Effective E-Learning Tools for Safety and Compliance Training

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Ongoing employee learning and development is a necessity for most organizations, but particularly those in typically high-risk industries from manufacturing and mining to chemicals and oil & gas. For these companies, safety and compliance training can be a requisite to their ability to operate as a business. Not only must this comprehensive training take place when onboarding every new employee, it must also be provided to existing workers to comply with current regulations, on an ad hoc basis should there be unexpected changes to existing safety regulations, and at regular intervals to continuously reinforce safe operations.

Such training often represents a significant investment of resources for companies both in terms of time and money. A little more than half (53 percent) of companies participating in a July 2017 Compliance Training Study by Brandon Hall Group reported devoting between 76 to 100 hours to compliance training for each employee throughout the calendar year. That same percentage of companies spend at least $500 on each employee per year for compliance training, and 15 percent report spending more than $5,000 per employee per year to provide compliance training, according to the study.

Challenges to Effective Learning and Development

Despite this clear commitment to provide necessary safety and compliance training to employees, organizations can face two significant challenges to doing so effectively:

1. Satisfying varying geographical needs.

Companies with operations in multiple locations, especially those with multinational operations, can be subject to varying regulations. In the United States, for example, a company's facility located in Ohio could be subject to different environmental and operational regulations than one of its facilities operating in California, depending on the laws of those states. And if a U.S.-based company also has operations in Europe, employee training in those two countries would need to be reflective of Occupational Health and Safety Administration rules and those of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, respectively. Likewise, organizations with multi-national operations must provide training in the native language where employees are located. However, simple translations of content prepared in one language to that of another language can contain numerous inaccuracies, rendering the translated training content ineffective. Overcoming such geographical obstacles are essential to successful compliance training.

2. Keeping all workers engaged in training.

Technology is transforming the way we live and connect with one another, but not everyone is eager to adopt and use the latest innovations. Workers who are older tend to be less familiar with the latest technology, while younger "Millennials" are quite accustomed to recent digital trends and more comfortable with using newer technologies. (PD Quarterly, "Millennials and Technology in Today's Workplace," Lauren Stiller Rikleen, February 2014) Training initiatives must recognize these differences while leveraging new technologies that can effectively engage all generations in the workforce and improve outcomes.

The training experience itself should be interesting to employees. If we are being honest, workers are rarely excited about participating in safety and compliance training. The hours required for training are, in most cases, mandated by the company, and can account for a significant part of an employee's workday or work week depending on the training to be done. Training content that is not updated can easily be perceived as repetitive. Because one training experience can impact how employees feel about the next, all training experiences should seek to excite employees and hold their interest.

Current Trends in Safety and Compliance E-Learning

Fortunately, there are several tools currently available and in development that can make critically important compliance training more engaging and increase the retention of information provided so learnings are applied regularly in the workplace.

Video

Advancements in technology and lower costs for video design have made video production and sharing more prevalent than ever before. It is estimated that in 2017, video accounted for nearly 70 percent of all consumer internet traffic, according to Cisco. Global consumers were predicted to spend an average of 47.4 minutes each day viewing videos online in 2017, up from 39.6 minutes in 2016 (Zenith's Online Video Forecasts 2017). The availability of video is having a tremendous influence on safety and compliance training. The ease with which engaging, high-quality video can be created and streamed enables it to be seamlessly integrated within a classroom-based training session or made available on mobile devices for training on demand. The result is a more immersive training experience for employees.

Mobile Devices

Mobile devices, whether smartphones or tablets, are transforming the way safety and compliance training is conducted. Workers can now have training and information available at their fingertips 24 hours a day, seven days a week, making training more convenient for workers. It is estimated that by 2019, mobile devices will account for 72 percent of all online video viewing (Zenith's Online Video Forecasts 2017). Today, two-thirds of people (67 percent) use mobile devices to access learning (ZEQR infographic "ELearning Trends to Watch Out for in 2018").

Mobile-based training is an ideal way to engage younger workers, particularly Millennials. Nearly nine of every 10 Millennials (87 percent) say their smartphone never leaves their side (ZEQR infographic "E-Learning Trends to Watch Out for in 2018"). But as mobile devices become more commonplace in society and gain more acceptance, older workers are becoming more comfortable using them. Roughly two-thirds of Americans ages 65 and older (67 percent) accessed news on a mobile device last year, a 24 percentage point increase over 2016 (Pew Research Center survey, March 2017). This makes mobile devices a key tool for safety and compliance training today and in the near future.

Microlearning

Microlearning is emerging as an important way to augment and complement learning. What makes microlearning different is how it offers a reconsideration of the traditional method and medium of training. More traditional training, especially on-boarding of new employees, is often seen as an intensive, one-time immersion into the safety, skills and culture of an organization. While this type of induction training is necessary, it is becoming apparent that there can be more effective ways to train, reinforce or adjust skills.

Microlearning delivers training in short "bursts." These two to three minute bursts may encompass an individual skill or be part of a series of skills or knowledge. Microlearning promotes awarenesslevel learning, enhancing comprehension of specialized, individual tasks. It assists with sustainment of learning by making an abstract point concrete for learners and demonstrating how a procedure that is taught applies to a worker's daily job. Individual microlearning opportunities stress a specific skill and can utilize brief messaging and short videos that can be accessed via mobile device.

Microlearning is increasingly becoming a widelyutilized element of training and continuing education among organizations. It is important, however, not to view microlearning as a replacement for a larger training curriculum, but as a powerful tool that enables better engagement and retention of focused subject matter. Its ease of use and ability to target specific employees who have specific responsibilities

at specific locations opens new avenues of training beyond the traditional seminar to promote year-round learning opportunities, which can significantly improve an organization's safety compliance.

Gamification

Gamification is emerging as a way to interest and incentivize workers during compliance training by injecting an element of competition and achievement to the exercise. Typically, safety and compliance learning is reinforced through the use of post-training quizzes intended to recap key points to be retained by workers. Gamification can add scoring to these quizzes and show how an individual or business unit compares to the scores of other employees or departments. Employees can earn social badges to signify high scores or number of training sessions completed. In some cases, the quizzes themselves can be presented as a game instead of a check-thebox exercise to make it more interesting and appealing to employees.

Important Considerations When Using E-Learning for Training

E-learning is greatly improving the safety and compliance training experience for workers by making it more interesting, engaging, accessible and effective. But organizations should keep the following considerations in mind when selecting e-learning tools for their training needs:

1. Don't neglect traditional classroom learning.

It would be easy to assume that available new e-learning tools and trends could replace comprehensive curriculum-based learning systems or instructor-led classroom training. They can't. While the traditional approach involving an instructor speaking for hours on end utilizing a PowerPoint presentation, or worse bound workbooks, is archaic, instructorled classroom training can still be highly effective for presenting certain concepts or for on-boarding of new employees, where an intensive, one-time immersion into the safety, skills and culture of an organization is necessary. But such classroom training should be augmented with appropriate e-learning tools (video, interactive learning experiences, etc.) to enhance its retention and reinforce or adjust skills.

2. Use platforms that provide flexibility to customize e-learning experiences.

No two companies are alike. Even those in the same industry sector have different cultures, operating locations, internal organizational and supervisory structures, etc. In a few limited instances, off-the-shelf, "cookie cutter" e-learning solutions are sufficient. But more often than not, the most effective e-learning platforms for safety and compliance training are those that can be customized to the needs and characteristics of a specific organization.

Customized e-learning content and platforms are able to capture the unique goals, objectives and operational requirements of an organization while off-the-shelf systems can only provide a glimpse at generalized policies that are applicable to a company's broad industry or business sector. By including the policies and procedures that are specific to a company, customized learning not only improves the efficiency of the training experience by ensuring employees are only taught was is relevant and don't waste time on information that is unnecessary, it also enables companies to measure employee performance more accurately during the training exercise.

Customized learning is also particularly effective to impart the organization's unique safety culture to the learning experience. The combination of knowledge and skill transfer, coupled with an organization's cultural commitment and branding, increases the effectiveness of each.

Learning is reinforced and associated with an organization's cultural goals, thereby connecting it with and providing context within the learning environment. Companies should utilize training software that gives them the flexibility to edit content and customize it to their unique culture and needs.

3. Recognize the importance of "just in time," "just in place" and "just enough" training.

Often the most effective training takes place on the job site or shop floor where dayto-day work is done. Because information can now be put in front of workers quickly and conveniently, organizations should leverage the ability to offer important skills training and safety refreshers "just in time," "just in place" and "just enough." In other words, training should be made available to employees at the most opportune time when it can be most effective; at the ideal location where it is most pertinent and relevant; and at a level of detail that is easily digestible and understandable.

This also enables companies to provide prescriptive training in advance of a potential problem. To illustrate how such prescriptive training can occur, consider a high-rise construction worker on the job in a city that experiences significant temperature fluctuations. The worker wears a safety harness when working on the upper floors of the new building. In cooler weather when he or she wears more clothing, the safety harness is adjusted to fit differently than when the weather is warmer and workers wear less clothing. But the worker may not always readjust the safety harness so it fits properly. With this in mind, the construction company can distribute a microlearning video to workers via mobile device before a significant change in the weather is forecast to occur with the goal of training employees about proper procedures for using a safety harness.

Conclusion

E-learning is transforming the way organizations are providing safety and compliance training to employees. New tools that leverage mobile devices are making training opportunities more convenient with the ability for employees to receive learning any time of day at nearly any location. They are also adding to the effectiveness of training, with the use of video, microlearning and gamification making for a more interesting and interactive learning experience. Yet it is important to remember that no single e-learning tool is sufficient on its own. Utilizing the best combination of e-learning tools that complement and augment traditional curriculum-based or instructor-led sessions and are customized into a program based on the unique training needs of an organization will result in a more prepared workforce and safer workplace for companies.

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