Leveraging User-Generated Content for Training & Performance Improvement
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Overview

In February and March 2012, 146 organizations participated in a research study designed to better understand how companies adopt, implement and manage user-generated content in their training or performance improvement programs.

All of the companies surveyed both have employees who create user-generated content and either currently leverage or plan to leverage user-generated content. However, only 60%-65% of respondents reported that they support their employees in creating their own content in any way or were at least somewhat effective at leveraging user-generated content.

Thus, a key question among companies and learning professionals is, “How should learning professionals or companies best support and leverage user-generated content?”

After describing what types of content users generate, who creates it and how companies currently leverage user-generated content, this study reveals:

- Benefits of user-generated content
- Key barriers preventing users from creating content and challenges for leveraging user content
- What drives effectiveness in leveraging user-generated content
- Support practices and top lessons learned/best practices in leveraging user-generated content
- Most appropriate topics for user-generated content

Key Findings

- Overall, 91% of learning professionals leverage or plan to leverage user-generated content.
- Of the respondents, 37% said they were ineffective at leveraging user-generated content.
- In open-ended comments, accuracy was cited as the top challenge in leveraging content by 42% of respondents.
- The top benefits of user-generated content are increased content/context relevance, capture of employee knowledge and content/context accuracy.
- L&D’s role with user-generated content should be to support users (e.g., coach, provide guidance/tools), review content for accuracy and make content accessible.
- L&D professionals believe coaches and managers should create more user content.
- Lack of time is the most common barrier to users generating content.
- Practices to support users in creating their own content are in their infancy; only 60% had any practice. Of those who did, the most frequently used practice was to provide training on developing content via story format or using tools. Those who effectively leverage user-generated content, in general, used more support practices for their employees.
- User-generated content is appropriate for product training, but not compliance training.
- Functional areas that leverage user-generated content the most are customer service and business/product units; it is least often used in engineering and manufacturing.
I. What Is User-Generated Content and Who Creates It?

What Is User-Generated Content?

The survey defined user-generated content as “content which is not developed by learning professionals and is included in training and/or performance improvement initiatives.” Survey questions about user-generated content focused on it in this context and in the context of each respondent’s own company.

A list of the most common types of content generated are listed in Figure 1 below. A majority of respondents reported that their users generate subject matter expert (SME) stories/case studies and job aids.

Which of the following types of content do users generate for training and/or performance improvement in your company?

Figure 1

Among the most common “other” types of content respondents listed were PowerPoint presentations.
Who Creates User-Generated Content?

Since the most common type of content is subject matter expert stories/case studies and subject matter experts (SMEs) are often engaged by learning professionals in course development, it comes as no surprise (see Figure 2) that SMEs are also who respondents feel both should be and are creating content.

Companies are much more successful at getting SMEs to create content than any other group. Relative to who they think should be creating content, one could say they are least successful at getting coaches/mentors and managers/supervisors to create content. In fact, there is at least a 36% difference between the percentage of respondents who think content should be created by coaches/mentors and managers/supervisors and those who say those groups are creating it.

In your company, which groups SHOULD BE and ARE currently creating user-generated content for training and/or performance improvement?

![Bar Chart](Image)

Another aspect of who creates content is which functions create or leverage it. As Figure 3 shows, customer service and business/product units leveraged it most, while manufacturing and engineering leveraged it least.
In your company, which functions leverage user-generated content for training or performance improvement?

Figure 3

II. How Is User-Generated Content Currently Leveraged?

Results indicate that 91% of learning professionals leverage or plan to leverage user-generated content—with 29% saying they plan to leverage it and 62% who currently leverage it. This shows that there is a substantial percentage of companies and learning professionals who are dealing with the difficulties and challenges of leveraging user-generated content for training or performance improvement.

Does your company leverage user-generated content for training and/or performance improvement?

Figure 4
In open-ended comments in which respondents elaborated on their selection by describing how their companies leverage user-generated content, most addressed the variety of ways in which they worked with users (primarily SMEs) along a continuum of content development. As Figure 5 shows, on the one end is L&D taking the lead in developing content and on the other end are users taking the lead in developing content, and then there is everything in between, including various types of partnerships.

Respondents described variations in these three main points along the content development continuum:

- **L&D Develops:** On the more traditional end, L&D leads the content development process and gathers information from SMEs deciding what to use and how to present it. The SME’s role is to review for corrections, additions or other feedback.

- **L&D/User Partnership:** Here L&D may coach, facilitate, train and provide templates, guidelines and content-sharing tools like web portals, communities of practice, social or collaborative platforms and knowledge/content management systems.

- **Users Develop:** The other end is that L&D may simply find the content that users generate completely on their own. L&D may or may not be involved in a review and approval process.

Respondents also mentioned three other ways in which their work with user-generated content varies:

- **Amount of Content Used:** L&D may just leverage user content to fill in missing information and add case studies or examples, or they may use a higher percentage of user content in the training.

- **Level of Review:** Before they approve the content and release it for use, L&D may do an extensive review or “rework” of the materials or “mine” many pieces of content and synthesize it into a more refined offering. Alternatively, they may do a lower level of review just for accuracy or formatting. Or, companies and L&D may play no review role and users may publish their own content.

- **Accessibility:** This can range from L&D making content easier to search to actively pushing content out to targeted learners.
III. Benefits & Challenges of Leveraging User-Generated Content

Company Benefits

Why should companies or L&D professionals encourage user-generated content in the first place? Increased “content/context relevance,” “capture of employee knowledge” and “content/context accuracy” were the three benefits that respondents felt user-generated content both can deliver and has delivered. A “tie” for the third-most often reported benefit delivered was “faster creation of content.” “Increased sense of connection among learners” was expected by nearly two in three respondents, yet only 34% said that these benefits were actually realized.

Which of the following benefits do you believe user-generated content CAN deliver or HAS delivered for training and/or performance improvement initiatives in your company?

Figure 6

To realize these benefits above, however, companies must overcome specific barriers that users have in creating it and challenges that companies and L&D professionals have in leveraging the user content once it is created.

Barriers Preventing Users From Creating Content

Before companies can leverage user-generated content, users must create it. Thus, barriers to users creating content can logically develop into challenges for companies being able to leverage it.
Besides lack of time, the most common barriers to users creating content are a lack of best practices/strategies for how to generate content and how to use the tools. If companies and L&D professionals can find ways to incorporate the creation of content into users’ jobs and give them the practices, strategies and knowledge for how to do it, they can greatly facilitate the creation of more user-generated content.

Which of the following barriers prevent users from generating content for training and/or performance improvement in your company?

Figure 7

Challenges to Leveraging User-Generated Content

When asked for their company’s three most significant current concerns or challenges related to leveraging user-generated content for training and/or performance improvement initiatives, the most common response, by far, was ensuring content accuracy. This challenge was followed by a lack of resources (e.g., primarily experts’ time) to create it and finding ways to ensure that the content had good instructional design. Below are elaborations on these three areas.

- **Ensuring the content’s accuracy:** Fully 42% mentioned accuracy concerns at least once. Concerns included inconsistent content, outdated content and content that may be out of compliance with regulations. Note that since increased content/context accuracy was also a top realized benefit of user-generated content, this shows that many companies have found ways to overcome this challenge before they approve the content.

- **Resources to create the content (time, staff):** Just as time is the largest barrier to users creating content, it also creates a major challenge in leveraging it. Respondents described how SMEs or other users are
expected to create the content while taking time away from their daily tasks. Also noted was the total time to create the content, including the quality review and editing/formatting time of L&D staff.

• **Ensuring good instructional design:** Another common concern is that experts or other users do not know how to create content in a way that uses sound instructional design practices such as considering how to best engage learners with the material. This finding parallels that of the second most common barrier to creating content, which is a lack of best practices or strategies for creating content.

Other challenges mentioned include the following, which are listed from most to least-often mentioned:

• **Making content widely available/accessible:** This includes “pull” factors such as the ease of searching and finding the information as well as “push” activities like promotion and dissemination.

• **Managing, maintaining and organizing content:** This includes the processes, roles and standards for the governance and “curation” of the content.

• **Ensuring the content’s business relevance:** Respondents regarded relevant content as that which is appropriate and applies to specific contexts (e.g., industry or geographic region).

• **Garnering support for user-generated content:** This includes getting buy-in from the right stakeholders, selling the “value” of it and allowing time for attitudes to change.

• **Lacking technology, tools or the knowledge of how to use them:** Respondents described the need to select a cost-effective, easy-to-use tool or a lack of knowledge on how to use them. A lack of understanding of how to use tools was also cited by over half of the respondents as a common barrier to users creating content.

• **Creating content in efficient, timely manner:** The biggest concern here was the amount of time and cost it can take from when the users start creating content to when it is released to other users (e.g., slow or inefficient review or approval processes).

• **Managing data risk:** The most common risks cited were access control and security issues as well as copyright and privacy infringements. As shown in the common barriers to users creating content, concerns about risks related to sharing content also weigh on the minds of users. This implies that the more companies can do to allay risk-related concerns, the more content will be created.

• **Involving and motivating users to create content:** Getting the right people interested is key. Note that lack of interest among users consistently appears as an infrequently mentioned challenge.
IV. Effectively Leveraging and Supporting User Content

For companies and learning professionals to effectively leverage user-generated content, users must get the support they need to create it in the first place. This section focuses on how effective companies are and why respondents selected that level of effectiveness, as well as best practices in leveraging and supporting user-generated content.

Current Levels of Effectiveness at Leveraging User-Generated Content

One-third (37%) of respondents felt they were ineffective at leveraging user-generated content. About half thought they were “somewhat effective” while only 15% felt their companies were “very effective,” as shown in Figure 8.

How effective is your company at leveraging user-generated content for training and/or performance improvement initiatives?

Figure 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Effective: 63%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>Somewhat Effective</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22%</td>
<td>Somewhat Ineffective</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Very Ineffective</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Very Ineffective</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked why they selected this level of effectiveness, respondents gave these factors impacting effectiveness, which are in order from most to least-often mentioned:

- More experience with user-generated content leads to greater effectiveness.
- The user-generated content does not require substantial editing by L&D to make it meet basic instructional design requirements and make it compelling or engaging.
Leveraging User-Generated Content for Training & Performance Improvement

**Survey RESULTS: Leveraging User-Generated Content for Training & Performance Improvement**

- L&D has the time and staff to keep up with and ensure the relevance, accuracy and consistency of large amounts of user-generated content.
- L&D can find and encourage the right people to generate new content.
- L&D can find the existing user-generated content they need (e.g., in multiple places).

Other respondents said they were effective or ineffective based on specific outcomes, which most often included how well-received and widely used their user-generated content was.

**Top Lessons Learned or Best Practices in Leveraging User-Generated Content**

When asked about their companies’ top lessons learned or best practices in leveraging user-generated content for training and/or performance improvement, respondents shared a variety of suggestions to improve their ability to leverage user-generated content.

- L&D should be open to trying user-generated content and letting users have some control.
- L&D should start small and allow time for buy-in to the process of creating user content.
- Find SMEs with the right experience and make their content contributions part of their jobs.
- Support users by providing guidelines, coordinating plans and providing the right tools.
- L&D should partner with users and identify the most important information.
- Review user content to ensure accuracy using specific workflows (e.g., multiple “proofers” and one content “owner”).
- Ensure content is easily accessible (e.g., by tagging, search).
Support Practices for Creating Content

Supporting users in creating content makes it easier for companies and L&D professionals to approve and then leverage the content. However, only 60% of respondents said that they used at least one of the employee support practices in Figure 9 to support employees in creating user-generated content. Of those who had at least one practice, the most frequently used practice was providing training on developing content via story format or using tools.

How does your company support employees in creating user-generated content for training and/or performance improvement?

Figure 9

![Support Practices for Creating Content](chart)

Interestingly, those who said their companies were effective at leveraging content used more support practices. Those who said their companies were effective at leveraging user-generated content reported using 50% more practices than those who said they were not effective. Also, among those who said they were effective, 78% had at least one practice to support employees in creating their own content. By contrast, among those who said they were ineffective, only 44% had at least one support practice.

Most Appropriate Topic Areas

While the survey did not collect data on the actual topics on which users are generating content, respondents did weigh in on which topics they thought users should generate.

As Figure 10 shows, by far, the most respondents felt that product training was an appropriate topic for expert user-generated content, while only 35% felt compliance training was an appropriate topic.
Which of the following topics do you consider to be appropriate candidates for user-generated content?

**Figure 10**

- **Product training**: 75%
- **Administrative task training**: 66%
- **Customer service training**: 62%
- **Sales training**: 60%
- **Managerial or supervisory training**: 57%
- **IT training**: 56%
- **Soft skills training**: 52%
- **Leadership training**: 52%
- **Professional development**: 46%
- **Compliance training**: 35%
- **Other appropriate topics**: 6%
V. About the Study

Industries
Among a total of 146 respondents, 25 industry sectors were represented (including “other”), with nearly 4 in 10 from the top 3 industries: technology, banking/finance and business services/consulting. See Figure 11.

Figure 11

Note: The industries included in “other” include legal media/entertainment, mining, utilities, wholesale distribution, aerospace, construction, hospitality, manufacturing - non-durable, and oil and gas.

Company Sizes
Of the respondents, 58% were from companies with at least 1,000 employees. Refer to Figure 12.

Figure 12
Survey RESULTS: Leveraging User-Generated Content for Training & Performance Improvement

Titles

As Figure 13 shows, 62% of respondents had leadership titles (T&D manager, T&D director, VPs or other executives) and nearly one in three held individual contributor roles such as trainer/instructional designer within training & development.

Figure 13

Roles with User-Generated Content

As the top three pie slices in Figure 14 illustrate, 60% of respondents were involved in some sort of facilitative partnership between the company’s L&D group and the users/SMEs either in the role of leader/overseer, reviewer of content or coach/facilitator of users. The remaining roles seemed to be on both sides of the spectrum of content development: either L&D leading the content development (20%) or the users generating it themselves (20%).

Figure 14
Survey RESULTS: Leveraging User-Generated Content for Training & Performance Improvement

About GP Strategies

GP Strategies is a global performance improvement company driven to help organizations solve business challenges and achieve impactful results by delivering innovative and superior training solutions. GP Strategies’ approach to teamwork is personalized and reinforced by a strong commitment to earning client satisfaction. GP Strategies’ learning professionals are dedicated to providing the superior service and flexible solutions that have been the hallmark of the company for more than 45 years. From custom training, sales training and consulting to talent management and business process outsourcing, when working with GP Strategies, clients can count on a tailored approach that focuses on their business goals. For more information, visit http://gpstrategies.com or call 800.727.6677.

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