Chapter XIV
Developing a Mobile Learning Platform for a Professional Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes some conceptual and practical issues in the development of a professional mobile learning system. The main focus of the chapter is the implementation of a mobile learning solution for the requirements of a specific working environment. The study proposes a conceptual framework for mobile learning applications, based on multiple studies of mobile learning design requirements, and uses it as a design tool for the development of the new system based on situated learning in the workplace. This approach is illustrated through the development life cycle of a prototype mobile learning solution. Finally, the chapter reviews and evaluates the success of the prototype and the utility of the framework as a design tool, identifies potential issues and outlines ideas for further development and research.

INTRODUCTION

The Demographics of Professional Learning

If we consider today’s business environment there have been some significant changes in workforce demographics and the technologies that support this environment. The ‘millennials’ is the term used for generation Y, people born between 1979 and 1997, who already account for 15 percent of the workforce (Hignite, 2007). While the ‘baby boomers’ (born between 1946 and 1964) currently outnumber the millennials by three to one in the workplace, it is estimated that within 10 years this proportion will change as more baby boomers retire and younger millennials reach their working age (Hignite, 2007). The differences between the new generation of employees and the current workforce are significant across multiple
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levels. Deloitte Consulting summarize the profile of generation Y as (Leah, 2006):

- Characteristics: techno-savvy, connected 24/7, independent, self-reliant;
- Beliefs: education is good, integrity is admirable;
- Technology: grew up online, never experienced life without computers, all information is a click away, expect information on the go, use instant messaging, have carried cell phones since high school (or earlier);
- Work attitude: work well with friends and in teams, collaborative thinkers, comfortable with speed and change, impatient, love a challenge.

These changes in the workforce create challenges for organizations to attract and also to retain new employees. The millennials are the most education-oriented generation in history. Furthermore, they are motivated and willing to constantly learn and gain new skills. They see an organization as a hub of resources that will provide training, learning, and relationship opportunities. They are highly mobile and technology literate and expect all information to be at their fingertips. In the light of these changes, businesses are faced with the challenge to not only create a good learning and training program within the organization but also to rethink the way learning is conducted and delivered amongst their employees (Koschembahr & Sagrott, 2005).

The Mobile Professional

In terms of the technology that supports the current business environment, major emphasis is given to mobile devices and wireless communication of information. The market penetration of mobile device technology in the business professional environment has been tremendous over the last decade. Mobile devices such as PDAs and smartphones have grown to become an absolute necessity for employees in order keep up with their busy schedules and manage their work load in a highly dynamic, competitive, and time critical business environment. This significant push of mobile device usage has been supported by considerable advances in wireless technology. The rich functionality list featured in the mobile devices with their increasingly user friendly design, wider network coverage, higher bandwidth, and faster and more stable connections, make mobile devices not only practical to use but also a virtual requirement for many professional users to deliver their objectives, meet targets and keep up with the competition. This sophistication of mobile technology allows for more complex utilization opportunities that go far beyond simply making a phone call, sending an email or updating an organizer.

Professional Mobile Learning

Companies are facing a serious challenge to revolutionize the way they deliver and implement professional learning among their employees. Training in a conventional manner results in significant loss of time which leads to potential profit loss for the organization. Every hour spent in a classroom means missed sales opportunities for many employees on the road. Thus, learning needs to be flexible in terms of time and place, available, and ad hoc in order to fit into the new workforce demographics and business environment.

Professional mobile learning is a way to address these issues. Mobile learning enables employees to choose what they want to learn, in their personalized format, at a time convenient to them and wherever they are. Learners can use their ‘down time’ to extend their professional skills or product knowledge. Learning can be done during breaks, before meetings with clients or in traveling time. ‘Mobile learning is a solution that opens new possibilities to already existing technologies’ (Koschembahr, 2005a). Companies
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