Extension Agents' Perceptions of a Blended Approach to Onboarding

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Abstract

Extension organizations are challenged to provide onboarding to new employees that is comprehensive and high quality, yet cost-effective. The purpose of this study was to explore Extension agents' perceptions of participating in an onboarding program that used a blended approach involving face-to-face and online learning components. The objectives were to (a) describe the perceptions of participants in the Fall 2014 cohort, (b) describe the perceptions of participants in the Spring 2015 cohort, and (c) compare the perceptions between the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 cohort participants. Two focus groups were conducted with participants from each cohort and a cross-case analysis was conducted with the data. Results showed participants were open to the blended approach and liked being able to work asynchronously but desired improvements in quality, communication, interaction, and applicability. A review of the process with greater consideration of, and adherence to, the principles of adult education is recommended.

Keywords: blended approach, extension, onboarding

Introduction

Staff development professionals for Cooperative Extension are commonly challenged to develop, deliver, and evaluate robust onboarding programs for new agents in a cost-efficient manner. Accomplishing a balanced approach to quality and cost calls for innovative educational solutions. In Florida, a desire to improve the quality of our onboarding program without significant additional expense lead us to consider the use of a blended approach (Alonso, López, Manrique, & Viñes, 2005) for professional development.

New agents in Florida have historically been required to participate in an onboarding program comprised of two face-to-face sessions conducted on the main university campus. In the early 2000s, the face-to-face sessions were each 2.5 days and included a teaching practicum during the second session. Budget cuts during the recession caused less funding for professional development and there was pressure to reduce the number of days that new faculty had to spend out of their counties. By 2008, the face-to-face sessions of the onboarding program had been reduced to 1.5 days each and in 2010 the teaching practicum was eliminated.

The changes in format coincided with increased dissatisfaction with the onboarding program from new agents, their supervisors, and state-level Extension administration, although it remains unclear if the relationship was causal. Regardless, the 2014-2016 Strategic Plan developed for the Program Development and Evaluation Center (PDEC) acknowledged the concern with

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quality when it called for the use of "input from recent participants and administrators to redesign the format and content of the new faculty orientation program" (PDEC, 2014) as an action step. New efforts to redesign the format and content of the onboarding program began in Summer 2014 and resulted in a plan that called for participants to attend two sessions of face-to-face training, complete modules within an existing online Extension teaching and learning certificate, and develop a draft logic model based on materials viewed and read prior to the first session.

The goals of adopting the new blended approach were to expand the learning opportunities available to new agents, not substantially increase costs to the organization, and provide flexibility for agents to work at their own pace and from home or the office. Adding e-learning appeared to be an ideal solution and was already well-established within the formal curriculum of the university. However, we were keenly focused on the need to monitor and evaluate the response of new agents to the blended approach. Klein and Polin (2012) asserted "there is a serious dearth of information about the actual onboarding activities being used in today's organizations and the extent to which those activities are meeting their desired aim of facilitating the organizational socialization of new hires" (p. 267). Therefore, this study was conducted to address the dual purposes of improving our own onboarding program while addressing a gap in the literature.

Theoretical Framework/Review of Literature

The genesis of using a blended approach cannot be known for sure, however a comprehensive literature search pointed to the work of Alonso et al. (2005) as a seminal discussion of the topic. They defined blended learning as "learning that mixes various event-based activities: self-paced learning, live e-learning, and face-to-face classrooms" (p. 231). From a theoretical perspective, Alonso et al. proposed blended learning fits well with a social constructivism framework where learners construct their own meaning while actively participating in a social environment (Doolitle & Camp, 1999). Given our focus on new Extension agents, adult learning (Knowles, 1980) is also a relevant framework, especially aspects of self-directed and problem-based learning. In the most recent version of *The Adult Learner* (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2015), six key assumptions about adult learning are made. First, adults need to understand why they need to know something before beginning to learn. Second, adults are self-directed and must have choices in their learning. Third, adults have a large amount of life experiences which greatly influence their learning. Fourth, adults seek out learning opportunities to address their immediate problems and come to the learning environment ready to learn. Fifth, adults are problem-centered in their learning. Sixth, adults are primarily, but not exclusively, intrinsically motivated to learn. Effective adult education programs begin by accepting these six assumptions about adult learners.

Alonso et al. (2005) proposed seven key ingredients for successful blended learning:

1. Learning is directed by an instructor.

2. Instructor is available to personalize instruction through email and telephone.

3. Synchronous web-conferencing allows instructors to explain concepts and answer questions.

4. Instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction is facilitated through online chats.

5. Technical assistance is available to help with learning management systems.

6. Learning is assessed.

7. Learners are awarded a certificate or diploma upon completion.

Although anecdotal evidence suggests blended learning approaches are widely used in agricultural and extension education, only limited research has been reported. Conner, Stripling, Blythe, Roberts, and Stedman (2014) examined one particular type of blended learning, the flipped

classroom approach. In a flipped classroom approach the lectures are delivered through web-based narrated lectures and face-to-face time is used for discussion and other activities. Conner et al. (2014) used this approach in an undergraduate teaching methods course in agricultural education, which has similar content and similar students as our onboarding program for new Extension agents. Students appreciated the online lectures, but offered specific suggestions for improving the quality. They also enjoyed the face-to-face sessions, but emphasized class time should not be used to re-deliver the online lectures, but rather focus on interactive and active learning approaches.

Conner, Rubenstein, DiBenedetto, Stripling, Roberts, and Stedman (2014) replicated the earlier study, making changes based on their original results. In this study, students appreciated the ability to work through the online lectures at their own pace and being able to watch them again if needed. Most students valued the active learning that occurred in the face-to-face sessions, but a few students were uncomfortable with the flexibility now offered in class. Overall, students reported they were very satisfied with the blended approach.

Seger (2011) described efforts to use new technologies to deliver extension programming to clientele. Seger (2011) proposed blended learning can be a great tool to reach traditional, current, and future clientele and further claimed blended learning can provide both "high tech" and "high touch" interactions (para. 20). Seger acknowledged Extension administrators and agents face barriers to adopting these new delivery techniques, one of which is their own comfort levels. Training could be one strategy to eliminate this barrier.

Based on the available literature, blended learning can be an appropriate method to deliver an agricultural education teaching methods class to undergraduate students in a formal setting. Blended learning is also a promising extension delivery method, but agents may not be comfortable implementing such an approach. What is not known is if a blended approach could be a good delivery method for delivering training to Extension agents.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the Extension agents' perceptions of participating in an onboarding program that used a blended approach. The objectives were to (a) describe the perceptions of participants in the Fall 2014 cohort, (b) describe the perceptions of participants in the Spring 2015 cohort, and (c) compare the perceptions between the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 cohort participants.

Methods

A qualitative approach was used to investigate the study objectives. Data were collected through focus groups conducted in October 2014 and April 2015. Participants were recruited from the Fall and Spring cohorts of an onboarding program offered to new county and state Extension faculty in Florida. Typically, new faculty complete the Extension Faculty Development Academy within their first six – twelve months of employment. Both cohorts had the same requirements to complete a number of assigned modules within the online teaching and learning certificate, watch a narrated logic model PowerPoint lecture, and create a draft logic model. All Extension faculty have Internet access at work, although the connection speeds vary with faculty in rural areas experiencing the slowest speeds. The Fall cohort met face-to-face for a total of three days. Additional resources from the Dean of Extension were provided to add two days of face-to-face time for the Spring cohort, which enabled the re-establishment of the teaching practicum.

The focus groups were scheduled on-site immediately following the conclusion of the second session of the program. Participation was voluntary and an incentive of free lunch was offered, given the timing of the focus groups at noon. All participants signed informed consents forms in accordance with the IRB regulations of the University of Florida.

Five (of 17) participants from the Fall 2014 cohort and eight (of 15) participants from the Spring 2015 cohort opted to participate in the focus groups. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. The focus group discussions were audio recorded and then later transcribed by one of the authors.

A moderator's guide was used by the facilitator of the focus group. Guiding questions asked participants to consider their reactions to the teaching and learning modules, logic model lecture and practice assignment, and face-to-face sessions. Participants were asked to share how those aspects impacted their learning. A final prompt allowed for open-ended feedback regarding the blended approach to instruction.

A cross case analysis is appropriate when analyzing multiple cases (Merriam, 1998). This type of analysis is defined by two stages: a "within-case" analysis and a "cross-case" analysis (Merriam, 1998, p. 194). The first stage allows the researcher to understand the contextual variables of each case, while the second stage may result in the identification of commonalities between the cases. This study consisted of two cases, comprised of the Fall 2014 focus group and the Spring 2015 focus group.

Within-case analysis of each focus group was used to accomplish the first two objectives. The data were categorically divided using constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998). Constant comparative analysis is used to compare data in order to draw out recurring themes, sub-themes, and illustrative quotes. The process requires careful comparison between one section of data with another in order to draw out similarities. Codes were used to identify each participant. Following the within-case analysis, the themes and sub-themes of the focus group cases were compared in the cross-case analysis stage. The results of the cross-case analysis are reported for the third objective.

We followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommended techniques for establishing trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement and triangulation are techniques for establishing credibility, which is one component of trustworthiness. Two of us spent two months working with each cohort, which included three intensive days of training for the Fall 2014 cohort and five intensive days of training for the Spring 2015 cohort, as well as online communications between face-to-face trainings. Triangulation occurred through the recommended "use of multiple and different *sources, methods, investigators* [*sic*]" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). The inclusion of data from multiple participants across two cohorts satisfied the use of multiple and different sources. The focus group method was complemented by informal conversations which occurred throughout the duration of each cohort's training period, as well as data obtained from the formative and summative evaluations of the program completed by each cohort. Finally, we decided to use multiple investigators because we did not want the focus groups to be biased by their familiarity with two of us. As a result, our team included an established expert in teaching and learning who had no prior relationship with the cohort participants.

Member checks were described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the most important technique for establishing credibility. Each participant was e-mailed a copy of the transcript from his/her focus group and provided the opportunity to verify the transcription or correct any misinterpretations. Further, each participant received an e-mailed copy of the summarized findings and was asked to provide feedback on our interpretation of the data. Both methods served to further establish the credibility of our research.

Transferability, dependability, and confirmability are also considerations for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We have provided a detailed description of the training program and the participants to establish context. The extensive use of quotes also contributes to thick description, as required to enable the reader to make transferability judgments. Dependability and confirmability can be established through a formal audit. We have created an audit trail using records that include: (a) raw data in the form of audio recordings, written field notes, and survey

results; (b) data reduction and analysis products organized in Excel; (c) data reconstruction and synthesis products for each case, the cross-case analysis, and final manuscript; and (d) instrument development information in the form of a moderator's guide.

Merriam (1998) recommended addressing the researcher's biases to increase internal validity (a recognized corollary to the concept of trustworthiness espoused by Lincoln and Guba (1985)). Our research team recognizes potential biases exist due to our roles as professional educators. Two of us have worked as teachers within the formal K-12 educational system, while the third of us was an Extension agent. At the time of this research, two of us were faculty members while the third researcher was a doctoral student. We all use online courses as a platform for instruction, which may lead to a pro-technology bias. Finally, one of the researchers was assigned new responsibilities to lead the redesign of the onboarding program and another researcher aids with coordination and instruction for the program. We have employed the other techniques to establish trustworthiness to guard against our possible biases.

Findings

Objective One: Fall 2014 Cohort Reactions

The following themes were identified from the Fall 2014 focus group transcription. Coding was used when including direct quotes from the reports. All fall participants are denoted with an "F" followed by a number 1-5.

Online modules allowed flexibility. An overarching theme found within the Fall 2014 focus group was the ability for Extension agents to complete the online modules at times that were complementary to their schedules. They were able "to stop a couple of times, get a couple of phone calls, play it back, play it back, and print it, and [take] some notes" (F3) and then continue the modules. Extension agents felt the online modules offered the convenience of multi-tasking. One agent commented, "I think it was a lot better to do it online because at least I can feel like I can do other things, answer emails" (F4). Agents also commented on the ability to replay sections of the modules to better understand the content. One agent mentioned, "I remember three times I just paused it…but after that it is much easier" (F5). In the event that agents felt as though the content was no longer a novelty for them, they were able to gain a fresh perspective without feeling as though they left the office for something they already knew. One agent noted he/she got the "refresher but still not feel like you drove and got a hotel room and you're misplaced from your job and family and forced to listen to things that you've been doing" (F2).

Content overlap between face-to-face and online modules. The Fall 2014 focus group discussion revealed participants felt as though some of the content was repeated throughout the online modules. One participant commented the information given in one of the online modules was "redundant" (F1) and repeated what the previous module had already gone over. In regards to the face-to-face sessions, some participants in the focus group felt as though the sessions were repetitive of the content they learned within the online modules. One focus group participant mentioned, "I feel like there may have been a chance to spend a little less time on it face-to-face" (F2). A participant noted, "it was completely verbatim what happened [in the] online module" (F4). Their suggestions for future improvement revealed a desire to quickly review the online content and spend the remainder of the face-to-face time "getting into more efficient use of time" (F2).

Low bandwidth connections affected module completion. The online modules created some difficulties for focus group participants with low bandwidth capabilities. One participant noted, "I had to do them at home during the weekend because our Internet is so slow, I couldn't do that at the office" (F5). The participants with low bandwidth benefitted from the text, which accompanied some of the online modules. Instead of listening to the modules and following the

planned progression, those with low bandwidths chose to read through the lectures, which made it "much easier" (F5).

Large time gap between online and face-to-face modules. Participants in the focus group discussion spoke about the difficulty in remembering material they covered in the online modules while they were attending the face-to-face sessions. One participant mentioned having "no recollection" (F1) of the online material due to having completed the modules months prior to attending the face-to-face sessions. Another participant stated that he/she would have liked a notice to "wait until two weeks prior" (F2) to attending the face-to-face sessions to complete the online modules. The participants noted difficulty in processing the face-to-face information because they had completed the online modules months in advance to the face-to-face sessions.

Unclear online assignment communication. Online modules had accompanying assignments that needed to be completed prior to the face-to-face sessions. Focus group participants felt the communication of those assignments was difficult to understand. One participant suggested having a list of needed assignments "so that you can do them as you're doing the module" (F4). The participant went on to note he/she had difficulty finding the appropriate information to help complete the assignments. Others found the directions in the online modules for assignment completion to be "unclear" (F3) and another noted that he/she "had no idea what's right" (F2) when it came to the directions for the assignments.

Desire more interactive sessions. As the participants went into detail about the idea of redundancy in the module content, it became clear the focus group participants felt as though more effort should be placed in making the face-to-face sessions more interactive, in light of the information-heavy online modules. One participant stated, "Keep in mind that the online part is where the detail is and …whenever we are here, we are experiential" (F2). Participants enjoyed face-to-face sessions that used the online module information as well as the assignments in appropriate ways. One participant described a face-to-face session as "not being redundant and giving advice as we were going because he had given appropriate homework to bring in and go over" (F4). Another participant, commenting on the same session, stated, "[presenter] did a lecture PowerPoint but it was just like, these are the important pieces we talked about in the online piece and here are some examples and then we broke out and did a revision" (F1). This approach was positively received and led to participants suggesting, "a five-minute overview rather than an hour overview of the lecture and no experiential" (F1).

Objective Two: Spring 2015 Cohort Reactions

The following themes were identified from the Spring 2015 focus group transcription. Coding was used when including direct quotes from the reports. All spring participants are denoted with an "S" followed by a number 1-8.

Timing of session requirements. The focus group discussion revealed participants had difficulty with the timing of various session requirements. One participant stated, "later on in the year it would have been more appropriate to get that [Teaching and Learning] certificate done rather than versus, right here and now and I probably would have appreciated it more" (S1). Participants also felt as though the online modules could have been given soon after being hired. One participant commented, "the first two weeks of the job I had a little bit of breathing room where I would have had more time to complete the [online modules]…why couldn't I have done this that first week" (S3). Echoing the previous statement, a participant stated, "I do agree that if we would've gotten them earlier on when we were probably the first week or two on the job, that I had more down time" (S5). Another participant felt as though the various requirements were "so overwhelming" (S7) in light of other events and requirements at their county offices during the time of the onboarding program.

Need more practice-based information in online modules. Participants discussed their desire to see more practical information reflected in the online modules. Participants felt as though some of the information presented in the online modules was difficult to understand because "it was a lot of theory based stuff" (S6). The participants in the discussion felt as though the purpose of the modules should be to offer tools to apply immediately within their programming and day-to-day practices (S7). Others felt as though the information presented was valuable but did not understand how to put it into practice. One participant noted, "I will attempt to use it but I need to be shown how to and I think that that was missing here" (S8). When discussing their preferences during the online modules, participants noted enjoying creating "lesson plans" (S1, S2), which they felt represented practical means for addressing their programming needs. One participant suggested focusing on administrative aspects of their position in the future, stating, "the learning modules also focused on learning and teaching which is part of our job as 4-H agents but a very large part of our job is administrative and doesn't touch on that but maybe that could be addressed in the future as well" (S7).

Engaging online modules. While discussing the content of the modules, participants expressed a desire for more interactive online modules. One participant preferred to see the lecturer and suggested, "I don't want somebody to lecture to me when I can't see them so maybe more interactive videos" (S3). Another participant, when speaking about the online module structure, stated, "I paused it and read it myself most of the time" (S4). Other focus group participants also mentioned using a similar method in completing the online modules (S5, S3). Lack of engagement caused participants to become distracted and led to "checking email" (S3) during the modules.

Connection between online and face-to-face modules. Participants in the focus group felt as though some presenters at the face-to-face session failed to connect to the information in the online modules. A participant commented, "the presenters at the actual trainings weren't fully aware of or didn't relate to what they were doing in person to the modules" (S4). They attributed this apparent lack of linkages as a gap within the overall training. Another participant felt as though the activities and presentations completed in the face-to-face sessions could have "tied back" (S2) to the online modules they had completed. General consensus was seen with multiple participants vocally agreeing to the previous statements.

Clear communication methods. Another theme which emerged from the focus group discussion was the need for a simpler method of communicating online module requirements. Participants noted, "you had to really read and be very careful reading emails from several different people on different dates, different subject lines, to figure out what was expected of us when we got here" (S8). The confusion led to participants feeling unprepared for the face-to-face sessions because they had missed assignment notifications. The same participant later stated, "had I been given a syllabus, you know when I first started I could've planned and planned a little better and given myself a little more time" (S8). Another participant noted the emails did not follow a logical progression to help alleviate stress associated with completing assignment requirements. This participant commented, "when I went to go do my homework modules the other day I had to go through multiple emails to find the one with the link on it to go to the modules and I really think its good to have everything organized when the emails are going out" (S4). One participant felt that he/she was not given adequate notice on the requirements of the online modules (S1).

Online material useful. In their discussion, participants noted the "overwhelming" (S3) amount of paper they received during the face-to-face session. Participants felt as though they could have received the same information in a digital format such as "DropBox" (S7). Others felt as though a separate site with files of all the presentation materials and online templates could be "more user friendly" (S3). One participant also stated that "if [they] had just known [they] could go somewhere and click on it and read it" (P4) it would be more conducive to future use in their county positions.

Objective Three: Similarities and Differences between Cohorts

The following themes were identified between the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 focus groups. Coding was used when including direct quotes from the reports.

Communication methods. Within both focus groups there is an emphasis on the need to improve the methods of communicating the requirements of the online modules. Participants felt the information needed to complete the assignments was difficult to locate as well as unclear in the intention. Unclear communication strategies were identified among the participants. They felt as though multiple emails with "different links" (S8) created challenges to completing necessary tasks prior to the program. Participants felt as though they "had to really read and be very careful reading emails from several different people on different dates, different subject lines, to figure out what was expected" (S2). The unclear nature of the assignment led to some participants feeling as though they had not completed the assignment correctly (F2, F4). A participant went so far as to say they "had no idea what's right" (F2). Participants felt as though there was not enough communication about the contents of the assignments prior to their due date (S1). Having a central location with assignment requirements was suggested to alleviate the confusion caused by multiple emails.

Engaging sessions. Another similar theme through both focus groups was the emphasis on increasing the presence of engaging sessions during the online and face-to-face portions of the training. Participant discussion focused on increasing the presence of engaging activities during the face-to-face sessions, which would improve their attention and enjoyment of the sessions. For example, a participant expressed the need for face-to-face sessions to be "experiential" (F2). Participants stressed the need to lower the amount of "lecture time" (F4) and increase time for new information and "hands-on" (F4, S1) practice. According the participants, these changes would create opportunities for higher levels of interest and engagement.

Participants desired the sessions to be more engaging by increasing the practicality of the session content. Participants did not want to be told theories, they wanted to be taught "how to" (S8) apply it to their jobs. Participants stated theory based material "was hard to even have to tie it to anything because I hadn't done anything and so trying to take the information and put it to use at some point wasn't going to happen" (S6). When discussing their experience creating lesson plans for the program, they remarked how they would use them in their programming upon returning to their offices (S1). In addition to increasing their technical knowledge of programming, the participants felt that a focus on "administrative" (S7) aspects of their jobs during the session would help them to engage. These comments express a desire to make the content of both the online modules and face-to-face sessions appealing to their professional situations.

Connections between online and face-to-face sessions. Both focus groups emphasized the need to modify the topical connections between the online and face-to-face sessions. The participants desired to "apply the knowledge" (S4) from their previously completed online modules in the face-to-face sessions. The participants felt as though the face-to-face sessions were not highly distinguishable from the online modules (F1, F2). One participant noted the face-to-face session was "completely verbatim what happened online module" (F4). The participants suggested reviewing the online material for a short period of time and then moving to "more efficient" (S2) uses of their time. During the course of the conversation, the participants revealed their dissatisfaction with presenters they felt did not adequately review the online material. They felt as though the presenters "didn't relate it back to what [they] did online so it seems like there was this gap of why did we do the online" (S4) modules. This further emphasizes the desire of the participants for further modification of the connections between the online and face-to-face modules.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

We sought to assess the possibility of using a blended approach to improve the Florida onboarding program by exploring the perceptions of participants in two cohorts that experienced the blended approach as a pilot. Similarities existed between the focus groups' largely negative perceptions, but their views were sometimes in direct opposition. The varying personalities of the group members between cohorts is a possible explanation for the different viewpoints but those are also likely attributable to a conscious effort to use evaluation results gathered following the Fall 2014 cohort to improve the experience of the Spring 2015 cohort. Neither group was very positive about the blended approach, particularly the online component. However, the data gathered from the focus groups was specific and detailed, which enabled us to adjust the Extension Faculty Development Academy to strive to maximize the potential of the blended approach.

The Fall 2014 focus group identified several challenges they experienced as a result of the blended approach, such as unclear assignment instructions and bandwidth requirements, and generally disliked the redundancy within the modules and between the modules and face-to-face sessions. The Spring 2015 focus group articulated similar concerns about the need for better communication but felt the instructors did not do enough to connect the face-to-face sessions to the modules. Further, the Spring 2015 focus group had negative views of the modules themselves, finding them to be too focused on theory, boring to watch, and lacking practical application. Contrary to the Fall 2014 focus group, which suggested the modules should be completed soon before the face-to-face sessions, the Spring 2015 focus group felt they would have had more time to work on the modules during their first two weeks of employment. Both focus groups emphasized the need to use the face-to-face sessions for experiential and hands-on activities rather than lecture, which is consistent with the findings of Conner et al. (2014a, 2014b).

Seger (2011) advocated for the use of blended learning as an extension approach, but identified a lack of instructor comfort as a barrier. A lack of instructor comfort and experience may have impacted how effectively the blended approach was implemented. Of the two instructors who assigned online work related to what they taught face-to-face, neither had significant experience using the blended approach. Coordinators of onboarding programs considering a blended approach should ensure all instructors receive appropriate training and support in the use of the approach. We suggest modifying the first ingredient in the list for successful blended learning offered by Alonso et al. (2005) to indicate that learning is directed by an instructor *who has been trained to use the blended approach.* The remaining six ingredients in Alonso et al.'s (2005) list did not emerge as major themes in either focus group despite varied levels of adherence in the methods used for the Fall and Spring onboarding programs.

The theory of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015) provides more insight into understanding the concerns articulated by participants. Adaptations to using the blended approach are necessary to better take into consideration the new agents' need to know why what they are learning is important. Directions for what to do, when, and how should be reviewed for clarity so as to honor the agents' sense of self-concept by preventing them from feeling lost before they even begin learning. The timing of the online modules should be matched so it coincides with when agents are most ready to learn that information, although it is unclear from the contrasting views offered by the focus groups participants exactly when that timing should occur. It is notable the most positive aspect of the blended approach identified by the focus groups was the flexibility to complete the modules on their own schedules. Finally, greater emphasis needs to be placed on linking the online and face-to-face content to specific tasks and problems, because adults "learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations" (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005, p. 67).

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