

The Changing Face of

Podcasting puts the responsibility for learning onto the employees.



By Anders Gronstedt

José María Sotomayor, an EMC sales engineer in Madrid, likes to get the latest EMC news during his morning jog. Meanwhile, his colleagues are catching up on new product solutions at airports and coffee shops around the world by watching five-minute whiteboarding sessions by EMC experts on their video iPods.

These brief, information-packed sessions address everything from key customer challenges and market landscape dynamics to solution architectures. EMC's field organization is part of a growing global legion of forward-thinking professionals who are seizing the opportunity to learn just-in-time and just-in-place with the new iPod-driven phenomenon known as podcasting. Podcasting doesn't require an iPod (80 percent of all podcasts are played on the PC), nor is it broadcast in real time (it's time-shifted listening or viewing). Learners can listen to or watch a podcast from their computers, BlackBerrys, iPods, smart phones or any other media playing device.

Mobile audio and video applications represent the steepest technology-based adoption curve that the training industry has ever seen: Corporate education's use of iPods and other portable media players has grown from cutting edge or novelty to mainstream status in slightly more than a year.

IBM is approaching 1 million downloads by employees, who can select from more than

Workplace Learning

2,700 podcast episodes. National Semiconductor spent \$2.5 million on video iPods for all of its 8,500 employees. And learning organizations in industries as varied as high-tech to offshore drilling (such as Atwood Oceanics) are cranking out a new podcast almost every business day of the year. Training professionals who haven't yet gotten into the game are destined to play catch-up while their competitors forge ahead.

EMC, a Massachusetts-based computer storage company, 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 a total of 50 videocasts in their library, EMC is leading a revolution in training.

"I've never seen the field sales organization so enthusiastic about learning," says James Hunsicker, EMC's manager of sales education and productivity programs.

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 RSS capabilities to its sales intranet site to allow employees to stay current with the specific topics that affect their jobs.

The Tivo of radio

The benefits of podcasting are substantial because employees don't have to stop working to learn. The format's time-shift capability enables more productive load-balancing during the workday, and the ability to listen on the go while driving to client meetings or work, walking the dog, or running on the treadmill, transforms downtime into constructive time.

"It drives productivity," says Ben Edwards, IBM's director of new media communications. "It's on-demand, time-shifted, mobile, subscription-based content that can replace conference calls or training classes."

The mobile revolution is driven by Asia and Europe, where cell phone penetration in some countries exceeds 100 percent and MP3 players have been integrated with the cell phones for years. "Almost half of our podcast audience is outside of the United States.," Hunsicker says.

With the growing popularity of video iPods and video-enabled cell phones, "vodcasting" is taking off as well. "A year ago, we gave out hundreds of portable media players to examine interest in portable learning, and today we find that most of our field and partners have these devices," says Hunsicker. "It's amazing how clear the programs are on a ViPod. Vodcasting holds great promise."

People on the move

According to one mobility industry expert, Hunsicker's take on the mobile revolution may be understated. Sam Smith, a principal in Boston-based mobility consulting and content firm RazzberrySync, says mobility is one of the most important and dramatic megatrends in modern history, noting that all phases of American society have seen a rapid shift from site-based technology to personalized technology in the last five years.

"We've started to catch up to Europe and Asia a bit," Smith explains. "This is especially true in the business world, where a variety of factors have forced workers to get away from their desks and out of their offices in an effort to squeeze greater productivity out of the already busy work week."



All this talk about time shifting and employees listening to training programs while driving to work is wonderful, but motivating them to devote their personal time to work requires a significant change in the company culture, and that means creating a completely new approach to learning.



“Mobile phones, BlackBerrys, smart phones, wireless PDAs, iPods, and the expansion of Wi-Fi—it’s all part of the same powerful trend,” notes Smith. “People used to go to work, but now work has to go with them. Today, professionals have to be on the move and that means that employers have to make the company’s knowledge base and processes mobile.”

Some companies have been quicker to figure this out than others, he says, but we’ve now reached a point where any business that isn’t aggressively mobilizing its operations is risking major competitive disadvantage.

“Imagine that it’s 1998 and your company doesn’t have a website or an intranet,” Smith says. “That’s about where we are with mobility right now.”

Training is one of the easiest elements of the corporate mission to mobilize. For starters, the technical demands are fairly uncomplicated. Audio programs aren’t hard to produce, and with a smart, appropriate learning model in place, training professionals can effectively generate powerful return-on-investment. And advances in desktop production make video podcasts more viable than ever before.

Edutainment for the pod-generation

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“There’s definitely a premium on entertainment,” says Edwards. “We model programs on radio and TV formats, so our shows reflect the reality of the media landscape outside of IBM. Instead of scripting an executive, it’s generally a lot more effective to record a 20-minute conversation with the executive and an interviewer,” says Edwards. Other formats that IBMers rank high are quiz and game shows, call-in shows, talk radio shows, and employee stories a la NPR’s *StoryCorp*.

The traditional academic model, where students move through a curriculum with a fixed start and end point, simply doesn’t work for the mobile generation, which places a premium on autonomy in the workplace. Podcasting allows employees to take responsibility for their own learning and trusts them to understand and act on what they need to know to succeed in their jobs.

Success of mobile training programs hinges on using the technology appropriately. The inherent strengths of these media are subverted when they’re used to simply time- and site-shift the traditional lecture format. Instead, the most successful podcasts sound more like radio shows than classrooms.

Employees respond enthusiastically to the natural, conversational tone of fast-paced and engaging “theater of the mind,” which can incorporate everything from field reports, exotic imaginary locales and inspirational vignettes to running themes, jokes, and cliffhangers that hook employees into future programs.

“Listener competitions are particularly effective,” says IBM’s Edwards. “We’re currently running a contest to become the voice talent in an upcoming feature movie where we’re the technology provider.”

Format, length and frequency

Once you have articulated an integrated, coherent mobile learning strategy, you need to make some tactical and technical decisions. How long should your podcasts be? How frequently will they be produced? What format best addresses the audience, the company’s culture, and its business needs?

One size does not fit all, and the nearly infinite customizability of the technology is yet another of its strengths. EMC produces three to four podcasts each week, but smaller organizations might produce one every other week.

There’s no right answer on the length-of-show question, either. Publicly downloadable

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-Ben Edwards
Director of new media communications, IBM

indie podcasts average 44 minutes in length, but an EMC survey suggests that 15 minutes is about right for sales training programs.

Video podcasts tend to be much shorter; EMC limits its whiteboard “vods” to five minutes. The format of the show is often key to its success, and this decision is inextricably tied to the organization’s culture. Free-wheeling employees might respond much more strongly to funny, over-the-top entertainment programs, but many businesses are more conservative, and in these cases a more direct, no-nonsense approach is probably appropriate.

The next step is to find a home for the podcast, a place where employees can access them, read show notes, and provide feedback. Most successful podcasts are hosted on a blog, and the integration of mobile training programs with an active blog is a critical step in 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, and they 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 in far-flung organizations.

Web 2.0

The final step in the podcasting strategy—and the one guaranteed to frighten company leaders the most—is to turn over control to employees. Currently, IBM employees have more than 600 podcasters with more than 2,700 episodes produced.

“Employee ownership is an outgrowth of our internal blog strategy,” describes Edwards. “Having offered our blog tool, Blog Central, to our employees, we decided to make a podcasting tool called Podcasting Pilot freely available behind the firewall.”

Any IBM employee can produce and upload new episodes. The result is a plethora of shows on everything from conducting effective meetings, creating career guides, and developing technical topics for sales force training, to music competitions.

“The community filters the content,” explains Edwards.

Just like in the world outside of IBM’s firewall where people can go to iTunes’ Podcast Alley to cast a vote for their favorite cast or check out the most popular show, IBM employees can do the same with internal shows. Every podcast has an RSS feed that employees can add to any pod catcher program, such as iTunes, to subscribe to the show. The shows may or may not be work related—a recent competition for best music band has drawn an enthusiastic following—but Edwards doesn’t mind. “It’s not work-related, but it’s an incredibly powerful culture-building tool.”

Is “eLearning 2.0,” where students produce their own content, making training professionals obsolete? “Not at all,” says Edwards. He believes the new technologies are simply creating healthy competition between professional training, communications and marketing departments, and rank-and-file employees, with the result being higher standards and booming ROI.

Training professionals can take some solace in the fact that the training group’s professionally produced shows are still well represented on IBM’s list of most popular podcasts.

“This is really important to appreciate,” says Edwards. “In the old world, we could only evaluate ourselves months later by inferring how our performance had affected company results. Now we know right away, and lessons learned can be put into play immediately.”

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