, worksheets, reading assignments, and use of instruction manuals
- On-the-job learning assignments

FACILITATOR-DIRECTED

- Webcasting (*one-way video and audio, moderate interactivity, larger audiences*)
- Web conferencing (*two-way audio, enhanced interactivity and data-sharing, smaller audiences*)
- Electronic coaching, one-to-one or one-to-many

- Skill application workshops or classroom seminars
- Observation and coaching of learners on the job



Figure 1

IDENTIFYING BEST USES OF BLENDED LEARNING TOOLS

The performance improvement objectives best addressed by each cell of the matrix are shown below (Figure 2). Whether organizations choose electronic, face-to-face, or on-the-job options will depend on factors that begin with specific performance improvement needs, but also depend on other variables Wilson Learning can help to assess and prioritize. Use the chart to help guide your blended learning decisions.



Figure 2

Many organizations find advantages in choosing one learning delivery method as the “engine” for a blended approach. An engine serves as the centerpiece for integrated learning, the component piece in which core knowledge is delivered. Other blended elements help to turbocharge that engine, providing the additional power and reinforcement to transform newly acquired knowledge or skills into on-the-job behavior change.

For example, the engine for a blended learning solution that Wilson Learning developed to improve how one organization selects, grows, and retains promising talent was self-directed offline field activities. Managers completed structured exercises on developing mission statements, having courageous career or goal conversations with employees, and identifying and retaining “at-risk” talent. Bracketing that engine was preliminary work featuring a leadership skill assessment with online feedback that directed managers to appropriate self-paced e-learning modules, and post-work that offered one-day, facilitator-led classroom workshops and optional electronic coaching sessions. In the latter option, facilitators coached leaders on “talent management” via Webcasts, e-mail, and telephone support.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT SOLUTION FOR YOU

As new learning delivery options proliferate, choosing the right blended learning solution for your organization’s performance improvement needs grows more complex. There are more ways to educate or train a workforce than there have ever been, whether it be face-to-face or across time zones. Should the learning be self-directed or facilitator-led? Online or in the classroom? Real-time or anytime? Web-based or multimedia-rich CD-ROM? How much learner collaboration or interaction is needed, and how much facilitator support? Hosted externally or through your company’s own computer servers?



Wilson Learning has been at the forefront of adult learning and performance improvement for more than 35 years, and has intensively researched what works and what doesn’t in integrated learning to develop its own blended offerings. Our approach is structured to create improved performance on the job, with more flexible learning options and new delivery efficiencies as important byproducts.

Too often organizations view blended learning only through the lens of cost containment, embrace new learning technologies only out of fear of being left behind, or pit one delivery mode against another, rather than seeing them as complementary ways of achieving the same goal.

Choosing the right blended learning strategy for you will depend on variables that include, first and foremost, your performance improvement objectives, but also available learning technologies, in-house IT support, budget parameters, and the size, learning preferences, and geographic distribution of your audiences. Blended learning is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, and Wilson Learning can help configure effective solutions to meet your specific needs. Our mission is to understand your objectives and provide the right solutions — whether electronic, in the classroom, or on-the-job — to improve your people’s performance.



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