The Art of Blended Learning:

Reimagining Effective Learning Experiences for Today's Workforce

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Introduction

The landscape of professional development is undergoing a profound transformation. Blended learning — if designed and executed well for the multi-generational workforce — can bridge the gap between traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning.

Blended learning, at its core, is the thoughtful integration of in-person and online learning experiences. It goes beyond simply adding technology to traditional classrooms or digitizing existing content. It represents a fundamental rethinking of how we design, deliver, and experience learning. By leveraging the strengths of both physical and virtual environments, blended learning aims to create a synergistic effect that enhances engagement, retention, and application of knowledge.

This eBook, developed in partnership with Brandon Hall Group™ Smartchoice® Preferred Provider NovoEd, leverages insights from a webinar, Blended Learning Reimagined: Strategies for Cohesive and Engaging Programs. You can access the recording here. The eBook features insights from a panel of learning thought leaders:

Wesley Best
Director, Educational Technologies/Digital Programs
Darden Executive Education & Lifelong Learning, University of Virginia

Mike Lakusiak
Associate Director, Digital Experience
University of British Columbia (UBC)
Sauder Executive Education

Todd Moran
Chief Learning Strategist
NovoEd

Current State of Blended Learning

The concept of blended learning has evolved significantly over the years. "The historical definition of blended was often fairly simplistic," said Todd Moran of NovoEd. "It was usually centered around Instructor-Led Training (ILT) and almost exclusively for a period of time in a classroom-based model with some form of digital activity that was, generally speaking, kind of self-guided."

However, the landscape has shifted dramatically, particularly in light of recent global events and changing work expectations. Moran said the multi-generational workforce expects flexibility at work, which includes learning and development. Blended learning now encompasses a wide variety of models, as the adjoining boxes show. The key is to find the right balance that meets both organizational needs and learner expectations.

Flipped Model

Learners engage extensively with online content and activities before participating in in-person learning

Face-to-Face Focus Model

Relies on in-person instruction as the core of the learning experience, supplemented by various online components

Enhanced Virtual Model

The model primarily takes place online, with periodic face-to-face sessions for hands-on activities, assessments and networking.

Flex Model

Offers learners significant autonomy to choose when and how they access online content, often with self-paced focus

Rotational Model

Learners rotate between various learning modalities, including face-to-face instruction and online activities

The Benefits of Blended Learning

Blended learning offers numerous advantages for both learners and organizations and has become ubiquitous for flexible and dynamic learning solutions.

"We've gotten to a state where basically all of our custom programs that we design for clients have some form of blended element to them," said Lakusiak of UBC Sauder Executive Education. "That's just table stakes now."

The panelists discussed five main benefits of blended learning:

1 Flexibility in learning schedules

Blended learning allows learners to access content and complete activities at times that best suit their fast-paced work environment. For example, asynchronous online components enable learners to engage with material outside of traditional classroom hours, accommodating various work schedules, time zones, and personal commitments. This can lead to increased participation and completion rates as learners can fit their education around other responsibilities.

2 Ability to cater to diverse learning styles

Every learner has a unique way of processing and retaining information. Blended learning addresses this diversity by offering multiple modes of content delivery. For example, visual learners might benefit from online video tutorials or infographics. Auditory learners could prefer recorded lectures or podcast-style content. Kinesthetic learners might engage better with hands-on, in-person workshops.

By providing a mix of these approaches, blended learning ensures that all learners can engage in ways that resonate with their preferred learning styles. This versatility can lead to improved comprehension and retention of information across a diverse learner population.

3 Increased engagement through varied modalities

The mixture of self-paced online learning, interactive virtual sessions, and in-person components creates a dynamic learning environment. This variety can help maintain learner interest, improve focus, and ultimately lead to better learning outcomes.

"Blended learning mirrors how the workforce is aligned and how people work. It provides flexibility and comfort."

Wesley Best
Darden Executive Education & Lifelong Learning

4 Cost-effectiveness by reducing travel and physical resource needs

Blended learning can significantly reduce the costs associated with traditional, fully in-person training programs. By incorporating online elements, organizations can decrease travel expenses for both learners and instructors, reduce the need for physical classroom space, and cut down on printed materials by providing digital resources.

5 Opportunity for more personalized learning experiences

Blended learning enables a level of personalization that's difficult to achieve in traditional learning environments. This occurs in several ways:

- ◆ Adaptive learning technologies that adjust content based on learner performance
- ◆ Choice in learning pathways, allowing learners to focus on areas most relevant to their roles or interests
- ◆ Personalized feedback through one-on-one virtual coaching sessions
- ◆ Customized project work that applies learning to real-world scenarios

"We have a very fulsome engagement process with our clients where we do a full needs assessment in terms of not just the logistical side, but what their actual organizational objectives are, what they need, and how we can map to that."

Mike Lakusiak
UBC Sauder
Executive Education

By tailoring the learning experience to individual needs and organizational objectives, blended learning can increase the relevance and impact of the educational content.

"I think what we try to do is provide a uniqueness factor, especially when you think of the demographics of the people we're serving, Best said. "They're working professionals who use technology every day, maybe every hour, every minute."

Designing Cohesive Experiences

A well-designed blended learning program should create a learning environment where each component complements and reinforces the others, leading to deeper understanding and better retention of knowledge.

"You really need to over-engineer opportunities for engagement," Lakusiak said. "We are obviously trying to build group dynamics and build a network and have people really establish it."

This "over-engineering" involves careful planning and intentional design of each element of the blended learning experience. It requires a deep understanding of learning objectives, learner needs, and the strengths of different learning modalities. Key steps include:

Establishing shared interests and connectivity upfront. This is particularly important in programs that involve both online and offline components, where learners might feel isolated during self-paced or remote learning periods. To establish this connectivity:

◆ **Start with an in-person or synchronous virtual kickoff event.** This allows learners to meet each other and the instructors, understand the program objectives, and begin building relationships.

◆ **Create a shared online space.** Utilize your LMS or collaboration platform, like NovoEd, where learners can interact, share ideas, and support each other throughout the program.

◆ **Develop clear communication channels.** Ensure that learners know how and when they can reach instructors

> "We found a lot of success integrating in-person sessions as pre-sessions or virtual kickoffs, or even in-person kickoffs, because when you talk about cohesion, that establishes it upfront. You align shared interests. You get that connectivity."
>
> **Wesley Best**
> Darden Executive
> Education & Lifelong Learning

Sustaining cohesion through modular or rotational approaches.
Once the initial connection is established, it's crucial to maintain that sense of cohesion throughout the learning journey. This can be achieved through carefully structured modular or rotational approaches:

Modular. Break the learning content into distinct modules that combine online and offline elements. Each module should have a clear theme or learning objective that ties together its various components. Ensure smooth transitions between modules, with each building upon the knowledge gained in the previous ones.
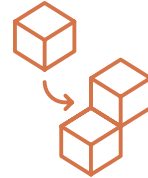
Rotational. Alternate between different learning modalities in a predictable pattern (e.g., online self-study, virtual group discussions, in-person workshops). Each rotation should reinforce and expand upon the concepts introduced in the previous ones. Use consistent themes or case studies across different modalities to create a sense of continuity.
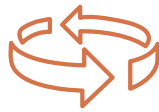
Incorporating celebratory elements, such as graduation events.
Celebrating milestones and achievements is a powerful way to reinforce the sense of community and shared accomplishment in a blended learning program. These celebratory elements serve multiple purposes:

✦ They provide a sense of closure and accomplishment for learners.

✦ They offer opportunities for face-to-face networking and relationship building.

✦ They allow for reflection on the learning journey and discussion of how to apply new knowledge and skills.

By establishing strong connections from the start, maintaining engagement through well-structured learning approaches, and celebrating achievements along the way, you can create a blended learning program that feels unified, engaging, and impactful.

> "It's about creating an experience where there needs to be a real charismatic through line of people that makes the entire program feel like a cohesive, team effort."
>
> **Mike Lakusiak**
> UBC Sauder
> Executive Education

Configuring Blended Learning to Serve Unique Needs

Best, Lakusiak and Moran stressed that before designing a blended learning program, it's crucial to gain a deep understanding of the organizational culture and the profiles of the learners who will be participating. This involves:

Considering generational differences. Today's workforce spans multiple generations, each with its own learning preferences and technological comfort levels.

Conducting thorough needs assessments. Use surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather information about learners' preferences, technological proficiency, and learning goals.

Analyzing the organizational culture. Understand the company's values, communication styles, and attitudes toward learning and development.

Identifying potential barriers. Recognize any cultural or organizational factors that might impact the adoption of blended learning approaches.

By understanding these factors, you can tailor the blend of online and offline components to best suit the organization and its learners. For example, a tech-savvy startup might lean more heavily on digital tools, while a traditional manufacturing company might require more in-person elements.

Aligning with Business Objectives

Blended learning programs should be closely aligned with the organization's strategic goals and business objectives. This alignment ensures that the learning outcomes contribute directly to the company's success. To achieve this:

- Engage with stakeholders.
- Identify key performance indicators (KPIs).
- Map learning outcomes to business goals.
- Incorporate real-world applications. Design activities and projects that allow learners to apply new skills to actual business challenges.

As Best noted, "The key is making a real difference for an organization — a healthy difference, whether it's an increase in sales from the ideas, or reducing costs in a particular area, or succeeding with a new product launch."

Creating Specific Learning Pathways or Cohorts

To address diverse learning needs within an organization, consider creating specific learning pathways or cohorts. This approach allows for more targeted and relevant learning experiences. Strategies include:

◆ **Role-based pathways.** Develop different tracks for various job functions or departments within the organization.

◆ **Experience-level cohorts.** Group learners based on their experience levels, allowing for peer learning and appropriate challenge levels.

◆ **Interest-based electives.** Offer a selection of elective modules that learners can choose from to customize their learning experience.

◆ **Cross-functional learning groups.** Create diverse cohorts that bring together employees from different parts of the organization to encourage knowledge-sharing and collaboration.

"We found it very beneficial if we can create a specific pathway or a cohort where there are domain-specific skills and core essentials that are better face to face with faculty, or connecting with a peer, or connecting with a coach, or a mentor, either in person or virtually."

Wesley Best
Darden Executive Education & Lifelong Learning

The Role of Technology

Technology plays a crucial role in enabling effective blended learning experiences. However, it's important to use technology thoughtfully and intentionally.

"It just needs to be seamless," Lakusiak said. "It needs to be the connective tissue of the programs that we offer, and it can't be too on the nose. It kind of has to blend into the background."

Key considerations for technology in blended learning include:

◆ Ensuring user-friendly interfaces and clear communication channels

◆ Providing instant access to resources and support

◆ Facilitating effective collaboration and interaction

◆ Enabling progress tracking and assessment

◆ Offering flexibility in access across devices and locations

How Effective is Your Current Learning Technology in Supporting Blended Learning?

Somewhat Ineffective
27%

Not at all Effective
5%

Very Effective
10%

Somewhat Effective
58%
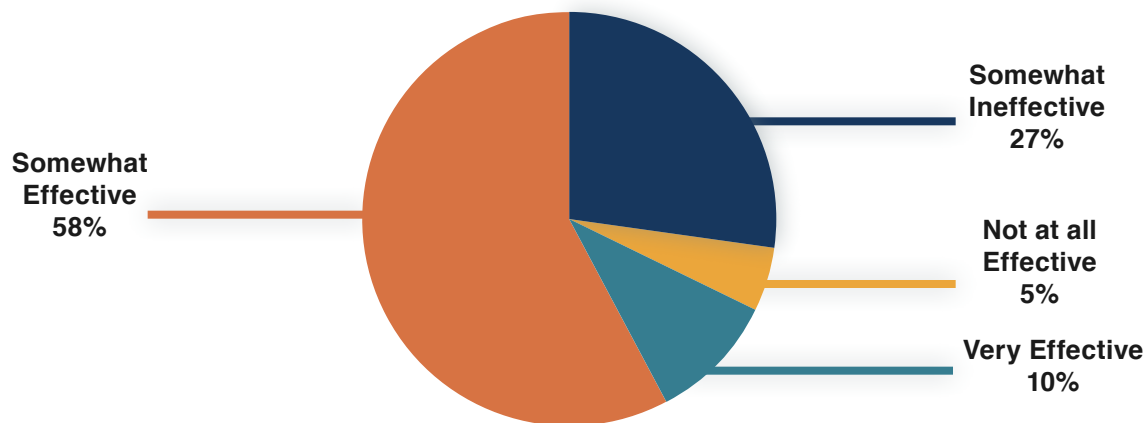
Source: Brandon Hall Group™ poll taken during a blended learning webinar

Todd Moran of NovoEd said technology should act as "connective tissue" for blended learning programs. He also encouraged experimentation. For example, Best said that Darden recently used the metaverse with a client to create compelling experiential learning virtually.
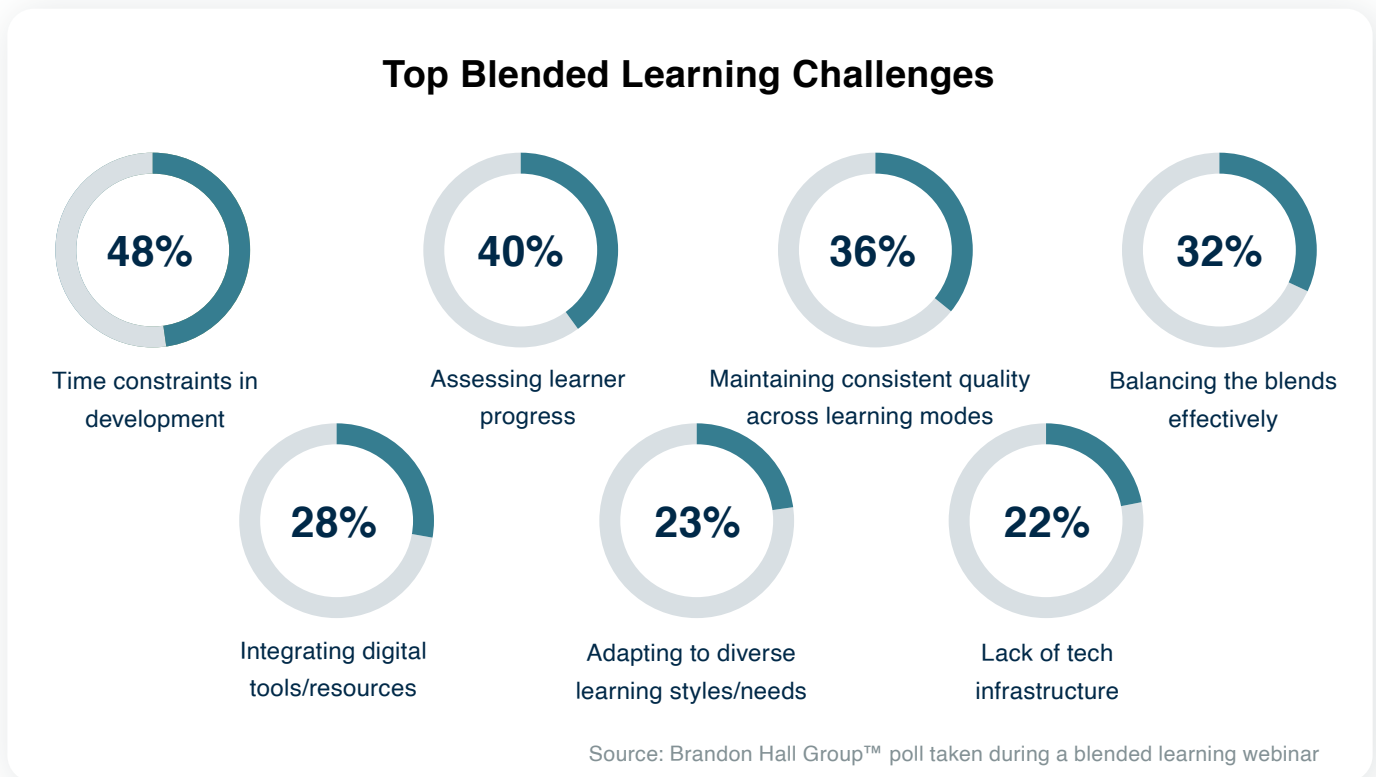
Moran also stressed that organizations should work closely with their vendor partners to get the most out of technology:

"Make sure that you're pressing your technology providers to be in support of you. I mean, that is our role, right? We're not necessarily supposed to fade entirely into the background after implementation. We are here to make the learning experience, and ultimately the business outcomes, more powerful and impactful."

Todd Moran
NovoEd

Conquering Challenges

Implementing blended learning comes with its own set of challenges. The most common ones, based on a poll of the webinar attendees, are shown below.

Top Blended Learning Challenges

48% — Time constraints in development

40% — Assessing learner progress

36% — Maintaining consistent quality across learning modes

32% — Balancing the blends effectively

28% — Integrating digital tools/resources

23% — Adapting to diverse learning styles/needs

22% — Lack of tech infrastructure

Source: Brandon Hall Group™ poll taken during a blended learning webinar

Another challenge identified during the webinar is maintaining learner engagement, especially in the self-guided components of blended programs. Best addresses this issue by emphasizing the importance of human connection:

"We leverage the supervisor and manager experience, as well as coaching and mentorship, especially in that virtual or self-guided component. Understanding the learning experience from the supervisor's or manager's point of view is critical because they are contextualizing what a learner is experiencing to put them in position to use their skills."

This approach of involving supervisors and incorporating coaching helps to combat disengagement by providing learners with context, support, and accountability. Organizations can further enhance this strategy by implementing regular check-ins, creating peer learning groups, and using technology to facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration.

Assessing Progress

Measuring the effectiveness of blended learning programs is crucial for demonstrating value and ensuring continuous improvement.

Key strategies for assessing progress include:

Incorporating capstone projects. Capstone projects serve as a comprehensive assessment tool, allowing learners to demonstrate their acquired knowledge and skills in a practical context. Said Best: "We've been able to demonstrate learner progress with capstones. You can see the ideas and the innovations being built over an experience."

Gathering feedback from managers and stakeholders. Involving managers and other stakeholders in the assessment process provides valuable insights into the practical impact of the learning program.

Implementing proactive program management. This entails actively monitoring and guiding the learning process throughout the program. This includes regular check-ins, using the LMS to track learning engagement in various components of the learning, providing additional support to learners who may be struggling, and maintaining open communication channels for learners when clarification is needed.

Using metrics, reports, surveys. Quantitative data is crucial for objectively measuring progress and program effectiveness. This can include traditional metrics like completion rates, but should also include surveys to gather learner feedback on content relevance and difficulty level.

> "Survey design is a real science. You can't just do happy sheets and expect that you're going to be able to show a client that your blended learning program succeeded."
>
> **Mike Lakusiak**
> UBC Sauder Executive Learning

By combining these various assessment strategies, organizations can gain a comprehensive understanding of their blended learning program's effectiveness. This multi-faceted approach not only demonstrates the value of the learning investment but also provides rich data for continuous improvement of the program.

Key Takeaways

Seven critical factors for success with blended learning:

1   Experimentation and iteration are crucial in finding the right blend for your audience and objectives.

2   Leverage technology partners to support your blended learning initiatives.

3   Creativity and engagement are key to making blended learning experiences memorable and impactful.

4   Understand your organizational culture and learner needs before designing blended programs.

5   Intentionality is crucial in every aspect of blended learning design and implementation.

6   Incorporate meaningful capstone projects or assignments to demonstrate learning application.

7   Balance customization with foundational content to meet both individual and organizational needs.

# Authors and Contributors

Claude Werder (claude.werder@brandonhall.com) is Senior Vice President/ Research Operations and Principal Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. He leads the Talent Management research and advisory practice. He also produces Brandon Hall Group's HCM Excellence Conference.

Michael Rochelle (michael.rochelle@brandonhall.com) contributed to this report. He is Chief Strategy Officer and Principal Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. Michael leads a wide range of advisory support and strategic engagements for Fortune 1000 and small- to medium-sized organizations as well as leading and emerging solution providers across the HCM industry.

Mike Cooke (mike.cooke@brandonhall.com) is CEO and Principal Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. Mike has more than 20 years' experience in human capital management and the research, software and technology industries. Before running Brandon Hall Group™, Mike was co-founder of AC Growth and VP and General Manager of Field Operations at Bersin & Associates.
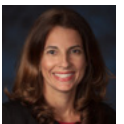
Rachel Cooke (rachel.cooke@brandonhall.com) is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions.

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To learn more, please visit: www.novoed.com

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