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Best Practices for Increasing Employee Engagement and Completion Rates in Online Courses: A Case Study on Creating a Culture of Learning

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines how the human resource department at the target company used features of their learning management system (LMS) to successfully implement a learning and development (L&D) program where employees were motivated not only to engage with courses in a meaningful way but also to complete them at a rate that was higher than that typically seen for eLearning courses. The research discusses the results of a study on the case organization and presents the implications of the findings.

1   INTRODUCTION

1.1   Measuring engagement

According to Kumar [1], one of the key indicators of success for any online course is its completion rate. High completion rates indicate that learners are motivated and achieving their learning goals. On the other hand, low completion rates can signify a lack of engagement, difficulty understanding the material, or other barriers to learning. By understanding the factors influencing completion rates, L&D professionals can make informed decisions to improve training strategies and course design, increasing the likelihood of organizational and learner success.

1.2   Context for completion rates

It is reasonable to ask why there is so much emphasis on course completion rates. In other words, why should we care? For one thing, some situations, such as mandatory or regulatory training, require a 100% completion rate [2]. Other courses may be developed or assigned due to an internal business need or because a manager has identified skill gaps. Completion rates thus indicate whether organizations are on track to achieve their larger goals of a skilled workforce and market competitiveness.

After COVID-19, many organizations have retained online training as an efficient method of deploying organizational learning due to its flexibility and reduced costs. Unfortunately, online courses are well-known for their low rate of learner completion. Some studies suggest that the rate may be as low as 12% for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) [3].

2   HAMPTON ROADS TRANSIT

The Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) is a publicly-funded transportation service in Virginia, USA. Its mission is to connect the Hampton Roads community with transportation solutions that are reliable, safe, efficient, and sustainable [4]. Transportation services include bus, light rail, and ferry serving over 22 million annual passengers within its 369-square-mile (960 km^2) service area around Hampton Roads. The system had an average ridership of 151,000 passengers per weekday as of the first quarter of 2023 [5].

HRT has approximately 1,000 employees [6] and is governed by The Transportation District Commission of Hampton Roads [7], a government body.

2.1   Research methodology

An interview was conducted in July 2023 with Jamica Baker, the HR Manager of Workforce Training and Development at the HRT, to determine strategies and outcomes of their learning and development program. This organization was selected for the case study based on a survey conducted in 2021 where GoSkills [8] business customers were asked to share their training goals and challenges. There were 42 respondents, and HRT was selected due to their high level of learner engagement.

The researchers wanted to identify the actions and tools they attributed to their success. In order to gain insights from a learner's perspective, a learner who showed a high level of engagement and course completion was also interviewed. By examining HRT's training methods, other organizations can gain valuable insights into how they might achieve similar positive results.

2.2   Training and development needs

HRT started using GoSkills in November 2021. The main reason for seeking an eLearning platform at that time was a proposed 3-month training program, Leadership Education and Development Program (L.E.A.D.), that was being developed for leaders within the organization. It had become apparent to the human

resources team that some managers found themselves in project management roles but had not necessarily been formally trained in technical computer skills such as Microsoft Excel, Word, and other programs that would help them in their daily tasks. Additionally, some team members wanted the opportunity to grow professionally, while some desired personal development.

The GoSkills course library, which comes built-in with courses featuring technical and soft skills for business, was deemed the ideal solution. The platform also includes a learning management solution (LMS) within which all employee training can be deployed and managed, and a course builder for creating custom courses.

2.3   Execution of L.E.A.D. training program

Upper management needed a way to offer practical training that would satisfy learners' various motivations. To achieve this, they used the GoSkills LMS to create a "Leaders" team and added managers as learners within the team. After performing a skills gap analysis and determining which GoSkills courses would fill those needs, courses were then assigned to the team with due dates for completion. The platform's functionality allowed learners to be notified of their assignments by email.

An outstanding aspect of HRT's training and development strategy was that learners were not limited to the assigned courses. Instead, they were empowered to enroll in any of the courses within the library that were of interest to them. HRT's three-month L.E.A.D. program also featured a monthly check-in and a cross-department graduation ceremony attended by upper management.

Using survey tools, the training and development team determined that reception to the program and the learning platform was overwhelmingly positive. This led to the establishment of other groups of learners based on job role (e.g., senior, mid, and entry-level project management), by department, or by potential (Rising Leaders) that were modeled from the success of the initial group. Jamica customized the learning experience of HRT employees by assigning relevant courses to them. By creating specific teams—"Leaders" and "Rising Leaders"—she was able to deliver training that was most relevant for participants.

2.4   Improving engagement

Prior to the implementation of L.E.A.D., training was deployed through a mix of online and in-person courses. The HR team realized that learners were taking classes but were not necessarily enjoying the "PowerPoint-style" learning, and they sought to change that.

The first step in the process was a consultation with management to determine what skill gaps or deficiencies existed. Jamica tasked herself with finding courses that included those skills in their learning objectives.

A key criterion was whether the course taught practical skills that could be used on the job. The L&D team theorized that if learners enjoyed learning, their participation would improve. This aligns with a study by Wang & Baker [9], which asserts that interest in the subject matter encourages participants to complete the course.

For example, Jamica stated that although administrators routinely used Microsoft Outlook to send emails, sharing specific tips and under-utilized features via the leadership training program helped increase daily productivity. Learners could

"see the actual benefit," and this increased participation to the extent that they "actually wanted to take the training." This finding aligns with Gartner's "State of Learning Culture 2021" report referenced by Rogers [10], where 72–73% of the 3,500 employees found it easier to engage with training if they found the content easy to incorporate into work or if they thought it would have future relevance, and 63% wanted learning to be of personal relevance (Figure 1).
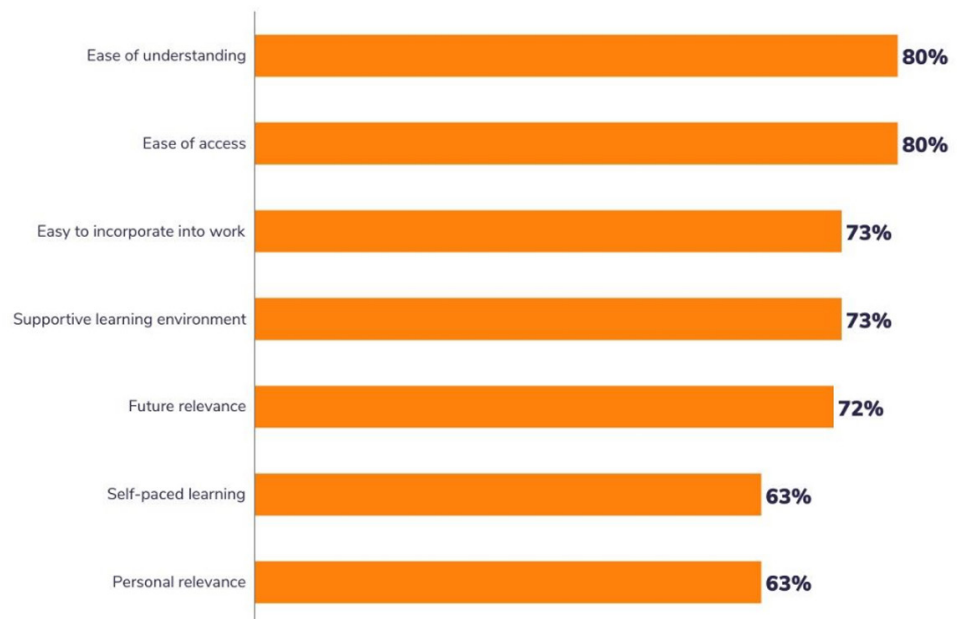
Fig. 1. Gartner's State of Learning Culture 2021 Report, as published in Software Advice

Another element that positively impacted learners' outcomes at HRT was course delivery and design. Previously, much of the training included lengthy PowerPoint presentations of up to 50 slides, which were difficult for learners to engage with. The advantages afforded by self-paced learning meant that learners were not forced to sit through training sessions at a time when they were distracted or unable to concentrate for long periods because of different learning styles or abilities. Instead, learning was flexible and took place at times convenient for each learner.

Again, this aligned with Gartner's findings that 80% of those sampled cited "ease of access" as a determining factor in their participation in an online learning experience (Figure 1).

Each bite-sized lesson consisted of a 3–6 minute video tutorial immediately followed by a quiz or situational questions that tested the concept taught in the lesson. Most lessons also included practice exercises and a reference guide. Pandey [11] states that such a model not only boosts engagement, but can also maximize learning retention by up to 80% because the skill is reinforced upon acquisition.

The microlearning format makes it easy to fit learning into busy schedules, such as "for 10 minutes while the oven is preheating," according to Jessica, the

learner interviewed. This phenomenon is based on what has been termed the "completion bias" [12], the simple idea that people are more likely to complete what is perceived to be an easier task than a more difficult one.

Learners are rewarded with GoSkills gamification coins and badges for completing each 3–6 minute "chunk." These small accomplishments and rewards are designed to motivate learners to keep going. Jessica shared, "I love taking the quizzes and getting the little badges... for people that love training, we love the certificates, we love the badges." Jamica shared her intention to explore the ability to offer customized gamification rewards (Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Business customers can customize gamification rewards

2.5   Measuring results

The L&D team used built-in reporting and analytics to give valuable feedback to the respective department managers so that performance evaluations would be supported by hard data. Being able to view whether learners were on track to complete their courses made it easy to figure out whether learning targets were likely to be achieved (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Team analytics helped admins monitor learner progress

Other LMS metrics provided more granularity into learners' behavior, intent, and level of proficiency. For example, observing that learners retook tests demonstrated that they not only wanted to improve their scores, but their actions also indirectly helped reduce the "forgetting curve," a phenomenon discussed by Wittman [13]. The result is that learners in the L.E.A.D. program saw a course completion rate of 69% versus a 60% rate for those not in the program.

2.6   Learner feedback

Jessica felt empowered by not being restricted to taking only the assigned courses. As a highly motivated learner, she valued the ability to select courses beneficial to her personal development and future professional growth.

After being introduced to microlearning on the GoSkills platform, Jamica shared that learners requested that this format be adopted for all their training, as it made learning more digestible. As a result, HRT webinars and resource videos were uploaded into the GoSkills LMS, and the training department made efforts to develop high-quality, custom courses that are similar in structure to those within the GoSkills library.

2.7   Designing custom courses

In creating custom training content, Jamica sourced industry-specific content from internal documentation, from third-party platforms such as NeoGov, and even from YouTube. She found that these could easily be imported into the GoSkills training platform as a SCORM package or by linking directly to the resource from the GoSkills LMS.

Though Jamica had minimal prior experience creating eLearning course modules, she found the block-style course creation tools very easy to use. This eliminated the

need for technical course-creation skills and reduced the learning curve. Since the course builder is integrated into the LMS, she could easily switch between "Admin" and "Creator" roles to enable course authoring.

Using a variety of delivery formats adds interactivity, improves engagement, and accommodates a broader cross-section of learning preferences and styles. The GoSkills course builder supports the easy addition of various types of text, multimedia, knowledge assessment elements, and supplementary resources via a point-and-click interface (Figure 4).
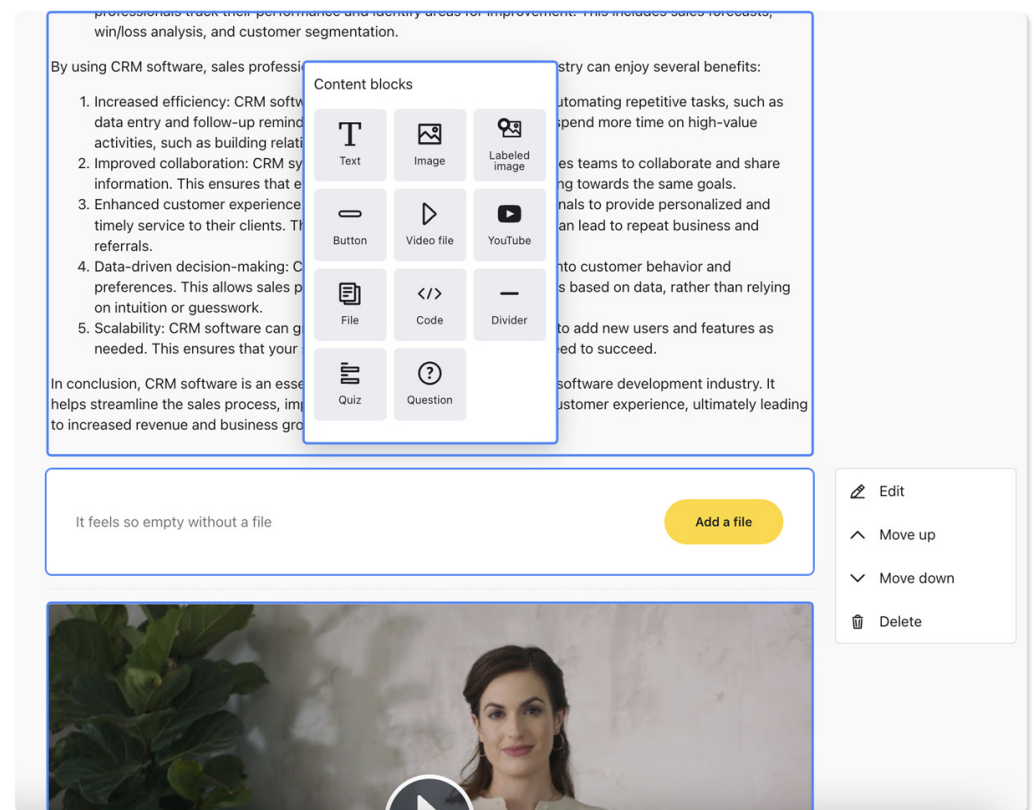

Fig. 4. The GoSkills course builder features a point-and-click block-style interface

2.8 Artificial intelligence

In May 2023, GoSkills released "Genie," an AI-powered course authoring tool. Genie generates course titles, syllabuses, content, and quizzes through a series of interactive prompts and uploads them directly into the course builder. Utilizing this technology significantly reduces the brainstorming and outlining phase and speeds up the course creation process.

Jamica said that by using Genie, she could define training objectives, target audience, and the depth of training required. This allowed her to create a first draft of an in-house course and collaborate with subject matter experts and managers in half the usual time. This resulted in more audience-specific, just-in-time training that eliminated irrelevant content. For example, separate customer service courses could be developed for bus operators and fare collectors. Significantly, Jessica, the learner, expressed a preference for customized training in her interview.

3 CONCLUSION

3.1 Findings and best practices

The above case study supported the findings of previous research and suggested some new insights. By combining the capabilities of the GoSkills LMS with specific strategies, Hampton Roads Transit has been able to create a strong learning culture (see Figure 5) that is beneficial both to the organization and to team members as individuals.
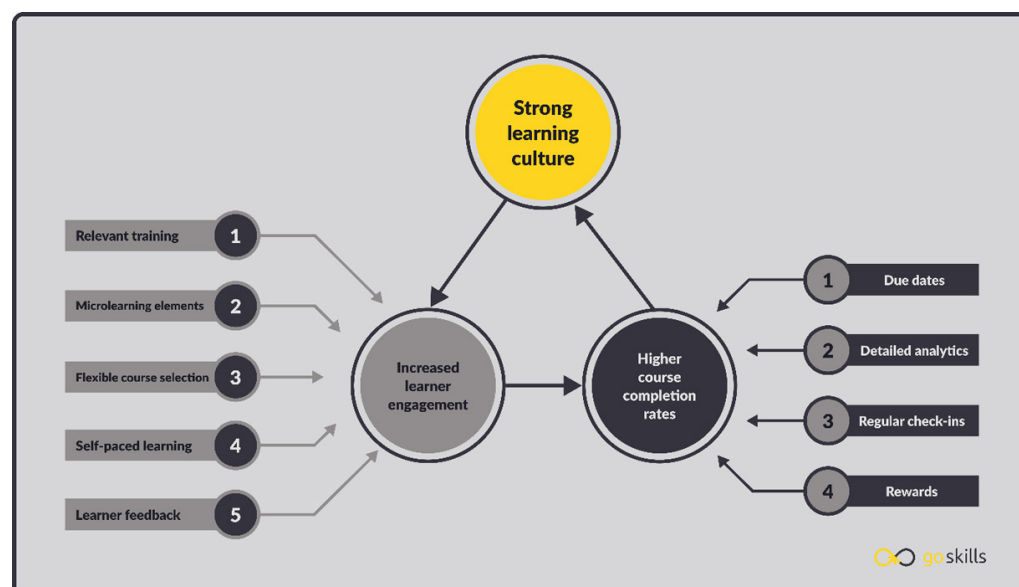

Fig. 5. The interplay of learner engagement, course completion, and strong learning culture

Specific practices included:

1. Making training relevant and specific to the audience.
2. Usage of microlearning principles in course delivery.
3. Granting learner flexibility in course selection.
4. Enabling self-paced learning.
5. Gathering learner feedback for L&D improvement.
6. Setting due dates for successful completion of training.
7. Using system reports and analytics to measure learner progress.
8. Having regular check-ins to support learners.
9. Rewarding success and making it shareable (e.g., accredited qualifications, recognition event, etc.).

3.2 Takeaways

While individual motivations and circumstances can influence learner engagement and completion rates, organizations can implement measures to foster and enhance them. By seeking to understand learners' motivations and maximizing the usage of LMS capabilities, L&D managers can better adapt their training programs and methods to improve the outcome of their efforts.

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