

A Bite-Sized Guide to Microlearning

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LEARNING. FOR A CHANGE.

Intro

You're here because you've heard the term **#microlearning**. Maybe you're a training and development professional, looking for a primer on the topic. Perhaps you're a content developer or instructional designer, looking for guidance on creating short, focused learning experiences. You might be a training manager or instructional strategist, pondering how microlearning could fit into your organization's overall learning strategy.

This e-book is a summary of the recommendations I make to my clients at Allen Interactions and practices they have implemented in their organizations. These are insights into what makes for successful microlearning gleaned from experience working with varied companies and organizations. In the spirit of making "short and sweet" learning content, this

e-book is organized into short sections, each independent of one another. You can read the sections in order, or read them out of sequence, or only read some sections. Each provides a foundation of knowledge in the following topics:

- ✓ **Is microlearning a good fit for your organization?**
- ✓ **Delivering microlearning**
- ✓ **Planning a curriculum with microlearning**
- ✓ **Designing good microlearning experiences**

The rest of this introduction discusses the definition of microlearning and explores what we know about its effectiveness.

What is microlearning?

There are lots of definitions out there. Some say microlearning must be video or that it must be less than three minutes. Certainly, it's helpful to list platforms that work for microlearning delivery and outline some guidelines for how long such experiences tend to be. However, I think strictly defining microlearning by platform or by length gets away from what's important—the learner's experience.

Rather than define microlearning by the clock or by the media used, let's define it by its core characteristics:

- ✓ Short
- ✓ Focused
- ✓ Multi-platform

SHORT:

Microlearning events are short enough so that completing them “on the go” doesn't negatively affect the learning experience. Microlearning can be completed during a coffee break or on a subway ride.

FOCUSED:

A single microlearning event focuses on one skill or topic. If you were creating microlearning on the basics of boxing, you might create one video lesson on how to throw a good right hook, and that's it. Uppercut punches would be a separate lesson. Microlearning is very granular.

MULTI-PLATFORM:

Learners might be doing microlearning at their desks between meetings, sitting in the back of an Uber car, or while eating breakfast.

What is microlearning? (cont.)

It helps if those events are multi-platform, available on mobile and on PC. After all, eating cereal and drinking orange juice next to a laptop doesn't always end well.

In my experience, creating multi-platform content has presented the biggest challenge to those clients who've sought out a microlearning approach.

Not all of the organizations we work with have the security infrastructure or culture to enable multi-platform deployment. However, that didn't stop these organizations from implementing learning that leveraged the first and second characteristics. They created short and focused learning, but on a single platform.

Why is microlearning trending now?

You've also been here before. Training and development as an industry is all about trends, it seems. There's always some new idea about designing learning that vendors and talking heads claim will revolutionize the way learners acquire skills and knowledge. Each new development tool seems to create a tsunami of excitement and social media shares.

This isn't strictly negative; after all, the enthusiastic discussions that can be sparked by the release of a new tool or the emergence of a new process can help every participant improve his or her practice.

But rarely do these new tools and ideas live up to the initial hype and result in the learning revolutions that fans hope for.

So microlearning is trending because it's a reaction to how consumers have come to interact with Web content. It makes sense—the most popular Web content is short. According to the blogging platform *Medium*, the ideal blog post takes about [seven minutes to read](#). Longer than that, and readers start to check out.

What are some examples of microlearning?

Because Web consumers expect content to be short, there is already a host of microlearning available for public access, some of it published well before the term “microlearning” grew its own hashtag. If you’re looking for inspiration, here are three examples you might want to explore:

The Duolingo logo is displayed in a large, blue, lowercase sans-serif font. The letter 'i' in 'lingo' has a small blue dot above it. The logo is positioned on the left side of the slide, partially overlapping a decorative background of blue and green geometric shapes at the bottom.

Duolingo

This multiplatform [language learning application](#) has social media integration and elements of gamification. Each lesson in the expansive curriculum uses interactive exercises to introduce 8-10 words from the learner’s selected language. To pass a lesson, the learner has to complete about 5 minutes of practice with the new words.

What are some examples of microlearning? (cont.)



MOOCs

Not all massive open online courses (MOOCs) are organized this way, but many courses on some MOOCs like [Udacity](#) or [Lynda.com®](#) are broken down into short segments less than 10 minutes in length, with each segment focusing on one concept or skill. These two MOOC platforms also have mobile apps, fulfilling the “multi-platform” criteria of our definition earlier.



YouTube™

This is certainly the Wild West of learning content, but quality microlearning can be found out there amongst the ever-growing body of YouTube™ videos. One example that’s more content-focused is [this episode](#) from the channel. Each episode on this channel is less than 10 minutes in length, and discusses a single element of game design or world history.

Is microlearning a good fit for your organization?

The idea of short, focused experiences might be appealing to us as learners, but there's a lot more to a successful microlearning initiative than the quality of the exercise or ease of use. Here's a checklist of factors to explore when considering microlearning for your organization.

- ✓ Will the microlearning be optional or required? This might affect where and when learners access the content.
- ✓ Does your organizational culture allow for small chunks of training time? This is an especially important consideration for companies with hourly employees, who may be expected to be compensated for learning time. If this describes your organization, examine these employees' incentive structures. If they're paid on commission, you may be better served by optional microlearning that can be positioned as a means for them to enhance their skills, and thereby increase their commissions.
- ✓ When and where will your learners complete microlearning? During the work day? After hours? On lunch breaks, or during

their commute? Make sure that you're interviewing your learners and finding out what they will actually do. Just because learners could complete a module on the train doesn't mean they will.

- ✓ What devices will learners use to access the material? Laptops, desktops, smartphones? Which operating system—iPhone®, Android™, Windows Phone®, etc.?
- ✓ Will learners engage with individual microlearning experiences in a sequence, or in no prescribed order?
- ✓ What existing instructional design resources does your organization have? If you're lucky, you may already have a comprehensive skills hierarchy for your learning audience. The majority of our clients do that analysis from scratch at the beginning of a project. So, if you don't have an existing map of which skills learners need and how they depend on one another, you may want to start there. Read more about this on page 10.

Delivering microlearning

This is another factor you should define before you begin any significant microlearning initiative. While you can create microlearning interactions or videos one at a time and host them on your LMS like all of your big e-learning courses, this might not provide the optimal experience for users or for the organization. Even if a microlearning experience is pleurably short and focused, it's only really useful as microlearning if learners can access it without digging through layers of cumbersome access points. Ideally, learners who were required to complete microlearning in order to acquire new knowledge and skills will want to return to the mini-courses for remedial training or for performance support.

A law of the Internet applies here—if it's hard to get at, people won't see it. So before you begin designing microlearning and pushing it out to learners, know the following:

- ✓ Where will microlearning content be housed?
- ✓ How will learners access it?
- ✓ How will learners know about it?

- ✓ What data do you seek to glean from microlearning usage? How often will you review this data? If microlearning is simply up and available for learners at all times, you may receive a constant stream of data that you can use to guide additional training efforts.
- ✓ Security. This may be one of the biggest challenges for deploying content that is short, focused and multi-platform. Video is touted as a great medium for microlearning, but while there are many existing platforms for sharing video content on the Web, it's unlikely that you can put your content up on YouTube™.

So, if you're hoping to implement true microlearning that learners can access anywhere, anytime, then that means you'll have to address the same security issues that any mobile e-learning course would have. Many employees will want to access content from their own devices, and it would be unfortunate if a competitor accessed your microlearning content through a misplaced iPhone®!

Planning a curriculum with microlearning

Go for the small stuff.

Practicing blues scales and 2-5-1 chord progressions will help a saxophonist get better at jazz improvisation, but she'll still need to practice Giant Steps many times before she plays her solo on stage.

A widget salesman's main job is to sell widgets. To truly master the skill of selling widgets, he spends months acquiring product knowledge and developing narrower skillsets, like how to ask open-ended questions, when to ask for the sale, and how to overcome objections.

It would be difficult to finish an entire saxophone solo or have a robust sales conversation in the time it takes you to finish a latte. Applying these skills in their entirety requires longer periods of time and potentially some dedicated space. Consequently, extended or complex skills like these aren't great candidates for microlearning because the characteristics of good microlearning work against focused practice of the skill.

Plus, it's likely that these complex skills are most important for the job, so enabling learners to practice them is essential for their success. You don't want to short-change them by providing the wrong type of learning experience, so think twice about replacing your whole curriculum with microlearning. Extended or complex skills should still receive dedicated practice time, through classroom training, e-learning, or some other means.

However, microlearning can be used to train or hone sub-skills—components of those larger, more important skills. While microlearning might not be a great format to help the widget salesman practice sales conversations from start to finish, it might be a good way for him to practice sub-skills like overcoming objections or matching product features to customer needs.

Designing good microlearning experiences

A single microlearning event is short and delivered asynchronously. If you create a curriculum that has a significant microlearning component with many videos or interactions, that content won't be completed in one sitting, but spread out over time. Of course, skills and knowledge are interdependent, but it's impossible to fit every potentially relevant piece of content into one slice of microlearning—plus, it isn't a good idea. Our perspective is that it's better to make another, separate learning event than to cram irrelevant content into an experience that's supposed to be concise.

If your organization is truly on board with a microlearning approach, then it can make dealing with SMEs much easier. When the veteran with years of industry expertise pushes to include just another piece of content because “learners need to know this,” the instructional designer can push back, citing the limitations of microlearning. Instead of including extraneous content, offer to create another microlearning event that focuses on the SME's precious concept.

Here are some considerations to keep in mind when designing microlearning experiences.

Minimize introductions. Our experiences with classroom training (and much existing e-learning) makes us feel like we need to preface learning experience with lengthy introductions. While this is certainly a problematic practice in e-learning, it's an untenable one in microlearning. You only have a few minutes of the learner's attention—don't waste it on introductions!

Modern learners have been conditioned by their everyday online experiences. When they enter a microlearning experience, they expect it to get straight to the point. In a microlearning video, avoid spending more than a few seconds on an introduction before getting to relevant content. If your microlearning is interactive, let learners immerse themselves in the activity as quickly as possible, and only use an introduction if it's needed to set context.

Designing good microlearning experiences (cont.)

Show, don't tell. This is especially important for videos, should you be using them to demonstrate a process or to illuminate a concept. However, the principle applies to more interactive microlearning as well. Maximize the amount of time you spend showing or asking learners how to do something, and minimize the amount of commentary you include.

Try to be performance-focused. Focus on a narrowly defined skill and context. A single microlearning exercise on “overcoming objections” isn’t going to give enough practice to develop the skill. Give learners multiple scenarios so they can practice the skill in varied contexts. Create one scenario on “overcoming objections with an impatient customer,” another on “overcoming objections about price,” yet another about “overcoming objections with a skeptical customer,” and so on.

The suggestions above are written with video or interactivity in mind (no, I do not consider the typical video to be interactive—it’s a moving picture that doesn’t require any input from the learner to advance). I don’t consider microlearning to be limited to video and interactive media; one might create microlearning using email or web pages, with text and imagery available to learners. However, most examples I’ve seen using these formats are primarily content-focused, like Dictionary.com’s Word of the Day, rather than performance-focused. Those that are performance-focused generally seem to be constructed as performance support material, rather than as microlearning that is intended to establish or reinforce important knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

At [Allen Interactions](#), we feel microlearning is short, focused, and multi-platform, and learning content that combines these characteristics will become more common. It's a format that allows learning to be more seamlessly integrated with work and life, and one that learners will increasingly come to expect.

I've provided some considerations and processes that have helped me and my colleagues at Allen Interactions create interactions that meet these criteria, and I hope they'll be useful to you as you think about how microlearning will fit into your organization. May your microlearning lead to sizeable success!

Also, check out these microlearning articles on our [E-Learning Leadership Blog](#)!

- ✓ [Microlearning: The Resources You Need to Plan and Execute Future Learning Projects](#)
- ✓ [Three Things You Don't Need In Your Microlearning Video](#)
- ✓ [Get Inspired: Five Examples of Good Microlearning Design](#)
- ✓ [The Microlearning Millennial Myth](#)
- ✓ [Three Reasons to Love Microlearning](#)

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A former English and technology teacher, Ellen Burns-Johnson joined Allen Interactions in 2011. Since then, Ellen has designed e-learning interactions and written content for dozens of projects and clients, including Apple, Allstate, Hilton, Verizon and the Department of Justice. Instructional topics included solution selling, software simulation, product sales, compliance training, customer service, and legal consulting skills.

Ellen's professional interests include gamification, blended learning, interface design, and social media. A learning junkie, Ellen has been known to organize study groups in which colleagues meet to study new development software and build e-learning applications for fun.

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About Allen Interactions

We understand that our clients' success in business depends on getting people to do the right things at the right time. This requires more than learning. It requires a change in performance, which is why we take a distinctive approach to developing learning solutions.

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