

**May 2005****mLearning – The Future Is Now**

By Rhonda Darnall

eLearning, learning that occurs with the use of any electronic device, has been the leader in distance learning for many years. We have heard about it, used it, applauded its successes and lamented its failures, at the same time we wondered what would be waiting on the horizon. The new era of learning is no longer the “e” but the “m” – mLearning, mobile learning.

Just what is mLearning? It's the ability to access learning content from any wireless mobile device such as personal digital assistants (PDAs), Palm Pilots, mobile phones, and smartphones; at this time there is some debate on the inclusion of the wireless tablet and wireless laptop computers, but this issue is expected to be resolved in the near future.

Imagine this scenario. Your company has rolled out a new product that requires all of your sales personnel to be trained on its benefits and operation procedures so they can immediately add it to their product line in order to present and demonstrate the new product to your customers. Enter mLearning. The sales person can download the course onto their mobile device and complete the course while still on the road. Then as they present the product and demonstrate its operation to your customer they can immediately refer to the material on their mobile device if necessary, providing the customer with immediate answers to any questions they may have.

With more than half the workforce on the move the emergence of mLearning is an important link to provide knowledge anytime, anywhere and mobile devices have been outselling Personal Computers (PCs) since 1977. According to IDC, a premier global firm that provides market intelligence in the information technology (IT) and telecommunications industry, the population of mobile and remote access workers in the USA alone grew to 55.4 million in 2004.

Mobile workers include occupations such as sales, customer service, engineering, maintenance, consulting, insurance and high level executives. These workers can spend as much as 50 percent of their time away from their desks and offices thus limiting their access to conventional training and eLearning courses.

The challenge to the training profession is to keep current in this fast-paced technology environment; not letting the technology drive the content but finding a way to develop content that drives the technology. When developing content for mLearning you must consider its limitations. First, the screen is approximately two-inches which limits the amount of text. Second, the processing is slower than a PC and lastly, storage is limited. But mLearning will become a valuable addition to the educator's and trainer's toolkits allowing mobile workers to download content and work on it offline, when it is convenient to them, and then send back their results. These problems can be overcome if content is developed according to the emerging international standards for interoperable 'learning objects'. Technology such as Extensible Markup Language (XML), a programming language that allows easy exchange of documents on the World Wide Web (WWW), will make it possible to create content independently of any delivery platform.

The development of a mLearning course should begin with a very basic process called 'story boarding'; a technique used to layout the course prior to any keystrokes being made. Another key ingredient is to chunk the content into snippets of information that can be downloaded quickly, and whenever possible the content should be designed to be interactive which allows for the greatest transfer of knowledge in the shortest period of time.

mLearning technology utilizes Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) which is a new universal standard created for the Wireless Internet. The language used by wireless devices to talk to one another is called Wireless Markup Language (WML). The Operating System (OS) for wireless devices is not as large as those for regular systems therefore it takes up less memory and runs

faster. As manufacturers increase the capabilities of the mobile OS then instructional designers will be able to develop more robust mLearning courses. The ultimate winner is the mobile learner. As mobile computing evolves, educational games and simulations on mobile devices can provide a rich environment for learning.

Also important to training departments is the new ability to link mobile devices to learning management systems (LMS) allowing the mobile learner to download a course and use the course offline. Their course results are automatically tracked and returned to the LMS upon reconnecting to the network.

Are you still uncertain of the benefits of mLearning? The following link provides an online demonstration of mLearning: [http://learn.m-learning.net/iframe\\_page.htm](http://learn.m-learning.net/iframe_page.htm)

Want to learn more? The 4th World Conference on Mobile Learning, mLearn 2005 will take place from October 25 -28, 2005 in Cape Town, South Africa. The previous mLearn conference had participants from more than 60 countries making it the world's largest conference on mLearning. For more information: [www.mlearn.org.za](http://www.mlearn.org.za).

What does this tell us about today's mobile workforce? They want to be connected without being wired.

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