



Workplace Safety

How Microlearning Can Improve Safety Training Retention

Gillian Scott | Feb 14, 2019

What You Need to Know

Microlearning modules are typically just a few minutes long, meaning employees don't lose precious work hours.

Microlearning works best for simple subjects, or for topics employees already know and understand but may need a refresher on.

Advances in technology mean microlearning can be delivered in multimedia format to devices like smartphones and tablets.

What if you could update your employees' knowledge without pulling them away from their work for time-consuming classes? Welcome to microlearning, bite-sized lessons that can make learning both more convenient and less disruptive for busy workers.

Microlearning is a training technique that breaks information down into smaller components. They are sessions that are 4 to 5 minutes long focused on one aspect of a topic. Traditional training sessions are generally 40 to 50 minutes or longer—sometimes an entire week or weeks of coursework that covers a topic in its entirety. Microlearning can be used to teach new skills, to address performance issues, to refresh previous training or to close skills gaps.

What Are the Benefits of Microlearning?

In comparison to traditional training classes, microlearning offers more flexibility and saves time and money.

Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, says in *an article in EHS Today* that microlearning makes safety training easier to work into employees' busy schedules.

"The gist of this approach is to shorten, focus and increase the availability of training," Mathis says. Instead of being presented in longer workshops, information is organized in modules that are each four minutes or less. "A series of these modules can replace, or be used to reinforce, the longer classroom or CBT (computer-based training) modules."

Because of this, microlearning saves companies time and money, says Don Leonard, co-founder and president of The MARCOM Group Ltd., *in an article in Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*.

"Safety training has typically been an 'event-oriented' activity," Leonard says. "Employees go to a class, or take a computer-based course in a learning lab or at their desk. However they do their training, it takes them away from their normal work activity, resulting in hours of lost productivity. And the impact of that lost productivity can be huge."

Microlearning also helps companies with decentralized employees, can be easily updated and can be accessed on demand, says Annie Murphy Paul of the *Society for Human Resource Management* (SHRM).

"Microlearning systems are set up to allow employees themselves to control when they take their training, so it can be at a time in their day when it is convenient and won't impact their productivity," says Leonard.

Microlearning and OSHA Safety Training Requirements

Clare A. Epstein, chief operating officer of IndustrySafe Inc., writes in *Occupational Health & Safety* that, so far, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has not addressed the use of microlearning in safety training.

"However, it should be noted that OSHA's official 'Resource for Development and Delivery of Training to Workers' states that organizations should take into account different employee demographics and learning styles when selecting a training delivery method," she says.

In order for microlearning to meet OSHA training requirements, multiple short courses would need to be completed, says Don Leonard, co-founder and president of The MARCOM Group Ltd.

"A good microlearning course should be 'self-contained,' not relying on any previous knowledge that the employee may (or may not) have," he says in *an article in Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*. "But to fulfill training requirements that require more than 3-5 minutes of information, such as those that are included in many OSHA regulations, microcourses can be organized into curricula. By completing all of the courses in a curriculum, an employee can meet the entire training requirement."

Even if microlearning can't replace computer-based training or classroom training, Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, says that it remains an important tool.

"It is ideal to reinforce OSHA training in the workplace, making the training more sticky and effective," he says in *an article in EHS Today*.

Breaking Down Microlearning

In the long run, offering short refresher courses helps employees retain key safety information.

“Early in a role, employees need macro-learning to understand their job and the skills they need to perform it,” says **Victoria Zambito**, senior vice president of content and communications with Vector Solutions. “Then, they need reminders of that learning. That is where microlearning comes in.”

Walmart was able to reduce its reportable injuries by half after it began using a microlearning app that featured three-minute presentations on topics like driving a forklift. Employees would log in to watch a safety presentation, then take a brief test. After a successful pilot, Walmart **expanded the program** to distribution centers companywide.

George Haber, Ph.D., global director for Instructional Systems at DuPont Sustainable Solutions, writes that microlearning enhances workers’ understanding and awareness of specialized individual tasks and skills.

“For example,” says Haber, “a training seminar on personal protective equipment frequently is a significant, two-day session. Clearly, microlearning would be ineffective for training workers about such a comprehensive subject. However, microlearning can be very effective for the specific subject of hearing protection, even enabling an organization to target and customize the microlearning to a specific work environment within an organization.”

“Part of the appeal of microlearning is that it can be administered just-in-time and just enough,” adds Clare Epstein, chief operating officer of IndustrySafe Inc., in an article in **Occupational Health & Safety**. So if workers are about to use a ladder, she says, managers can send a microlearning session on ladder safety to the workers’ devices before they begin. “The session would be brief enough to avoid interrupting the work schedule but thorough enough to provide a refresher on safe practices to avoid injuries.”

Are there other ways to up your safety skills? Learn more in “The Path to Becoming a Safety Professional: Certifications and Steps.”

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Technology Is Key to Microlearning

To make the most of microlearning, companies need to present multimedia modules accessible on multiple devices, experts say.

Mathis says microlearning is driven by new technologies like smartphones and other portable communication devices, and by changing demographics.

“Attention spans have shortened over the past several decades and the time required to forget new information has shortened even more,” he says. “Retention of information has been delegated to smart devices, as illustrated by where we keep phone numbers and calendar events.”

In addition to using rich media formats and including video, Epstein says microlearning presents an opportunity for more, albeit brief, interaction. Courses can include learner interaction, such as a brief quiz or follow-up discussion with an instructor, and provide reference documents and other outside items as additional resources.

Haber says microlearning’s ability to offer focused instruction to subsets of employees makes it an important part of a safety program.

"It is important, however, not to view microlearning simply as an individual 'chapter' of a larger training curriculum, but as a powerful tool that enables better engagement and retention of focused subject matter," he says. "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 significantly can improve an organization's safety performance."

Has your company integrated microlearning into its safety training program?

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