

BLENDED LEARNING: Blending Educational Resources to
Create an Optimal Orientation Program



mc strategies
THE HEALTHCARE E-LEARNING COMPANY

www.mcstrategies.com



The responsibilities facing nursing staff educators and staff developers have never been more important or complex. Not only are educators responsible for teaching new staff about clinical responsibilities and increasingly complex standards of care, but they also must ensure that orientees demonstrate competency in the application of that knowledge.

The stakes are high. Orientation can be an expensive, time-consuming process. And the quality of learning will correlate directly not only to patient care outcomes, but also to nurse recruitment and retention.

As a result, organizations must find ways to ensure quality, efficiency, and consistency across their staff development orientation programs. These goals can be best achieved through a blended learning approach. By combining traditional classroom orientation, hands-on clinical experience, and e-learning courses, organizations can strengthen knowledge dissemination, improve instructor productivity, and reduce costs.

Incorporating online orientation courses into a blended learning program also provides greater flexibility — both in how learners access the material and in the way lessons can be tailored to meet individual learner needs. At the same time, e-learning platforms create a framework for monitoring individual learner progress as well as the efficacy of the program as a whole.

In general, creating a successful blended learning program requires assessing learners' technological skills against the backdrop of available resources. With support from organizational leadership, staff educators are well-positioned to create the ideal mix of knowledge delivery tools.

Multiple Benefits

The benefits of blended learning are numerous. Adult learners gain from the ability to determine when and where learning is accomplished. With online learning, learners can complete the assigned coursework at a convenient time and place without the constraints of conflicting personal issues or the staffing demands of the institution.

Staff educators benefit by being able to more efficiently allocate their time. Using e-learning courses to deliver key concepts frees up staff educators to concentrate on hands-on clinical activities or advanced topics, or to provide special assistance to individual learners.

For the organization as a whole, the rewards of blended learning include lower costs (through reduced education-related travel and paid time-off), greater educator productivity, and the ability to monitor educational progress electronically through advanced learning management system (LMS) applications. Perhaps most importantly, staff educators can realize educational continuity systemwide if personnel on all nursing shifts have access to the same educational materials and training opportunities.

Establishing a Blended Learning Program

The first step in creating an effective blended learning orientation program is to ensure buy-in from hospital administrators. Arguably the single greatest expense associated with a blending learning program is the investment in an LMS that can provide a platform for anywhere/anytime e-learning. Education leaders should therefore work to develop return-on-investment (ROI) calculations that compare traditional learning expenses against the costs of an LMS and content licensing.

Costs and benefits should be detailed. By providing alternative approaches to traditional live classes, both educators and learners will save time and money. Fewer nurses are pulled from the bedside



because learning can occur in a self-paced manner. And facilities can avoid paying for an educator to come in on an off-shift. It is important to include the cost of technology, hardware and software, as well as the salaries of staff educators and learners in your ROI calculation.

Here are tips for providing key decision makers with an executive summary of your proposal:

- ▶ **Be concise, clear, and compelling.** To establish legitimacy for blended learning, let administrators know how it will benefit them. Focus on issues that are relevant to administrators, such as cost savings.
- ▶ **Identify the problem or learning objective.** Set up expectations from the beginning. Determine your objective up front, such as providing a comprehensive orientation program. Define what success is and identify the criteria for success.
- ▶ **Present detailed ROI information.**
- ▶ **Articulate the solution — online or blended learning.** Assess the organization's readiness. What is the culture as it relates to online learning? Consider combining traditional, face-to-face classes with online courses.
- ▶ **Summarize the key points.** Emphasize that blended learning not only delivers education more efficiently, but also more effectively. Underscore the mutual goals of increasing productivity and improving educational and training opportunities for staff.

Assessing the Audience

With an LMS in place, staff educators can next focus on assessing the learning audience, the learners' educational needs, and the learners' relative experience with the Internet and computers. Younger learners typically have a greater comfort level with technology and, consequently, can appreciate online learning. Conversely, older learners and some educators initially may not be comfortable with e-learning, and thus may shy away from a blended learning program that includes considerable computer coursework. One way to overcome this resistance is to stress the practical benefits of blended learning for both the individual and the organization. Some learners may need more uninterrupted time to become familiar with the e-learning process. Although this may initially cause staff to be away from the bedside more than is desirable, over the long run, the advantages of more consistent learning, lower costs, and greater convenience become clear.

Identifying Resources

When creating a blended learning orientation program, it is important to assess available organizational resources that can be harnessed to create an optimal learning experience for the target audience. These resources can include computer labs, simulation labs, instructor-led face-to-face classroom teaching, and e-learning courses available through an LMS platform.

Establishing a Lesson Plan

Lesson plans that include elements of classroom instruction, e-learning, and hands-on clinical work should reflect a clear understanding of both the learning objectives and the learners' capabilities and experience. The great advantage of blended learning is that courses can be tailored to meet individual learning needs as well as the needs of the group. That said, using e-learning courses to convey core content is an effective way to establish uniformity of knowledge while freeing instructors to focus more on clinical activities.



Measuring Results

Once the blended learning orientation program is up and running, staff educators and hospital administrators should periodically assess and refine the various educational elements. With an LMS, both individual learner and departmental progress can be tracked to ensure that essential competencies are being achieved. Opportunities to expand e-learning capabilities may present themselves as learners become more comfortable with the blended learning approach. At the same time, areas that can be improved should be identified and incorporated into educational programs for future orientees.

Sustaining a Blended Learning Program

Sustaining a successful blended learning program depends, to a great extent, on achieving buy-in from administrators, clinical leaders, and learners. A few general guidelines for achieving decision-maker support:

- ▶ Pay close attention to the organizational vision so that blended learning programs can be aligned with business objectives.
- ▶ Identify champions who understand the benefits of a blended learning approach and can work to instill that understanding in others.
- ▶ Involve managers in the process of developing, assessing, and improving blended learning courses specific to their departments or areas of expertise.
- ▶ Determine course objectives up front, define the criteria for success, and ensure that a specific road map is laid out for meeting educational objectives.
- ▶ Give learners enough time to complete courses that may include self-paced, online studies, and live classes and demonstrations.
- ▶ Evaluate what works and what does not, and make sure learners complete evaluations at the end of the course.
- ▶ Ask learners to evaluate the blended learning program to build on the positive and eliminate the negative.

A Valuable Resource

Properly conceived and executed, blending learning courses provide a unique and powerful tool for meeting nursing staff education objectives. By combining the best elements of classroom, clinical, and computer learning, educators can create courses that provide greater interest, convenience, consistency, and efficacy. At the same time, instructors will be freed up to focus on the hands-on clinical aspects of education. The result is an educational program that is worth considerably more than the sum of its parts.