

The Podcast Revolution:

Scary Times for Traditional Trainers

BY ANDERS GRONSTEDT, PH.D

Podcasting has grown from novelty to mainstream status in just over a year. National Semiconductor recently gave top of the line video iPods to all of its 8,500 employees worldwide to the tune of \$2.5 million to deliver training and communications programs. Another podcast leader, IBM, is rapidly approaching one million podcast downloads by employees who can choose among almost 3,000 podcast episodes. It's now part of the playbook of field training for organizations as varied as high-tech firm EMC to offshore drilling company Atwood Oceanics.

“We’re developing the podcasts on the requests of my constituency. Our sales people are on airplanes and have a lot of windshield time, they are very anxious to get podcasts,” says Jan Hellie, Senior Manager at National Semiconductor.

These are scary times for trainers who are unwilling to change their modes of operation. You can already hear the snickering from the training establishment echoing on the rubber chicken circuit: “We can’t track it” “we can’t test people,” “what about security.” Predictably, their solution is to subvert the inherent power of mobile learning by reducing it to a time-shifted lecture format for test preparation. It has been suggested even on the pages of this magazine that “software upgrade certification training” by an instructional designer is a good use of an audio podcast. If listening to a monologue about a software update doesn’t sound like your idea of a pleasant morning commute, you’re probably not alone. As if putting people asleep in the classroom wasn’t bad enough, they’re now trying to put people asleep at the wheel of their cars!

In contrast, professional podcasts sound less like lectures and more like a radio show. “There’s definitely a premium on entertainment,” says Ben Edwards, IBM’s Director of New Media Communications. “We model programs on radio and TV formats, so our shows reflect the reality of the media landscape outside of IBM.” Program formats that IBMers rank highly are quiz and game shows, call-in shows, talk radio shows and employee stories *a la* NPR’s StoryCorp.

The learning industry is still reeling from the disastrous first generation e-learning programs that were nothing short of glorified correspondence courses. Repeating the same mistake by force-fitting a one-way lecture model to the iPod is going to lead the learning function down the path to obsolescence.

Let’s get real about podcasting. It’s a new medium that requires new story telling approach.

Successful companies are leveraging employees’ mobile work style by taking advantage of down time





in the car. These industry leaders are developing content specifically for the iPod and other mobile devices, complete with field reports, exotic imaginary locales and inspirational vignettes to running themes, jokes and cliffhangers that hook employees into future programs. They are using podcasts to improve learning, not to copy what they are doing in the classroom. “We’re using professional studio video and audio recordings, it’s not someone sitting with a PC and microphone,” says Hellie, adding: “The casts have to be lighter, more entertainment oriented, but with substantial content. At the end of the day, people are not going to listen if there’s no substance in the program.”

Trainers, who are falling back on their tired old playbook, packaging and delivering an unending stream of mind-numbing monologues through MP3 audio files, deserve every tomato thrown their way by an unforgiving new workforce. The one-to-many lecture model is a relic from the monks and the monasteries that was never successful in the classroom and is not going to be more effective when ported to the iPod.

Stop the academic pretense. Resist the parochial use of podcasting as a complement to the all important classroom lecture and exams. 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.

Anders Gronstedt, Ph.D., President, Gronstedt Group, an industry leader in podcasting, simulations and other innovative learning development, anders@gronstedtgroup.com

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Podcast Defined

A podcast is a digital audio or video file distributed online that users can subscribe to via an “RSS feed,” which is an alert system that notifies users of new shows. iTunes and other aggregators can automatically make the newly downloaded episodes available to a user’s portable media player, enabling people to listen and learn while driving to work or walking the dog.