

Part One

THE BACKGROUND

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1

TRAINING TODAY

Today's training organization faces challenges that did not exist just a few years ago. For one thing, the speed of doing business has increased. Information travels back and forth in seconds rather than days. Decisions are made quickly, and people expect quick answers to their questions.

The speed required to develop training programs to support a business has also increased. Everything seems to change more and more quickly—software applications are frequently updated, new approaches to leadership are constantly being deployed, processes and policies are constantly being revised. New regulatory and compliance rules seem to pop up every day, too. Workers need a constant flow of information and training just to keep up.

Meeting the Needs of the Workforce

The workforce has also changed. According to the U.S. Census, our workers now spend more than a hundred hours a year commuting. Not only is this new workforce more mobile, it is more decentralized—a single manager might have employees in several areas of the country, or even scattered around the globe, all of whom need to receive the same information at the same time.

These new workers are also far more technologically savvy than their parents. Having grown up with computers, cell phones, personal electronic devices, mobile audio players, and the Internet, the children of the Baby Boomers expect instant communication. Accustomed to doing more than one thing at a time,

4 PODCASTING 101 FOR TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

they see nothing unusual about sending and receiving instant messages, making phone calls, listening to music, reading and replying to e-mail, and writing reports all at the same time over a latte at Starbucks.

Always busy, they carry their work with them and consider downtime—the time spent waiting for an airplane or an appointment—as time in which to get something done. Yet even though they put in long hours, they never seem to have enough time. As a result, many of the traditional approaches to training don't meet their needs. It's hard for them to see the value of time spent sitting in a workshop or seminar. Even much of the e-learning that organizations have spent so much money to produce or purchase is too slow and plodding for workers' fast-paced, fluid environment. They want information delivered as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Richard Sweeny, the university librarian at New Jersey Institute of Technology, has done research on the newest generation of college students, the group he refers to as Millennials. His studies of those students born between 1979 and 1994 show that:

- This generation is the most racially and ethnically diverse in U.S. history.
- Thirty percent of the population are considered auditory learners (versus 65 percent who are visual and 5 percent who are tactile).
- They want options and customization in every aspect of their lives.
- They hate to waste time and want to learn quickly. They rarely read instructions and prefer to learn by doing and interacting.
- They want to be mobile.
- They were raised on computers and adapt faster to new technologies than any generation before them.

Thus the challenge becomes how to deliver a learning experience when and where these new learners need it, deliver it in a format that works for them, and ensure that the content is kept up-to-date. Podcasts, which make use of the electronic media that are an integral part of their environment and present information in the snippets that they prefer, offer an ideal option for addressing many of the realities of today's learning landscape.

What Is Podcasting?

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines the term *podcast* as "a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player." According to Wikipedia, the term, a combination of "iPod" and "broadcast," was coined by Ben Hammersley in an article in *The Guardian* on February 12, 2004. Like *radio*, the term *podcast* can refer to both the content and the method of delivery.

A podcast, then, is a digital audio program, a multimedia computer file that can be downloaded to a computer, an iPod, or another device, then played or replayed on demand. Updated content and new editions can be downloaded quickly and, in some cases, automatically.

While audio (or video) on the Web is nothing new, podcasts are intriguing because they combine the benefits of being always available, portable, easy to control, automatic, and inexpensive.

Always Available

Podcasts are like radio shows on demand. They can be listened to at any time. This concept frees individuals from appointment-based listening or scheduled workshops because the program is always ready to be delivered. This aspect is especially attractive to busy professionals whose schedules are packed with meetings and who must constantly look for opportunities to learn new skills or refine the skills they already possess.

6 PODCASTING 101 FOR TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Portable

Podcasts are generally distributed using MP3 audio files. This format, with its small file size, is perfect for downloading from the Internet and transferring to portable media players. This portability further frees the trainee, who can actually take a class while traveling to and from work or while on a plane—or sitting in the airport. The portability of podcasts truly supports the concept of learning on demand.

Easy to Control

With podcasts, the listener is in control. Unlike e-mail, where the sender decides who gets a file, podcasts let the listener decide. If people subscribe to a particular training podcast series and then decide that they no longer want to take classes on that subject, they can unsubscribe, and the programs will stop coming.

Automatic

Podcasts can be downloaded automatically to the user's computer. Thus, once users have identified the types of training they would like to take and then subscribed to them, they no longer need to look for content. The content comes to them.

Inexpensive

One of the primary advantages of using podcasting for training is that it is far less expensive than most other training methods. According to *eWeek* magazine, "Getting started with podcasting is so inexpensive that it hardly makes a dent in most companies' capital budget." (The article, titled "Podcasting: An Enterprise Hit," is in the edition of October 2, 2006.)

The History of Podcasting

The concept now referred to as podcasting dates back to 2000, although the technical components were not available until the

start of 2001, and it wasn't until 2003 that regular audio downloads started to show up on well-known Web sites. By that time, however, the concept had taken off—and by the end of 2004, thousands of podcasts were available.

The *pod* part of the name came about because Apple Computer's iPod digital audio player was popular when podcasting began. In fact, the use of *pod* in 2004 probably played a part in Apple's development of podcasting products and services in 2005, further linking the device and the activity in the news media. The term is really a misnomer, because podcasting doesn't require an iPod and no over-the-air broadcasting is required. Nonetheless, it has maintained its hold in the face of numerous alternatives because it just sounds right.

Today, podcasts come in all types and sizes. News organizations offer podcasts, allowing people to stay in touch with current events without opening a newspaper or watching television. Radio shows are available as podcasts. Professional organizations offer podcasts to their members on topics of mutual interest. Museums make podcasts that can be downloaded and used as audio guides to their exhibitions. Companies use podcasts to announce new products. Universities offer podcasts on academic topics. Conference presenters make podcasts for people who are unable to attend in person. Hundreds of thousands of people and organizations use podcasts to keep themselves better connected to their readers, listeners, admirers, and critics. And Apple Computer, through its iTunes Music Store, offers tens of thousands of audio and video podcasts for download.

How Podcasting Works

The most important difference between a podcast and a traditional recorded audio presentation, such as an audiotape or a radio program, has to do with the way the podcast is created and distributed.

Most podcasts are created using software that is readily available and designed specifically to record and edit the program. The

8 PODCASTING 101 FOR TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

process can be as simple as recording a single voice or as complicated as producing a show with dramatization, sound effects, and music.

Once the podcast has been created, it is placed on a Web site with its own unique Internet address, or URL. The site might be part of a company intranet, or it might be a site that is available to the general public. Users can download a single podcast, or show, or subscribe to automatically receive updates and new shows. They can save and replay the podcasts they have downloaded whenever they wish.

To make their podcasts accessible to users, most podcasters use a format called RSS, an acronym for “Really Simple Syndication” and “Rich Site Summary.” The RSS *feed* is used to distribute, or feed, a podcast to a Web server so that users can download it. RSS feeds make it possible for the content provider, such as a trainer or training organization, to automatically deliver updated or new podcasts to subscribers.

For more details about the process of creating and distributing podcasts, see Part Two.

Summary

The increasing pace of business has forced training organizations to confront challenges that did not exist just a few years ago. More and more there is a need to deliver learning content more quickly (just to keep pace with the changing business environment). Training organizations are also expected to accomplish this increased speed to market without major capital investments. Combine this reality with the new tech-savvy, multitasking, computer-literate learners who are entering the workforce, and it is quite obvious that there is a need for a new approach to delivering learning content.

Podcasts are the perfect solution for this situation. These on-demand learning objects are portable, always available, easy to control, and inexpensive. Users can download a single podcast,

or show, or subscribe to automatically receive updates and new shows. They can also save and replay the podcasts they have downloaded whenever they wish. Some might compare podcasts to an older and more common concept of posting audio or video training on the Web. The difference, however, is the use of RSS. RSS feeds make it possible for the content provider, such as a trainer or training organization, to automatically deliver updated or new podcasts to subscribers. This relatively new technology only began showing up on Web sites in 2003 but is quickly becoming the learning option of choice for many of the Millennial generation.

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