

## **New Workforce Generation, New Learning Styles: *Why Use of Employability Skills E-Learning by Schools and Agencies Makes Perfect Sense***

Today's digital age demands workers who are able and eager to use technology to get the job done. Nearly every occupation involves the use of technology, even in entry-level positions. Fortunately, incoming "Generation Y" workers are the most technologically savvy members our current workforce. On a personal level, they see technology as an extension of themselves – and they apply it with the same vigor and creativity within an employment context. These individuals *expect* to use technology on the job, and they have already had a profound impact on how employers incorporate technology into their business practices and processes, including their training initiatives.

While companies are increasingly using technological solutions for employee training, youth job readiness programs offered by schools and agencies, however, continue to rely heavily on the traditional instructor-led training model.

### **Technology and Youth**

This newest legion of workers was born into technology, and it has been ubiquitous throughout their lives, including their education and social interactions. Their parents used audio and video monitors in their cradles, rushed to buy the latest technology-based learning games as they grew, and gave them computers and cell phones – while still in grammar school – to monitor their safety and prepare them for a competitive academic environment.

Technology has always been part of the natural environment and everyday life of today's young adults. A 2008 survey by Forrester, entitled "North American Technographics," found that 90% of 18-28 year-olds own a PC and 82% own a mobile phone. Their use of online technologies surpasses TV watching, and their social contacts extend far beyond their local communities into the far reaches of the world. They are more open than those before them, and share more of themselves through online media such as social networks and blogs than their parents would think proper. They enjoy – perhaps even demand – being engaged, entertained, and "connected" as much as possible.

Young workers represent a very large population poised to take over for the retiring Baby Boomers and make their mark on the world that they have inherited. Considering that they will undoubtedly use technology to make that mark, why aren't schools and employment programs making more and better use of technology when educating this generation? Mark Prensky, author of *Digital Game-Based Learning* (McGraw-Hill, 2001), explains it this way: Today's young people are "digital natives" who are being educated in a system designed for preceding generations with limited technology exposure. Their teachers, while well-intentioned, are "digital immigrants" who have difficulty effectively integrating technology-based learning into their curricula.

Barbara Conner, Global Career Development Facilitator at Fairfax County Public Schools, told Access Technologies Group that digital resources are critical to reaching today's youth. She noted that young people use technology tools 24/7, blurring the line between leisure and work, and also remarked that tasks performed this way feel more like recreational activities and less like school or job requirements. Digitally-packaged learning, therefore, will be more appealing to students and an effective way for youth to learn and internalize the skills they need to be successful in the working world.

## Transitioning Youth as Learners

The term "Millennials" is frequently used to describe individuals born after 1980, the oldest of whom are currently in the midst of school-to-work transition. In their seminal 2000 book, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Neil Howe and William Strauss describe the "Seven Distinguishing Characteristics of Millennials," which have been subsequently corroborated by many other researchers. These key attributes are:

- **Conventional** – Social rules and structure are accepted and even welcomed. Unlike the previous two generations (Baby Boomers and Generation X), they are comfortable with their parents' values.
- **Confident and self-assured** – They are optimistic for themselves and their country.
- **Special** – They were rewarded for participating and trying their best (even in the absence of a "win"), earning them the moniker of the Trophy generation.
- **Sheltered** – They were the focus of the largest child safety initiative in history, one that extended from the home to the school and included everything in-between.
- **Stressed/pressured** – They have been pushed to excel not only in school, but also in extra-curricular activities and community service
- **Achieving** – They are positioned to be the most well-educated generation with the lowest violent crime-rate
- **Team-oriented** – They enjoy working in teams, and embrace diversity within their groups. Their work-related teammates tend to become friends and part of their personal and extended networks.

Needless to say, the above traits and experiences have helped shape the preferred learning styles of our youngest workers. In addition, they are constantly confronted with vast amounts of multi-sensory information from numerous sources, including the Internet; they watch TV shows that cram an amazing amount of content into a 45-minute plot; and they have been exposed to team-based learning since kindergarten. As a result of these factors, these individuals:

- Prefer a self-directed approach to learning.
- Expect engaging and meaningful visual and auditory input from their learning tools.
- Insist that what they learn is directly applicable to them and can be put into practice immediately.
- Enjoy making their own determinations through exploration and experimentation rather than simply being told that something is so.
- Demand instant gratification and immediate feedback as a result of their short attention spans.

- Assume that needed information will always be available “on-demand.”
- Are adept at seeking out and synthesizing data from a multitude of sources.
- Can effectively perform multiple tasks simultaneously.
- Value working together as a means of validating and expanding their own insights and belief system.

The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills is an advocacy organization focused on ensuring that every child’s education adequately prepares him or her to be successful citizens and workers. The following standards and best practices are among those that the Partnership has set forth for creating an environment conducive to learning.

- “Engages students with the real world data, tools, and experts they will encounter in college, on the job, and in life – students learn best when actively engaged in solving meaningful problems”
- “Enables innovative learning methods that integrate the use of supportive technologies, inquiry- and problem-based approaches”
- “Encourages the integration of community resources beyond school walls”
- “Enables students to learn in relevant, real world 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts”

It’s no coincidence that these speak directly to the ways in which transitioning youth best acquire and retain knowledge!

## **Technology as an Effective Training Delivery Medium**

In an interview with Access Technologies Group, Allison Paul, School Counselor at Hawthorne Cedar Knolls Sr/Jr High School, expressed that today’s youth are more motivated to learn when technology is involved in their studies. She further states, “Using technology to teach workplace skills is essential for today’s job market. When a student learns technology skills and becomes efficient, they will be more valuable to employers.” With respect to using software products for workforce training, Ms. Paul states, “It’s a natural fit. There isn’t enough time in the school day to teach these important skills. Students could learn at their own pace and repeat whatever they need to hear or answer again. They enjoy using the computer for learning.”

Ms. Paul’s statements only begin to explain the many ways in which e-learning is an ideal match with young adult learners. In addition to the simple appeal that technology holds for these individuals, as well as their familiarity and comfort with it, e-learning offers this population many other significant benefits over traditional classroom instruction. For example, well-designed e-learning:

- Entertains them by engaging their visual and auditory senses.
- Provides the flexibility to receive the training on their own schedule, at their own pace, when and as often as needed.
- Addresses their preference for standards and protocol by providing consistent instruction.
- Delivers information in small chunks or modules, allowing them to easily split their time between multiple activities.



- Provides meaningful feedback that enables students to assess their own performance and satisfy their need for achievement.
- Includes hyperlinks that allow students to freely explore related content from various sources, which they can use – along with the instruction provided by the e-learning courseware – to construct their own knowledge.

Additionally, e-learning is accessible to youth with disabilities and/or learning challenges, and “patient” with respect to slow response times and mistakes. Allowing students to work through the course in a private and embarrassment-free environment improves not only their targeted skills and behaviors, but also their comfort and confidence applying them in real-life situations.

Simulation-based e-learning further addresses the unique learning styles and expectations of today’s young adults. Allowing students to practice behaviors in realistic on-the-job situations meets their demands for both relevance and self-discovery. Additionally, a “conversational” approach to the role-plays and/or the subsequent feedback provided can convey the sense of collaboration that these individuals desire.

## **Conclusion**

Research consistently shows that e-learning is cost-effective (approximately 35-35% less than classroom training), scalable, easy to administer, and measurable. This – combined with young adults’ learning preferences, sound instructional design, and robust technology – represents a compelling case for schools and agencies to incorporate e-learning into their employability skills training initiatives. This would allow them to provide high-quality education and services despite shrinking budgets, while freeing up teachers and job coaches to focus their efforts on areas in which personal intervention is needed.

Another outcome – arguably the most important one of all – will be students and clients who are better equipped to secure suitable employment, succeed on-the-job, and proudly serve as contributing and productive workforce members.