

**The Open Corporation: How the app culture is changing how companies do business**  
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Article: The app culture transforms corporate training

Companies are increasingly exploiting the revolution in mobile applications (apps) as a powerful way to train workers. Smartphones and tablets are replacing traditional classroom-based training, desktop videos and webinars. This new trend is expanding access to data and reference materials and helping to keep employees updated on new procedures and products. Mobile-based learning is also reducing training costs for companies and increasing participation amongst employees.

According to Josh Bersin, chief executive and president of Bersin & Associates, a human resources-focused consulting firm, nearly \$600m was spent on mobile learning in the US in 2011. That is double the amount spent the year before, though this is still a fraction of the \$67bn spent by US companies on staff development as a whole.

The rapid expansion in mobile-based training has been catalysed by a powerful confluence of trends: the expansion of mobile penetration, expected to reach 115% in the US this year according to the EIU's forecasts; the growing skills gap as the threat of structural unemployment in the US and Europe increases; and an imperative for companies to cut costs in the face of ongoing economic uncertainty.

Using mobile devices as a training tool does away with the need for expensive off-site training sessions and does not require employees to take time off to attend classes. Furthermore, the shift towards training delivered via mobile-based apps in small, easily digestible chunks is consistent with the drive towards continuous engagement spurred by the rapid spread of mobile devices.

Companies that deal with direct customer interactions have been at the forefront of adoption of training apps, says Sanjay Poonen, head of mobile technology for SAP, a business management software company. This trend towards app-based training is improving the quality of field workers, he says. Employees who service customers or need an immediate product or procedure update are more likely to make use of a company's support materials when available on a mobile app, observes Michael Schaeman, a senior vice president at Lynda.com, a provider of training software and online tutorials.

Cricket Communications, a wireless services provider, uses mobile apps to train and test its retail store salespeople. Cricket began using training apps in a pilot programme in its

retail stores last year and, thanks to the success of the programme, has plans to expand the pilot to all of the company's 1,000 retail locations.

“Given how quickly technology changes, we needed a new way to train and test retailers instead of constantly pulling them away into classrooms,” says John Moxley, director of leadership development at Cricket. Cricket has developed a series of training apps that “hit [employees] with little nuggets of information. In five minutes [employees] can go through a training module that used to take 30 minutes and required salespeople to leave the sales floor,” Moxley says.

Mobile software is especially useful because Cricket stores are often staffed by a single employee who can't leave the sales floor for training sessions or to view video tutorials. The Cricket apps also allow salespeople to take tests right after a training webinar to reinforce what they learned.

Taking advantage of the interactive capacity of mobile apps also speaks to another trend: “gamification”. Gamification is about using game mechanics and design techniques in non-game contexts, such as recruitment, tracking your diet and daily activity or creating online communities that enable peer-to-peer support.

Cricket has developed a game that can be played while on the job and teaches salespeople to greet customers within 10 seconds of entering a store or when a customer is within 10 feet of salesperson. “It's a great way to get them in the habit of acknowledging customers right away,” Moxley says.

The Cheesecake Factory, a US restaurant chain, has also tried to “gamify” its operational training. Recently, the company built an iPhone game that teaches employees how to make “glamburgers”, a popular menu item. Rather than memorising ingredients, employees train by building burgers on an iPhone game app that tests the right order and speed in which ingredients are assembled.

Knack, a start-up app developer, is at the forefront of using app-based games for a wide variety of business uses. Knack, based in Palo Alto, is building game apps to help employees “make better decisions, do a better job of hiring, improve teamwork or transition from one role to another”, says Guy Halfteck, a Harvard-trained game theory economist, who is founder and CEO of Knack.

One Knack game, called Wasabi Waiter, teaches restaurant staff to identify customer moods as a way to improve service. In an interactive animation, gamers are tested in how well they accurately assess moods based on customer facial expressions, quickly serve a

sushi meal, clean away dishes and respond to new customers. Knack also has a version of the game called “Happy Hour” that is set in a bar. The games test skills from pattern recognition to emotional intelligence, risk appetite and adaptability to changing situations. Managers can access game scores or even watch as the game is played to detect where staff need help.

“In this way the employee is able to self-assess and improve habits in a format that can be fun and easy to access,” says Halfteck. “Just about everyone has or will have a smartphone they rely on for so many daily activities, which makes it perfect for training new skills.”

This trend towards app-based corporate training looks set to expand beyond its most obvious application in improving customer service. Knack is currently working with Shell’s GameChanger unit, which seeks out new disruptive technologies for the oil giant, to see if it can develop a game that can help identify future innovators. Bain & Company, a consultancy, is planning a pilot programme with Knack. The idea is to start by getting current staff to play various games to see which skills make for a successful consultant.