All Aboard!

The Web 3D Train Is Leaving the Station

Whether you are just starting a blog or entering a virtual world, there is still time to get on board with the future of learning.

By Anders Gronstedt

Put your ear to the tracks, and you'll hear the rumbling of a freight train coming toward you. It's Web 2.0, and it's driven by the sound of millions of conversations across the blogosphere, the growing hum of business podcasts, and the steady accretion of institutional wisdom on corporate wikis.

Right behind it is the Web 3D train, fueled by the booming populations pitching their tents in the virtual archipelagos of Second Life.

A new breed of game-savvy and socially networked employees are pouring into the workforce, and this new generation of workers wants to be engaged, in control, and part of a compelling storyline. They expect greatness and will abandon you en masse if you cannot inspire them. You'll never know what hit you unless you start innovating and rewriting the playbooks for frontline communication. Now.

When you listen in on your e-learning courses, do your hear monologues? Are they still overcome with death-by-PowerPoint, newsletters that can cure insomnia, videos that bring all the drama and thrill of C-SPAN, and media files that are rammed down a one-way track from your department to your employees? The best that can be said about most learning programs is that they give

people the sensation of a coma, without all the worry and inconvenience.

The future of learning and development is about doing. It's about simulating and engaging, not watching, reading, and listening. It's about conversation and application, not a sage-on-a-stage. It's about peer-to-peer sharing, not top-down dissemination. And ultimately, it's about fostering commitment, not compliance.

While you're contemplating whether to offer podcasts or dive into virtual worlds, your employees are already there. They role-play in Second Life, listen to podcasts while driving, build best-practice wikis, rant on their blogs, and "poke" their Facebook buddies.

The train is leaving the station. And your refusal to board might be taken as arrogance, technophobia, stupidity, or all of the above. Whether these things

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are actually true is irrelevant when the next generation of talent is leaving you for competitors who may already have planted their flag in the virtual world.

Many companies have already found a balance between training delivery and technology:

- Computer storage leader EMC is cranking out five to 10 podcasts a week and two to three vodcasts weekly to its employees, who subscribe to their favorite casts through an RSS feed and listen from their PDAs while driving to client meetings.
- Intel's internal wiki, "Intelpedia," has amassed 5,000 pages of content and garnered 13.5 million page views in a little more than a year.
- Sales reps at Ericsson role-play their way through customized virtual scenarios with full-motion video, professional acting, and story-centered, character-rich dramatizations that help them sell consultatively to real customers.
- Serena Software has instituted "Facebook Friday," requiring each of its 900 employees to spend an hour every Friday updating their Facebook profiles in recognition of its value to recruitment and brand building.
- Sun Microsystem CEO Jonathan Schwartz is getting rid of his office and cutting down on travel, finding that he communicates more efficiently from his kitchen table by writing blog entries that are translated into 10 languages and reach more than 50,000 people a day. He's setting an example for the more than 4,000 Sun employees who are also blogging.

Web 3D

Web 2.0 is already old news to some companies who are betting that the future of online interaction won't be built on flat, static webpages, but rather in traversable 3D spaces.

IBM has 25 islands in Second Life, and 15,000 of its employees already have Second Life accounts. A number of other companies conduct meetings, training, job fairs, and new-hire orientations in virtual world environments.

The unique value props with virtual worlds include

- the ability to visualize 3D objects, facilities, and phenomena and to manipulate scale and perspective
- role playing
- visualization of data
- low cost
- a platform for multiplayer games and simulations
- collaboration.

But let's cut to the chase. The real value prop is that virtual worlds are more fun than just about any other form of learning. Finally, they provide a break from the drudgery of staring at your phone while talking to disembodied voices on a conference call or watching a static PowerPoint during a webinar.

In the virtual world, you can "see" the meeting in an immersive 3D environment. You can see who is talking; you can express yourself through the customization of your avatar; and you can gesture, dance, or ride a horse.

The bureaucratic class

We can argue about whether it's self-indulgent or not, but the cold fact is that the new generation doesn't care why you're still doing things the old-fashioned way. For the talented young workers who represent the lifeblood of a forward-looking company, it's often as simple as asking, "Do they or don't they use Web 3D for training?"

A large majority of companies do not. Research suggests that more than two-thirds of all companies are blocking access to social networking sites, wikis, blogs, and video and photo-sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr. An even larger majority of companies block access to Second Life.

For this reason, it's critical that you don't let your legal or IT departments intimidate you. The bureaucratic class in your company—in IT, legal, human resources, and other functions—are frequently vested in the status quo instead of change, in the past rather than the future, and in preventing mistakes instead of creating opportunities. If left unchecked, they can suck

The hard part about Web 2.0– and Web 3D–powered training isn't technology—it's attitude. You have to loosen up, lighten up, and shut up. Don't join the party wearing your faculty cloak. Join as a participant.

the life out of a company and frighten away a generation of digital natives.

Skunk work approach

Whether you're working for a company that is stuck in Web 1.0 trying to move to Web 2.0, or in the flatland of blogs and wikis trying to move to Web 3D, don't approach progress as a threatening transformation. Instead, set up a "skunk work" project.

Start with something cheap like a wiki or a meeting in a virtual world. Eventually, you'll want a robust build-out, but for the time being, these are channels that can be productively employed for very little money (making them ideal ramp-up and case-building applications).

Test it. Solve specific problems, and get immediate feedback. Build internal success stories. Iron out kinks early, and create a groundswell of support and an army of evangelists. Think big and act bold, but start small. Aggregate upwards and outwards to generate scale and drive the organization toward enterprise-level adoption.

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THE NEW COMMUNICATION MANIFESTO FOR THE DIGITAL GENERATION

WHAT'S OUT?	WHAT'S IN?
Legacy dogmas	New realities
Watching, reading, and listening	Doing, simulating, and engaging
Telling	Conversation and application
Sage-on-a-stage	Ubiquitous training
Command and control	Guide and nurture
Top-down	Peer-to-peer
Father knows best	Harnessing collective intelligence
Plan and execute	Release early and often, perpetual beta
Cautious and safe	Wacky and rebellious
Ask for permission	Ask for forgiveness
People going to training	Training going to people
Interruptive distractions	Teachable moments
Appointment-driven	On-demand
Captives in meetings	Communications in context
Graphic design	Game design
Efficiency and cost control	Effectiveness and growth
Replicating communications with new media	Reinventing communications with new media
Compliance	Commitment

Second Life community activities for third-party developers, appears as Lynx in the virtual world (fluffy tail, whiskers, and all). Podcasts developed for Ericsson include interviews conducted by a comic relief character, Sir Basil Grey, the dean of her majesty's roving field correspondents. The Nike Sports Knowledge Underground (SKU), an online learning environment for retail employees, plays the urban subway system metaphor to the tilt, with each station representing a training activity.

Who said training for the digital age has to be modeled on a boring, ancient, Fordian industrial approach? If such anecdotal evidence is not convincing enough, check out Ed Castronova's latest book *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun Is Changing Reality*. He has put together a persuasive case that we're entering a "fun economy," where the real world may begin to model its institutions after virtual worlds because the general populace finds them more fun.

Communication departments that use new technology to deliver the same old straight-laced pronouncements have to brace for a train wreck as digital natives enter the workforce. Instead of using new technology to complement and supplement traditional newsletters and meetings, these organizations need to rethink learning. Imagine the possibilities if new-generation information and service workers can learn the skills they need in a context that's actually energizing.

Anders Gronstedt is president of the Gronstedt Group; anders@gronstedtgroup.com.

party wearing your faculty cloak. Join as a participant. You have to trust the audience members, some who possess knowledge and expertise that surpasses anything a communication organization can hope to master.

Let them teach each other. No one has better credibility than a successful peer. Your approach will be more productive if it's more fun, more interactive, more conversational, and more like the computer games, blogs, and podcasts that the iPod generation is already interacting with in its spare time.

Consider some examples. Paul Steinberg, who spearheads Intel's

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