

## Anatomy of the New Learning Plans: Reaching Generation X & Y

### Adapting the Seven Principles of Learning for Tomorrow’s Leaders

Since the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) published the “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Education” in 1987, teaching institutions have established this resource as the cornerstone of learning. Corporations also began to integrate these principles into their learning strategies for employees—until the emergence of new communication and information technologies.

As technology has changed, so has the learner. The younger generations (known as Generation X, the Digital Adaptives, and Generation Y, the Digital Natives or “Millennials”) differ from older generations in their perceptions about the world and their attitudes toward learning. They feel comfortable using new technologies as tools and resources for learning. To fully realize the power of technology, corporations must utilize it in ways that align with the needs of the younger generations. This article describes those needs and explores a fresh, updated approach to training based on the original principles of learning.

<b>The Generations of Today’s Workplace</b>		
Traditionalists		individuals born before 1946
Baby Boomers	(~76 million people)	individuals born between 1946-1964*
Generation X, or Digital Adaptives	(~51 million people)	individuals born between 1965-1976 <sup>†</sup>
Generation Y, or Digital Natives/Millennials	(75+ million people)	individuals born between 1977-1998
*Over the next several years, 75 to 80 million Baby Boomers are expected to retire. <sup>†</sup> Generation Y will dominate the workforce over the next several years.		

### **Principal #1: Encourage Contact**

Familiar with Internet use, Generations X and Y feel comfortable networking online. The Internet allows individuals around the globe to communicate and work with one another seamlessly—often, without ever meeting. Employing technology that facilitates “connectedness” can:

- Increase learner motivation and involvement through networking technologies—eg, blogs, instant messaging, e-mail, Webinars, podcasts, webcasts, chat rooms
- Encourage learning by providing a comfortable, engaging medium—eg, Internet search engines, such as Google
- Enhance employee commitment to learning by providing a system that is at once a work tool and an educational resource—eg, Internet, Intranet

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Technology also makes sense in a global environment. By employing networking capabilities, corporations can help employees acquire and share knowledge on an international level.

### Principal #2: Encourage Cooperation Among Learners

Computers can lead to isolation at work. To encourage teamwork, companies can integrate game interfaces into training. Engaging employees in healthy competition can stimulate minds and boost company spirit. It can also encourage:

- Collaboration through role playing and cooperative experiences in training
- Social networking—Gaining knowledge via people, as opposed to Internet searches
- Involvement through active collaboration
- Sharing of ideas and opinions/group discussions help collect the diverse knowledge and experiences of others to help broaden perspectives on issues

Leveraging the “Nintendo generation’s” ethic of winning and competition can work well in team environments. Business simulations and other challenging games can help break social barriers and promote teamwork.

### Characteristics of the “Millennials”

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-minded</li> <li>• “Grew up on” the Internet</li> <li>• Resistant to “busy work” and memorization</li> <li>• Desire personalization/tailoring</li> <li>• Work/life balance and flexibility are important</li> <li>• Prefer action over observation</li> <li>• Short attention span</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative/seek community</li> <li>• Focused on results, not process</li> <li>• Multi-taskers</li> <li>• Confident</li> <li>• Goal oriented</li> <li>• Want instant feedback/gratification</li> <li>• Want to understand the big picture</li> </ul> |
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### Principal #3: Use Active Learning Techniques

Where older generations prefer reading a manual or attending a class, younger generations differ. They want hands-on experience. They prefer learning through trial and error until they “figure things out”—just like a software program. Consider the following approaches:

- Telling is not teaching, listening is not learning—replacing passive classroom lectures with systems (eg, eLearning modules) employees can actively use can help facilitate learning
- Simulation activities provide hands-on learning during training
- “Real-world” models put learning into the context of the workplace

Generations X and Y also learn actively through instant messaging/chat rooms, posting/ blogging, search engines, and interactive software. These technologies should be encouraged.

#### **Principal #4: Give Prompt Feedback**

The computer generations expect prompt feedback. Nearly every action performed on a computer generates some type of feedback. Video gamers know that time and effort put into mastering a game leads to a higher score and the next level. The take-away here is:

- Learning is not a spectator sport; it requires action and feedback—consider eLearning modules with interactive learning exercises that provide feedback and remediation
- Developing employees into new roles through pre-assessment and feedback to determine where entry-level behaviors exist and what skills are needed
- Provide prompt verbal feedback as the learner engages in new tasks

The feedback-and-reward trend has already taken place in Corporate America. Managed care, for example, has adopted a pay-for-performance model to improve the quality of healthcare.

#### **Principal #5: Give Time on Task**

The Millennial mantra that “faster is better” poses a challenge in today’s workplace. Learning and mastery take time, yet the younger generation of learners would rather surf and scan than read or listen. Companies must consider:

- Providing a “fun” environment utilizing wikis, color, graphics, and high levels of interactivity for the learner to increase time on task
- Utilizing technologies (eg, Flash) that “speed things up” while providing important content
- Employing formats(eg, Articulate) that enable learners to move quickly from key point to key point without getting weighted down in text

Remember, this is the computer age. Today’s learners explore new information from link to link— they quickly absorb multiple ideas at once. Training materials should adopt ways of presenting lots of information at once (via charts, photos, text, and graphics) on a single page.

#### **Principal #6: Communicate High Expectations**

When computers become the medium through which employees work, correspond, and learn, how can managers communicate their expectations and ensure they are met?

- Set expectations via technology—Using technology to set expectations and train young employees will help get through to this audience.
- Provide measurable learning activities—Provide educational activities that give feedback based on measured success, or scoring. Activities should include learning objectives that are succinct, actionable, and measurable goals that the learner can demonstrate mastery of by the end of the training via an assessment that generates feedback. The activity should be fun for the learner—like a game. Think Nintendo. Think technology!
- In live training, provide peer evaluation—This helps learners identify with co-workers. Looking to peers for acceptance/approval can help learners meet corporate expectations.

Basically, effective training should set the expectations of the learner following the activity. Furthermore, it should do so in a way that makes learning fun—not intimidating.

3 Independence Way    Princeton, NJ 08540-6626

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## **Principal #7: Provide Diverse Ways of learning**

One size does not fit all. Provide opportunities with the entire workforce in mind, while giving Millennials the option to learn in their own environment. Digital-age employees prefer training that is flexible, self-directed, and high quality. Let's examine how to provide such training:

- Respect diverse talents and different ways of learning—Consider brief, interactive learning sessions using Internet technology that enables customization and on-demand access—particularly in a global environment.
- Use powerful visuals—Graphics that contain a strong visual message can substitute for content, helping to cut back on wordiness. This helps learners absorb information more quickly as they navigate through the training program.
- Virtual experiences that simulate real-life job functions—Training programs that provide virtual tasks requiring analysis, synthesis, and evaluation with real-life applications engage the learner in ways that promote job development.
- Use multimedia—Familiar with computer games, younger generations absorb many types of information and stimuli at once. Programs that offer audio and video as well as content provide enrichment that enhances learning as opposed to overwhelming the learner.
- Use self-paced learning—Allowing learners to engage in training at their own pace increases the likelihood that the employee will take the training and retain the information.
- Case study approach—Case studies enable the learner to think through situations and/or understand in terms of real-life scenarios. It puts the learning material into context.

Digital learners appreciate opportunities to practice their skills and get immediate feedback. By offering a variety of rich media formats for training, companies can reach the younger generations who are accustomed to learning in a highly interactive way. Training should also involve group projects and peer mentorship. In doing so, training not only promotes learning and skill, it encourages teamwork and company spirit. These are the elements that contribute to the inventive thinking and progressive ideas on which corporations thrive. So, if training has not yet considered generational issues, perhaps it is time to get onboard with the next wave of learners.

*Bruce Haghighat is founder and President of Tricore Interactive, a leading provider of practical and innovative training, marketing, and adult education solutions to the life sciences industry. Tricore Interactive offers a full range of sales training services to its clients, including product learning systems, web-based training, instructor-led training, educational games, and animations. He may be reached at [bruceh@eTricore.com](mailto:bruceh@eTricore.com) or 609-951-1000 x201.*

3 Independence Way    Princeton, NJ 08540-6626

tel 609.951.1000    fax 609.951.9222    [www.eTricore.com](http://www.eTricore.com)