The 4-tier Model: Manage the New e-Learning Curve
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Learning Past

Learning in the workplace was once relatively simple. It was all about performance. There were usually two choices. You either learned on the job or went to training. Training was exactly like school. There was a real person who was the instructor, you went to a classroom, the instructor took attendance to make sure you were there, you wore a nametag, you faced forward in rows of seats, the class started at a set time, you went through the materials from beginning to end and took a test to pass the course.

The technology at that point consisted of relatively simple things such as pens, pencils, chalk, markers, whiteboards, blackboards, overhead projectors, audiotapes, videotapes, VCR players, TVs and of course, books.

Learning Present

Today, we have a new learning environment at work. It is the original one compounded by an incredible array of new choices. Most of these learning choices start with an “e” and are enabled by one kind of technology or another. Let’s take a quick look at how this came about in such a short time.

- Personal Computing Technology — from the desktop to the laptop to the wireless PDA — emerging less than 25 years ago
- The rapid and worldwide spread of the Internet during the last 7 years
- A shift to the Knowledge Economy — the third economic paradigm in 100 years
- Rapid changes in the workplace over the last 30 years:
  - Move to a virtual workforce
  - Realities of working with a highly mobile workforce
  - More rapidly changing rules and regulations — or deregulations in some cases
  - Replacement of relatively static ‘job titles’ with ‘job assignments’ that change and demand new skills and levels of performance
  - Workers new expectations to learn and grow at work
  - Need to reduce and avoid costs of training while increasing reach (anytime and anywhere) and quality
Today, this new learning environment has redefined the role of education in the workplace. What was once among the first to be cut because it was seen as not having any ROI, is now expected to continually deliver measurable business benefits. Education is suddenly becoming more strategic, more important, linked directly to the needs of the business.

Education today is also expected to step up to new challenges. Today’s learning environment faces parameters imposed by e-business, such as aggressively reduced cycle times, faster time-to-performance, increasingly faster time-to-market and a more competitive global marketplace.

The only thing that has not changed is that it is still all about performance.

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**The New Dilemma for Education**

These new roles for education have created a dilemma.

For example, how do you develop and deliver education to a geographically dispersed, mobile workforce, with a product cycle that has been reduced to 6 months?

How do you maintain the skills of workers in the services industry, where skills need to be the best possible, and balance that against an ever increasing demand on utilization, which leaves little to no time for learning?

Fortunately, the answer is embedded in the problem. In the same way that technology created these new challenges, technology also presents us with a solution. We can integrate technology-based or e-learning to meet these challenges and more. We can exploit personal computing and the Web for learning — to produce education that not only changes performance, but also delivers real business benefits in the process.

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**Choices, Choices and More Choices**

The question is “What’s the best way to blend the old and the new?” Today, we’re faced with choices about learning that are sometimes changing so rapidly that by the time we get used to one another takes its place. The marketplace of education and learning is undergoing one of the most dramatic transformations since Gutenberg’s press started churning out books in 1540. E-learning alone in the last 20 years has created more new tools, technologies, approaches and methodologies than ever before. Taking the old tried and true methods of learning, and adding in the wired and new, is harder than ever. That’s one of the reasons we developed the 4-Tier Model. It’s all about managing these difficult new choices.
The IBM 4-Tier Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tier 4</th>
<th>Experience Based Learning</th>
<th>Getting together; Meet as a community; Develop relationships. Live it. Do it.</th>
<th>Mentoring, Role Playing, Case Studies, Coaching</th>
<th>Face-to-Face</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tier 3</td>
<td>Collaborative Learning</td>
<td>Discuss it, Practice with others, create virtual communities of practice or purpose</td>
<td>Live Virtual Classrooms, e-Labs, e-Teams Collaborative Sessions, Web Conferences</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>Interactive Learning, Games and Simulations</td>
<td>Examine it, try it, play at it, interact with it.</td>
<td>CBT / WBT Modules, Interactive Games Multimedia or actual Simulations</td>
<td>Multimedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>Performance Support and Reference Materials</td>
<td>Read it, watch it, listen to it, be directed by it.</td>
<td>Websites, audio seminars, videos, books, e-books</td>
<td>Internet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The IBM 4-Tier Model is a framework, a place to put the traditional learning and new e-learning tools and approaches into one of 4 basic categories. Once you know at which tier the educational experience needs to go, you can more efficiently and effectively develop and deliver that education. Educational programs can range from tier-1 standalone and self-paced, to blended more powerful multi-tiered combinations. Since the tiers also represent different levels of performance and skill acquisition, you can develop your education in a way that allows you to successfully build from one tier to the next, or start at the right tier in the first place.

Briefly, the four tiers can be described as follows.

**Tier 1: Learn from Information**

Read it, see it, and hear it. Basic knowledge transfer, ideal for new product launches, corporate strategy or organizational announcements. Simple Web one-way presentations, information Web sites where learners can quickly and simply get the information they need, books and e-books that you can read and learn from whenever and wherever. Basically this tier is self-paced and introductory for learning relatively simple skills and knowledge.
Tier 2: Learn from Interaction
Try it. Practice it yourself. Learn somewhat more advanced skills in new applications, or simple procedural tasks at this level. Use Computer-Based Training or Web-Based Training, with computer games or simulations for practice. You’re still primarily in a self-paced mode, only now you’re trying to use what you’ve been learning. You are entering The Performance Zone.

Tier 3: Learn from Collaboration
Discuss it. Practice it with others. Collaboration tools, such as chats, team rooms, and interaction with online instructors and peers, allow learners to be able to learn in virtual groups from their shared experiences. Virtual team exercises can be used. As well as more sophisticated technologies such as application sharing, remote application labs, live virtual classrooms, and interactive presentations on the Web. As a learner, at this point you are interacting with others, but you do not need to be face to face. You’re still in The Zone and on your own but you’re heading towards really being able to do what you have learned.

Tier 4: Learn from Collocation
Finally, the learners and the instructors or experts meet face-to-face. Classroom and mentoring, coaching, real-time learning labs, role-playing and more all happen at this level. At this level, learners are acquiring really advanced skills and know-how that leads to performance. This requires learners to be in the same place at the same time as they are learning and, while most expensive, the cost can be mitigated by knowing when to develop and employ learning at this tier. This reduces the amount of time learners need to spend out of the office and traveling, and optimizes the use of expensive instructor and classroom facilities and other face-to-face meetings.

Let’s take it a step further. How does the 4-Tier Model relate to the idea of formal and informal learning? Can it help us decide which kind of learning is required and when?

Formal to Informal Learning
Let’s simplify this with an example. Suppose you’re learning to play the game of golf, something with which many of us are all too familiar. If golf doesn’t work for you, substitute what does. It will help you understand how the 4-Tier Model works in the real world.

There was a study done at Digital Equipment Corporation in the early 90’s, and repeated by universities, other corporations and even the federal government’s Department of Health and Human Services, that graphically showed the disparity between formal and informal learning, between tier-1 and tier-4.
At tier-1, you can go to a seminar or read a book about the *History and Etiquette of Golf*, watch a videotape of “Great Golfing Moments,” listen to an introduction to golf seminar and then you can say you *know* something about golf. But have you really learned to play golf?

At tier-2 and 3, you can buy and enjoy a great computer eGolf game, find a golf pro, take lessons, take a simulated swing on a virtual golf course, practice putting, even slice and dice balls at the driving range all weekend. Now maybe think you *can do* it, but have you really learned to play golf?

From your first tee shot on your first hole, it takes hours and hours of adopting and adapting, alone and in a foursome, what you know and can do, swinging all the clubs, asking all sorts of questions, in all sorts of weather and conditions, failing and succeeding, succeeding and failing, practicing and more practicing, before you have really learned to play golf. Congratulations, you've reached tier-4. That's why reducing your golf handicap or becoming an expert at anything takes so much time.

Real learning, and being able to perform at an expert skill level, is the state of being able to creatively adopt and adapt what you know and can do under a varying set of informal circumstances. It comprises about 75% of the time-to-performance curve. So tier-4 of the model is mainly in the informal, face-to-face section (the upper right corner of the diagram below). You can use the more traditional instructor-led training in the classroom — which would fall right on the line between formal tier-3 and informal tier-4 — but you have a variety of equally useful and in some cases far more effective and interesting ways of getting together at this tier.
So it starts to look like this:

![4-Tier Blended Learning Model Diagram](image)

### 4-Tiers: Not So Many Choices

So the 4-Tier Model is really a tool that gives us a way to look at the real learning needs of the learner, find the appropriate tier or tiers, and produce a blended and often customized learning program that truly meets the needs of that learner.

It allows us to align the learning with the business needs of the company. It focuses our understanding of the learner’s requirements from formal learning to informal. It even acts as a guide as we make choices between the list of traditional methods and the multitude of new options we confront when developing and delivering educational programs today.

It truly is a framework that will guide you through an increasingly complex and complicated array of choices to select the right learning tool or technology for your needs.
Learning Future

The 4-Tier Model can help organizations move from today, when e-learning is being driven by business initiatives, to a place where blended 4-tier learning is beginning to emerge as a transformational and strategic business opportunity. Move to where learning is an integral part of the infrastructure for creating, managing, and delivering a wide variety of learning initiatives.

And someday the 4-Tier Model can lead to the creation and management of the learning organization, where traditional learning, e-learning, knowledge management, collaboration, and e-business tools have all converged to form a new experience of learning for employees, partners and customers.