



## SAFETY LEADERSHIP

### Microlearning: A New Approach to Safety Training

*Microlearning is coming to safety, and it has the potential to seriously improve performance.*

Terry L. Mathis | Apr 19, 2018

An important component of the fourth industrial revolution referred to as Industry 4.0 will be the adoption of new training techniques. Leading these new techniques is a process called microlearning. The gist of this approach is to shorten, focus and increase the availability of training. Rather than having workers attend a 15-30-minute (or longer) workshop or computer-based training (CBT) module, they can

access a four-minute or less module on their phone or other smart device covering one important aspect of the training. A series of these modules can replace, or be used to reinforce, the longer classroom or CBT modules. In addition to being brief and readily available, they can be re-accessed as needed to refresh the worker on the issue.

Microlearning is already being used for several business purposes, including leadership, supervision and technical skills, but is relatively new to safety. Some companies have amassed libraries of microlearning modules and more of these are beginning to be based on safety. As many other technologies that will comprise Industry 4.0 are adopted by organizations, microlearning modules can help workers learn the uses and purposes of these new technologies right on the job.

Additionally, the microlearning modules could become the user's manual and troubleshooting guide for these. Whether or not microlearning could replace classroom or CBT as the delivery mechanism for required OSHA refresher training remains to be seen, but it is ideal to reinforce OSHA training in the workplace, making the training more sticky and effective.

The need for microlearning has its roots in new technologies such as smart phones and other portable communication devices. But it was also driven by the changing demographics of the workforce. Attention spans have shortened over the past several decades and the time required to forget new information has shortened even more. Retention of information has been delegated to smart devices, as illustrated by where we keep phone numbers and calendar events.

The need for internalized knowledge has been greatly reduced and, in some cases, completely replaced by technologies that can search and retrieve information with great accuracy and speed. Generations who grew up in the computer age have become accustomed to getting information online and have become unfamiliar to accessing traditional media. Yet, most safety manuals and training materials are still in print.

The most effective microlearning modules are multimedia. New technologies have greatly reduced the cost of developing graphics and video, thus making microlearning modules more powerful and cost-effective. Where professional video could cost hundreds of dollars per finished minute just a few decades ago, that cost is as little as a tenth as much today. In addition, many companies that still provide videos, graphics, or entire microlearning modules also offer DIY software to allow organizations to make their own modules. This range of options from DIY to turnkey development of modules make them a viable option for almost any size organization.

In our consulting practice, we have found that helping organizations adopt microlearning helps them in other important ways, as described below.

### **Strategic Thinking**

The first step of developing a microlearning module is finding the nugget. A nugget is the central or core idea, issue, or skill around which the module will be based. Identifying these nuggets makes organizational leaders think in very strategic ways about what is important to accomplish organizational goals and what key roles workers need to play.

Many safety programs are simply not strategic. They are a series of programs or activities aimed at solving a problem rather than an overarching plan to achieve success. In fact, most don't even include a definition of success other than failing less.

In addition to identifying these strategic nuggets, organizational leaders must also prioritize them. Microlearning is a series of steps, and each step should precede some steps and follow others. Identifying and prioritizing these steps foster better strategic thinking than most other approaches to safety.

### **Continuous Improvement**

Too often, continuous improvement is viewed as doing everything right, then getting better at it. That approach almost never works. Continuous improvement begins by

developing a roadmap of improvement steps/goals that can be taken one at a time.

Setting specific and highly focused improvement targets is the beginning. Next, everyone in the organization needs to learn how to focus and achieve each specific improvement. This creates a can-do culture that becomes capable of one improvement after another.

In addition, constant improvement becomes a norm and not a special project. People begin to view improvement as part of their job descriptions and take pride in the organization as it becomes better and better.

### **Training Follow-up**

Many organizations view training as a stand-alone intervention. It almost never is. All training should be reinforced periodically. If the original training was lengthy and resource-intensive, more training is not the ideal follow-up. Microlearning modules can be utilized with minimal time and resource requirements and are available just-in-time as follow-up is needed.

### **OJT**

On-the-job training is utilized to some extent by almost every organization that requires specific skills for their workers. The problem with traditional OJT is it's no better than the tenured worker who mentors your new workers. OJT can perpetuate bad habits and less-than-effective performance and lose continuity as each worker gets a different message from a different experienced worker. With microlearning, everyone can have the correct information from which to learn, refer back to, and to get reminders when needed.

Training, and especially safety training, has not advanced significantly in most organizations over the past several decades. With the advent of the new technologies that will drive this next industrial revolution, training will be forced to adapt or fall hopelessly behind. Trainers, like workers, will be given new and powerful tools that

will change their jobs from largely manual to much more technical. Microlearning is coming to safety, and it has the potential to seriously improve performance.

*Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety , has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has authored five books, numerous articles and blogs. EHS Today named him one of the “50 People Who Most Influenced EHS” four times. Mathis can be reached at [info@proactsafety.com](mailto:info@proactsafety.com) or 800-395-1347.*

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