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BASICS OF PODCASTING

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TIPS, TOOLS, AND INTELLIGENCE FOR TRAINERS

TECHNOLOGY
TRAINING

ANDERS GRONSTEDT

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Basics of Podcasting

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Podcasting

It's the management's dream: you can talk straight into the ear of all employees without taking them off productive work. Thanks to the new iPod-driven phenomenon known as podcasting, they can now listen and learn while driving to work, walking the dog, or riding the subway. The use of podcasting in training has grown from cutting-edge novelty to mainstream status in short order. Companies like IBM, General Motors, Sprint, American Express, and BMW all use podcasts. Success stories from around the world suggest podcasting might represent the "next big thing" for training professionals. It's proving to be a highly cost-effective on-demand channel to reaching a dispersed employee audience, driving real change, and boosting productivity.

A podcast is a media file distributed online by subscription that users can play on a laptop or portable media player, including a BlackBerry, smart phone, or any MP3 player. Although one of podcasting's strengths is its portability, learners can also listen to podcasts on their personal computers in their office or at home.

Users can subscribe to a podcast via an alert system that notifies them of new shows. Podcasts are typically audio files, but video podcasts are increasingly common. Apple's iTunes and other similar software automatically make the newly downloaded episodes available to a user's laptop or portable media player. Just dock the MP3 player to the computer and the software will transfer the new program in minutes.

Momentum in podcasting as a training application is based on the confluence of several important trends including:

- an increasingly dispersed and mobile workforces
- the ubiquity of mobile players, broadband, and wireless internet connections
- a mandate to implant training in work processes instead of interrupting work to train
- the popularity of new e-learning that is more interactive and user-driven.

Podcasting makes use of many technologies and because of that, the idea of creating podcasts can seem intimidating to many. But the same technologies that make podcasting intimidating also make it intuitive. This *Infoline* will help you understand the basics of podcasting. You will learn how to

- start podcasting in your company
- create attention-grabbing, informative podcasts
- avoid misusing podcasts.

Benefits of Podcasting

Podcasting has a number of benefits, some of which include:

Doesn't interrupt work: Learners can listen to the latest company news while working on their weekly report.

Takes advantage of downtime: Employees can listen during their morning commute; the salesforce can review new product information while in the field.

Available at the learner's convenience: Learners are no longer tied to a meeting or class-session time.

Moves at the learner's pace: Learners can review information as needed, moving slowly through difficult parts or skimming through familiar parts; a podcast can be listened to in sections as the learner desires.

Low cost: Startup costs for creating a podcast in-house are minimal.

Suits auditory-style learning: About one-third of our population are auditory learners.

Subscription-based: Once learners have subscribed to a podcast, they will automatically be alerted each time a new podcast is created.

Embedded in the mobile life of employees: Laptops, cell phones, and wireless technology have created an increasingly dispersed workforce.

Builds company culture: Podcasts can be created with a personality that fits your company.

Is Podcasting Right for You?

The short answer is: Yes. Whether your company is small or large, podcasting can benefit you in some way. Podcasts have numerous training, marketing, and public relations (PR) applications. Instead of human resources giving the same orientation class to every new hire, they can create a single podcast to be distributed to new employees on their first day. Imagine the workforce hours saved! See the sidebar *Podcast Uses* for more ideas.

Successful companies focus on the sweet spots that complement their employees' mobile work style. Audio podcasts take advantage of downtime in the car. Video podcasts are used when you truly need mobile video.

Podcasts are best used in these applications:

- delivering corporate messages
- reinforcing core skills, such as leadership
- implementing change initiatives.

Impractical Applications

Just because you can offer seven-minute videos on “sexual harassment” on the video iPod, or a 20-minute audio of a software tutorial, doesn't mean that you should. What areas are less appropriate for podcasting?

- skills that require visualization
- classes or sessions that require participation or questions
- compliance training.

Clearly any technical skill that requires visualization, like software training, is difficult to convey via audio podcasting unless learners listen to it at their computers. Video podcasting is always an option for such training and should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Podcasts are not meant to entirely replace traditional classroom training. Any training that entails learner participation or encourages questions should be left in the classroom. Instead, use podcasting to post supplementary material or feedback to complement traditional class-based training.

Another area that is probably less appropriate for podcasting is compliance-driven training. In this type of training, students are not particularly motivated to learn, and there's a strong testing and certification component. Learners are less likely to listen to such training outside of the office, and tracking results is difficult. You can test them, but would you flunk someone for missing a finer point while stopping in traffic for a pedestrian?

Create Your Podcast

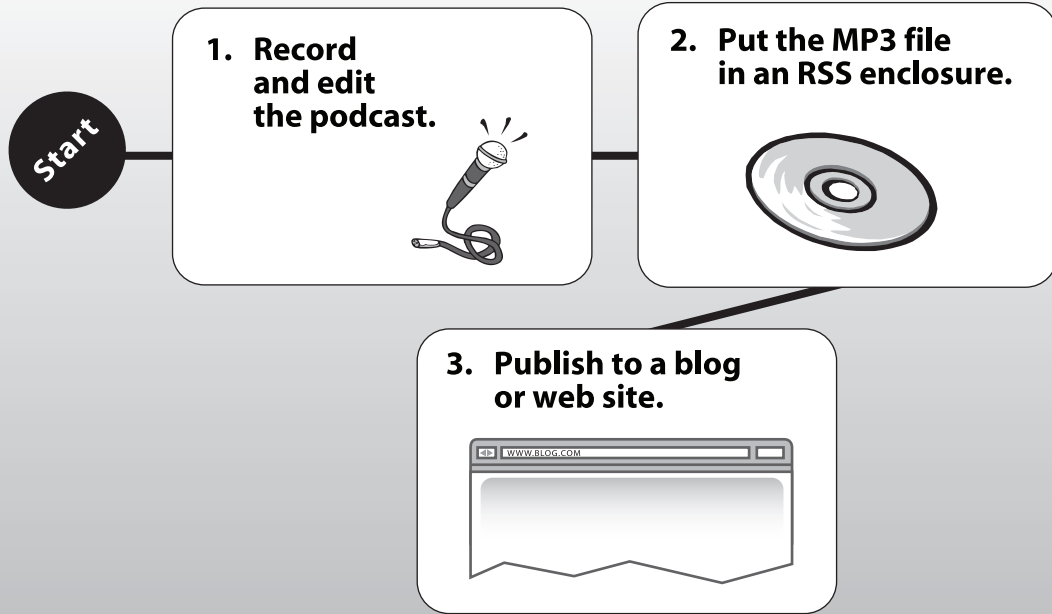
Use the following step-by-step process to successfully implement podcasting in your company. For more information on the stages of podcast production see the sidebar *How to Podcast*.

Audience and Need

Like any new tool that catches the imagination of a training organization, podcasting is a solution waiting for a problem. The first step of implementation is to identify an audience and a performance challenge. As discussed, ongoing reinforcement and change initiatives, particularly targeting employees in the field, are frequently the “low hanging fruit” for podcasting and the target for pilots.

How to Podcast: The Five Steps to Successful Podcasting

PUBLISH



SUBSCRIBE



Podcast Uses

Podcasting has many possible applications in the business world. Use the chart below to see how podcasting could be implemented in your company.

Potential Use	Prospective Listeners
Record classes and sessions	Staff
Orientation	New hires
Messages from CEO and senior management	Staff
Audio or video ads for employment	Prospective employees
Promote new products and services	Staff and customers
Record meetings and conferences	Staff
News updates, including company news and news relevant to the organization	Staff
PR purposes; creating a company personality	Customers
In-house contests	Staff

Program Format

Once the training group has articulated an integrated and coherent mobile-learning strategy, it will need to make some tactical and technical decisions.

- How frequently will podcasts be produced?
- How long should podcasts be?
- What format best addresses the audience, the company's culture, and its business needs?
- Should podcasts be created or bought?

■ *Frequency*

One size doesn't fit all, and the nearly infinite customizability of the technology is yet another of its strengths. EMC, a Massachusetts-based computer storage company, produces three to four podcasts a week, while smaller organizations might produce one every other week, depending on their requirements. At the onset of your podcasting program, it is important to be consistent and create podcasts on a regular basis to build awareness and popularity.

■ *Length*

There's no right answer on the length-of-show question, either. Publicly downloadable independent podcasts average 44 minutes in length. An EMC salesforce survey suggests that 15 minutes is about right for sales training programs. Video podcasts tend to be much shorter; EMC limits its white board "vod" to five minutes. In general, it is better to err on the short side, and leave your audience wanting more, rather than go too long and leave them bored.

■ *Format*

The format of the show is often vital to its success, and this decision is inextricably tied to the culture of the organization. While, free-wheeling employees might respond more strongly to funny, over-the-top entertainment programs, a more direct, no-nonsense approach is probably more appropriate with conservative, conventional businesses cases.

■ *Buy or Build*

Finally, there's the decision to build or buy. If the audience needs inspiration from outside the organization, external podcasts or even audio books can be useful. EMC makes audio books available to its top executives organized into play lists of different management topics. National Semiconductor, a California-based company, specializing in analog devices is growing a library of links to podcasts from Harvard Business School, the University of California Berkeley, Stanford, and other universities. Buying external podcasts and audio books is a fine start, but as with any training challenge, the best content needs to be custom developed. To see how podcasting is being used in two progressive companies, see the sidebar *Two Case Studies*.

Mid- to large-sized companies frequently turn to outside vendors for professionally produced programs. Cost of developing a program with a professional vendor can range from \$3,000 to \$7,000 for audio shows, and \$6,000 to \$15,000 for video shows. These prices may sound steep, but they include every aspect of production, including script writing, voice or acting talents, and editing.

Tools

Although creating a podcast is not difficult, it can seem intimidating because of all the technology involved. This section should alleviate that fear. According to the University of Missouri, here is a basic overview of the tools and equipment you will need to create your own podcasts:

■ *Audio Capture Tools*

Nothing will affect the quality of a podcast more than the tools selected to capture it. A quality microphone is a good start. The microphone can be connected to a tape player, digital recorder with a memory card, or directly into the "MIC" input on the editing computer. If you use some type of recording device, you will need some way to transfer the captured sound to your computer for editing. The way recorded content is transferred to the computer depends on the type of recording tool you use; check the instructions that came with the device or the numerous websites that discuss digital recording.

Case Studies

These case studies provide examples of how two progressive companies are implementing podcasting into their training and organizational lives.

■ *EMC*

EMC, the Massachusetts-based computer storage giant, has made podcasting a mainstay of its sales communication and training missions. Company leaders note that the car ride to a client meeting may be the only time their sales reps have in a busy day to catch up on company news. With three or four audio podcasts produced every week and an increasing number of vodcasts in their library, EMC is leading a revolution in training. “I’ve never seen the field sales organization so enthusiastic about learning in the past,” says James Hunsicker manager of sales, education, and productivity programs at EMC.

Hunsicker says thousands of episodes are downloaded every week, and the number of employees taking advantage of the program is exploding. EMC recently introduced a first phase of subscription capabilities to its sales intranet site to allow employees to stay current with the specific topics that most affect their jobs. The process of making training part of the everyday routine integrates learning into the company’s culture in ways that promise significant bottom-line impact.

EMC aggressively defies much of the conventional wisdom about “mobile learning.” Rather than seeing these activities as supplemental, the company understands that podcasting is one of its main communication channels with many of its key reps. EMC managers appreciate the versatility of the channel, too. Instead of having to divide the learning up into short modules, they can tailor podcast lengths to what they know about average car-commute times.

■ *IBM*

IBM is another company embracing new learning strategies. IBM breaks the traditional mold by offering both blogging and podcasting tools to their employees. Any IBM employee can produce and upload new podcasts. The result is a plethora of shows on a variety of topics including:

- how to conduct effective meetings
- career guides
- technical topics
- salesforce training
- employee stories
- music competitions.

IBM sees podcasts that are not work related as culture-building tools. Professionals can take solace in the fact that the training group’s professionally produced shows are still among the most popular podcasts at IBM.

■ **Audio Editing Tools**

There are a number of free or cheap software programs to record and edit podcasts for the do-it-yourselfer. Audacity is particularly popular among PC users (a Mac version is also available), and GarageBand in iLife is popular among Mac users. Good editing software doesn't necessarily have to be expensive; look for software that allows multiple track editing and multiple compression formats. For an extensive list of software for producing podcasts go to podcastingnews.com.

■ **File Transfer Software**

Once content files are created, they need to be published to a website or blog using any traditional file-transfer method. The software that is used for the website or blog creation will probably transfer the content files to the desired location as well.

■ **RSS Enclosures**

RSS (really simple syndication) feeds notify your computer when a new podcast has been created. Preparing the content for delivery requires it to be tagged via "xml." The enclosure can be created with software designed to create RSS feeds or can be hand coded using a text editor software. See the sidebar *Create Your RSS Feed* for more details.

■ **RSS News Readers**

The automatic download of a podcast requires a type of software called a "news reader." It must be designed to download podcasts to a specific folder on the subscriber's computer.

■ **Content Management Software**

This software allows the user to sort and organize content into "playlists," which can be scheduled to automatically synchronize with a media player when connected to a computer, or download new podcasts at a specified time of day. iTunes is the most popular example of content management software, but there are many excellent alternatives.

■ **Digital Music Player**

MP3 players are not a necessary component of podcasting, but they are needed to make learning mobile. Prices range from less than \$50 to more than \$1,000. Most players come with some type of content management software and methods for synchronizing with a computer.

Create Your RSS Feed

An RSS feed allows people to find and download a podcast, as well as subscribe to the podcast. Once an RSS feed is created, every time employees dock their MP3 players, they will be informed of any new podcasts.

Some elements of an RSS feed include:

- podcast title
- web address of podcast
- podcast author
- description of podcast
- publication date
- copyright information.

An RSS feed can seem intimidating because there is a lot of text as well as special tags involved, but most podcast software will create the feed for you. If not, many websites have sample feeds that you can copy.

A sample RSS feed can be found at <http://podcasts.yahoo.com/publish/3>. Copy the text and paste it into a Word document, then replace all the blue text with your own podcast information. Save the document with the extension "xml" and then upload it to your host site, just as you did the MP3 file.

Edutainment

Inject some fun into your podcasts. The strengths of the podcast are subverted when they're used simply to time- and site-shift the traditional lecture format. If you intend for employees to listen to your podcasts on their own time, the podcasts must be entertaining and educational. The most successful podcasts sound more like radio shows than classrooms. "We model programs on radio and TV formats, so our shows reflect the reality of the media landscape outside of IBM," says Ben Edwards, IBM's director of new media communications. Some successful formats include:

- quiz and games shows
- call-in shows
- talk radio shows
- employee stories.

Keep the tone natural and conversational as well as fast-paced and engaging. Use podcasts to reinforce your company's message and keep your employees up-to-date via a format that is both entertaining and informative. Try some of these ideas:

- gag "commercials"
- simulated call-in questions from characters portraying reps, competitors, or other industry watchers
- jokes and cliffhangers to hook employees into future programs
- listener competitions.

Production

Now that you are aware of all the tools and equipment needed to create a podcast, we can get into the aspects of production. Many companies have found that their most successful podcasts have a proper balance of information and entertainment. See the sidebar *Edutainment* for more information.

Before you start recording the first program, or "episode" in podcast parlance, it's important to develop a detailed outline. See the job aid *Podcast Episode Outline*, for examples of typical episode components.

■ *Script*

A verbatim script may or may not be necessary. It depends on time and resources available and the host's familiarity with the topic and ability to adlib. A detailed script is helpful if it's delivered by a professional voice talent who can make it sound natural. And because the voice talent usually isn't familiar with the subject matter, the detailed script is necessary.

The opposite is true for internal guests, your subject matter experts. If you give them a detailed script with complete sentences, they are inevitably going to sound like they're reading a script. Letting them write the script in their own words doesn't help, it's still going to sound stilted and boring. Insist that your subject matter experts have only key words in front of them as they engage in a relaxed conversation with the host. Put them at ease by reminding them that it's not a live show; they can always do a retake.

■ *Postproduction*

Postproduction is an important step of an audio production. Unlike television, where it's more difficult to slice and dice the recording without jump cuts, a sound recording can be completely cleaned up and tightened without a trace. With a few keystrokes, a professional audio producer can make sentences, words, pauses, coughs, "uhs," and "ums" magically disappear.

In other examples, a three-way conversation with people recorded at different locations at different times can be spliced together into a coherent conversation that sounds like they're all sitting around a microphone. Or, the host can introduce a guest by saying, "Our executive vice president of sales just joined us via phone from a client meeting in Stockholm," when she in fact was recorded last weekend from her home in New Jersey. Are such trickeries unethical? Tell that to National Public Radio, which uses all of them and more on a daily basis.

■ **Music**

Subtle sound effects can make a world of difference; some ambient sound can transport you to the French countryside or to a street corner in Singapore. Music can also be used to set a light-hearted or more serious mood.

If you wish to include a popular song in your podcast, be aware that using copyrighted music without permission is illegal. Numerous companies can help your business obtain licensing rights to the song you want. According to License Music Now, the cost of licensing a song varies and depends upon numerous factors including:

Format: Will the song be used in a video podcast or an audio-only podcast?

Popularity: Is the song a top 40 hit or from a relatively unknown band?

Circulation: Will your podcast be distributed in-house or made available to the public?

Marketing: Is the song used in a negative or positive manner?

Availability: Will your podcast be available for a number of years or be taken down after a few months?

Licensing can be expensive and shouldn't eat up your podcasting budget. For small businesses, licensing a song may not be worth the cost. As an alternative, hire a local composer or musician to create music for your podcast. Another alternative is to use an online music library that can provide original music, in the style you want, at a low cost. See sidebar *Podcasting Websites* for a list of websites that can assist you in creating a podcast.

Podcasting Websites

There are numerous websites related to podcasting. Here is a list of websites that will either help you with the production of your podcast or give you a better idea of what podcasting can do.

www.audacity.sourceforge.net: free sound-editing software.

www.fastlane.gmblogs.com: a blog written by GM executives about products and services as well as company news; receives more than 150,000 hits per month.

www.ipodder.org: a popular podcast directory.

www.licensemusicnow.com: can help you license songs.

www.musicboxmx.com: provides original music.

www.okaytoplay.com: provides comparison charts of podcasting service providers.

www.podcastingnews.com: contains directories, articles, and news related to podcasting.

www.podcasts.yahoo.com/publish/3: has a sample RSS feed.

Vodcasting

Vodcast is short for “video podcast.” With the growing popularity of video iPods and video-enabled cell phones, vodcasting is taking off. But just because you have the technology to produce a vodcast doesn’t mean that you should. Vodcasting has a few traits that make it less appealing than podcasting:

- higher cost to record, produce, and watch
- more challenging to produce successfully
- larger file size; uses more bandwidth and takes longer to download
- requires visual attention; decreases mobile learning aspect.


Vodcasts are best used when conveying a visual element is necessary. When Xerox developed training for its service engineers on its largest copy machine, for instance, it offered video instruction on the iPod so the engineers wouldn’t have to run back and forth between their laptops and the copy machines they were working on.

Publication

Upon completing the podcast episode, you need to compress the audio file to the MP3 format. Compressing the audio file greatly reduces the amount of space it takes up on a hard drive; a 30-MB file is reduced to about 3 MB when compressed into MP3 format. This makes downloading your podcast a lot quicker.

Audacity, GarageBand and numerous other programs, including iTunes, can encode to MP3. For video, there’s a tutorial in QuickTime 7 Pro on how to create an .m4v file that is optimized for iPod.

■ *RSS Feed*

You will post the MP3 file along with an RSS feed, which tells the employee’s “podcatcher” (can also be referred to as “RSS reader,” “feed reader,” or “news reader”) program such as iTunes where to find it. The “feed icon”  is the universal icon for web feeds. Employees can click on these icons to subscribe to a show

■ *Hosting*

The next step is to find a home for the podcasts on your internal network, a place where employees can access them, read show notes, and provide feedback. The two most popular homes for podcasts are

- blogs
- learning management systems.

Most podcasts are hosted on a blog, and the integration of mobile training programs with an active blog is a critical step in the process of building an engaging online community and transforming the podcast format into a two-way, listener-driven medium. Blogs allow development of programs based on themes raised by employees. Podcasts can address specific questions and concerns in ways that are more meaningful and manageable than the standard email barrage. The blog also enables ongoing updates and real-time conversations with organizations all over the world. By posting your podcasts on a company blog that is accessible to people outside the organization, you offer customers an outlet to provide your company with important feedback.

While many learning management systems (LMS) are adding podcast-hosting capabilities, these systems are inherently antithetical to the learner-centricity of the podcast. Podcasts are better utilized on a social platform like the blog that will empower participants, rather than an LMS focusing on the management of learning.

Podcasts are file-storage and bandwidth hogs. MP3 files are on average require about 1 MB per minute, i.e., a 15-minute audio podcast is typically a 15-MB file. An alternative to posting podcasts on your company's internal network is finding an outside host that will hold and maintain your podcasts. Some hosting sites are free, while others charge a monthly or annual fee. Fees vary and depend upon factors such as amount of bandwidth given and special features. Good hosting companies will provide a complete blogging/podcasting package that will have the RSS feed created automatically. See the sidebar *Podcast Hosting Features* for more information.

Subscription

The employee will paste the RSS feed into a pod-catcher program such as iTunes to subscribe to the podcast. This program is always on when their computer is on and manages the subscriptions. Some programs, including iTunes, automatically transfer the program to the portable player, like an iPod, when it's docked to the computer.

If the idea of your employees having iTunes on their computers does not appeal to your senior managers or IT department, consider turning to a vendor to custom develop a desktop PC application for exclusive use with your corporate podcasts. Such an application will handle all aspects of downloading and organizing the podcasts for the user. As soon as users attach an MP3 player to their computer, the application will download and update the podcasts automatically. In addition to subscribing to a series of podcasts, users can easily transfer individual episodes to the MP3 player using a drag-and-drop interface.

Podcast Hosting Features

Here are some features to consider when choosing a host:

- ability to measure the number of downloads for each podcast and report to the administrator a detailed breakdown of the downloads in varying categories
- ranking of most downloaded podcasts (“today’s hottest”) on the portal
- ranking based on votes by employees
- reviews and comments, written by employees on the content and nature of individual podcasts
- full, free text search for anything anywhere on the site
- browsing for podcasts on different categories, such as functional topics (sales, finance, marketing), geography, or business units
- sleek design with support for cover images of podcast series/episodes
- “what’s new and hot” section on the website with the newest podcasts
- listings of podcast authors or departments producing the podcasts.

For an extensive list of podcasting hosts, prices, and features go to www.okaytoplay.com.

Next-Gen Blended Learning

Blended learning effectively mixes e-learning with traditional training. While podcasting represents a key piece of training's evolution, it's hardly the only important new tool at the trainer's disposal. Winning organizations intuitively grasp the value of an integrated blending approach that capitalizes on the power and cost-efficiency of emerging electronic technologies. The next-generation learning tool box also includes:

■ *Game-based simulations*

Provide a fun, interactive way to address business challenges. These simulations closely replicate real-life situations, giving them practical application.

■ *Blogs*

Act as an online journal, and are a more informal way of disseminating information within a company. Blogs also provide an outlet for employees to post feedback.

■ *Virtual worlds*

Learners participate in a reality-based simulation, the most popular being Second Life, where users can participate in a working virtual economy, develop land, and run their own business.

■ *Wikis*

Allow users to create and edit web content; when used effectively. Wikis pool the collective knowledge of your employee base, concerning a particular topic.

Promotion

As with any new learning application, companies need to develop an internal marketing campaign. The initial marketing of podcasts is important for the strategy to succeed and can include:

- short trailers to be played from the intranet and in the speaker system in the lunch cafeteria
- plugs by the CEOs in employee communications
- banners on the intranet
- important announcements made only on a podcast
- giveaways, where employees who post comments about the podcasts can win an iPod.

You can't assume that because podcasting is a new technology people will automatically seek out your podcasts and tune in. There has to be a focused effort by management to promote podcasting as a learning tool.

Impact on Training

Podcasting should be seen as a way to empower your workforce and loosen their tether to the desk. The face of the workforce is changing; a new breed of game-savvy and socially networked people is entering the market. These "digital natives" were born after the PC revolution, want to be engaged and in control, and have less patience for traditional training. Podcasting is riding on the crest of the emerging e-learning trends. With bandwidth expanding relentlessly as the price points of MP3 players are declining, the barriers to the production and consumption of podcasts have broken down. For more information about emerging learning trends, see the sidebar *Next-Gen Blended Learning*.

The question training professionals need to ask themselves is not how they can transfer lecture material to the MP3 device but how they can reinvent learning and embed teachable moments into the mobile lifestyles of their employees. Podcasts need to be fun and engaging as well as useful and informative.

It's important to recognize podcasting as a new training tool and use it as one. Successful companies are using podcasts to improve learning, not to copy what they are doing in the classroom. Reading off of PowerPoint slides or delivering long speeches doesn't translate well into the world of mobile learning.

Mobile audio and video applications represent the steepest technology-based adoption curve that the training industry has ever seen. Training professionals who haven't yet gotten into the game are destined to play catch-up while their competitors forge ahead.

For progressive companies, training is no longer about watching, reading, and listening, but about doing, simulating, socializing, sharing, and collaborating. The maturation of a new wave of online applications and tools, such as blogs, podcasts, online gaming, and wireless and mobile technologies, is driving ever-greater levels of sales and service productivity. Rather than simply complementing existing training, it's transforming it.

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Podcasting Episode Outline

There are no hard rules about how to create a good podcast, but it's important to start with an outline. An outline will help you organize your ideas and ensure that you include all of the information you wish to convey.

This job aid contains some suggested parts of a good podcast episode. Use this job aid to decide which parts you wish to include in your own podcast and then put your ideas on paper.

Episode Part	Description	Your Ideas
Intro	Identify the show with a theme song, the name of the show and introduction of the host, the topic, and in-studio guests.	
Preview	Promote the upcoming show with an upbeat overview of the content to come.	
Trivia	Start on a lighter note with small stories that will set the stage for the main piece of the episode.	
Main story/ stories	Continue to the meat of the show; try one or several stories, served up in an interview format with an in-studio or phone guests.	
Commercial breaks	Punctuate the main story or stories with short “commercial breaks.” They can be spoofs of competitors or promotions of internal initiatives.	
Listener Feedback	Play soundtrack or read written comments from listeners of previous shows and discuss.	
Outro	Conclude the show on a high note with theme music, thank participants, encourage feedback, and give a preview of the next show.	

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