

Maximizing Microlearning

Sifting through the noise

A practical guide to assembling and optimizing
your microlearning strategy.

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Contents

Abstract	1
Microlearning 101	2
What is Microlearning?	3
Key Benefits of Microlearning	4
Why Microlearning Matters	5
Frequently Asked Questions	6
How to Supercharge your Microlearning Strategy	9
Conclusion	16



Abstract

A lot has been said about “microlearning” and the promise of its potential within organizations. But what is fact and what is fiction? How can microlearning truly benefit an organization and its people, and more importantly, how do you effectively build and execute a plan that best leverages the intentions and benefits of a microlearning experience?

When designed well, an effective microlearning strategy not only can provide tremendous learning value, but can also provide significant ROI in terms of learning asset production, as well as in-the-field performance optimization. Knowing the best way to navigate through your microlearning strategy will yield instant business impact for your organization and its learners.

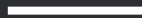
In this guide, you’ll gain insights into:

- What microlearning is and how it can help your organization
- Key facts and figures to help you make a business case for microlearning
- Frequently asked questions and debunking of myths surrounding microlearning
- 8 key principles to help supercharge your microlearning strategy



Microlearning 101

If you are new to the world of microlearning, here's a crash course on what it's all about.





What is Microlearning?

Though “microlearning” is not a relatively new term, there are differing opinions on what specifically it means. Is it just about “micro-tizing” content? Creating bite-sized assets? Reducing training into 5-minute-or less chunks? Or, is microlearning an approach for learning that requires a different mindset? While the industry is yet to reach a formal consensus, here are some good definitions of microlearning that are already out there:

“Microlearning means more than just small. Microlearning is not only compact—it’s also focused, offering just the right amount of information necessary to help a learner achieve a specific, actionable objective. This makes microlearning in business contexts especially valuable.”

- Allen Comm

“One is what I call ‘micro-learning,’ things we can quickly read, view, or consume and they only take 10 minutes or less. These may be a video, a blog, or a set of instructional questions that help us think differently than we did before. We as information-seeking animals consume this kind of material all day, and most of the news sites and social networks now offer such learning in a massive, curated stream.”

- Josh Bersin

“Microlearning is the breaking down of essential knowledge into specific concepts and procedures. Each of these is represented by an individual and independent piece of content (quite commonly now a video or an article).”

- Steve Dineen

Key Benefits of Microlearning

High Impact

Microlearning focuses on high-impact messaging delivered in a short, punchy manner. This is an economical use of the learner's attention and time.

Accessible

Microlearning is designed for multi-device delivery, making it mobile friendly and even available in offline formats. Combined with the "pull-factor" of its design, microlearning is a very useful content format.

Flexible and Convenient

By virtue of being broken up into individual units, microlearning can be deployed in a variety of environments (e.g., individualized learning paths) and can even be reused based on context.

Engaging

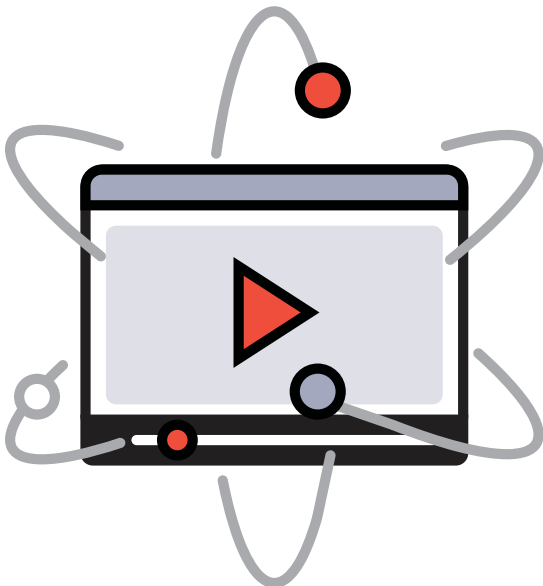
Typically using a rich-media format, and in a length that is less time consuming, microlearning is in perfect alignment with the needs of the Modern Learner.

Just in Time

Designed for the moment of need, microlearning has a positive impact on learning application and behavior change.

Increased ROI

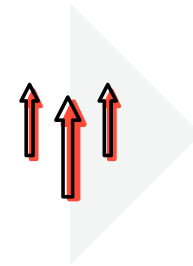
Due to the short nature of microlearning, the reduction of training time, shorter development, easy update cycles and more lead to greater ROI for organizations.



Why Microlearning Matters

Facts and Figures

Looking to build a business case for increased microlearning within your organization? Here are 9 important facts that help set the context for microlearning and its value within your organization.



Backed by Science

- Microlearning in 3-7 minute chunks matches the brain's working memory and attention span.
- Microlearning drives over 20% more information retention than long-form training.
- 90/20/8 rule says: In the first 8 minutes, we're at our peak energy level. After 20 minutes, our neurons experience a noticeable drop. After 60-120 minutes, alertness completely collapses.

Built for the Modern Learner

- 1% of a typical work week is all that employees have to focus on training and development. That's 25 minutes.
- 40% of people say they don't have time to do the training they need.
- Based on video engagement data of over 564,710 videos, and more than 1.3 billion plays, 2 minutes is the sweet spot. After that, the drop-off in engagement is significant.

Delivers Results

- 64% of L&D within top-flight organizations deploy microlearning where appropriate (versus 16% from "the rest").
- Companies that use microlearning for employee development are 30% more likely to improve customer satisfaction scores year-over-year.
- Companies that use microlearning for employee development are 1.9 times more likely to improve their revenue for FTE.

SOURCE

Grovo - Why Microlearning Matters; "Why Microlearning drives over 20% more information retention than long-form training"; Bite Size is the right size: Why Microlearning is the training solution for employees' shrinking attention spans; The Modern Learner Source: Bersin by Deloitte; <https://wistia.com/blog/optimal-video-length>; CIPD - In-Focus 2017 - Driving The New Learning Organisation; 2016 The Aberdeen Group

Frequently Asked Questions

Microlearning is often viewed as a “silver bullet” within training, but some beliefs are worthy of further examination and perhaps even debunking. Let’s take a closer look at some frequently asked questions.



How long should my microlearning be?

This is a commonly asked question, often due to competing ideas of what microlearning actually is. Is it 10 minutes? 5 minutes? 2 minutes? 30 seconds? Truthfully, microlearning is not about hard rules about the length of a module (or whatever unit you are using), but rather it is about adopting a philosophy of high-impact, high-engagement learning in a short time frame.

The most appropriate answer to this question is that your microlearning should be exactly as long *as it needs to be*. If a complex technical procedure requires more than 3 minutes to explain, take the extra time to explain it or consider breaking it up into meaningful chunks. Focus in on single ideas and break up your learning wherever appropriate to allow for better learning pace and reduced cognitive overload.

Should I use microlearning for everything? Does this mean I should stop larger-format learning?

No and no. Some topics are complex and complexity needs time to be explained. A strong content strategy has a good (and meaningful) balance between micro and “macro” learning. Not all learning objectives transpose easily to a microlearning environment, so choose wisely when beginning to form your strategy.

When it comes to larger-format learning, try and break up the pace of your training wherever possible. No one wants to watch a 2-hour course on anything, so aim to bring a “microlearning attitude” to your current large-form courses. The focus should be on engagement, regardless of how long or short your content is. This is why our favorite TED talks can last for 15, 20, even 30 minutes.

How do I create “microlearning” from my existing learning assets?

Unfortunately, there is no magic button you can press that will convert all your existing assets into a microlearning format. Adopting a microlearning “philosophy” is probably the hardest part in building your microlearning strategy, especially for those accustomed to more traditional, rote methods of learning.

It requires a reimagining of your current content landscape and pushes you and your team to distill your large-format learning into its very essential messages. While this will be challenging at first, the task will be a lot easier over time.

Is microlearning just about videos and/or modules?

Not necessarily. Though the concept of microlearning these days has become synonymous with videos and or eLearning modules, that does not exclusively mean it has to be one of those media formats.

If microlearning can be thought of as small bursts of high impact learning in a rich-media environment, this can be format-agnostic. Think of a podcast or an infographic. In fact, a diverse mix of microlearning modalities is actually preferred as it provides our brains with new forms of stimuli, which helps for better engagement and learning retention.



How to Supercharge your Microlearning Strategy

An effective microlearning strategy all comes down to one thing: meaningful design. Here are 8 key strategies you need to know to help you optimize your approach to microlearning.



1 Make it Mobile Ready *Optimized*

If such a thing can be said, microlearning's "soul" comes from mobile. The idea of short, small bites of content comes from our everyday digital consumption habits, which have been fostered over the last few years from the mobile revolution. But is your content mobile ready?

Let's stop right here for a second. "Mobile-ready" content isn't just content that is technically able to work on your smartphone. Your HTML5 converted course doesn't make it "ready" for a mobile audience, just workable. When talking about mobile learning, we often forget that mobile is just as much about design and user experience as it is about technical compatibility.

Simply put, avoid giving your microlearning the "mobilization" treatment and regarding it as an afterthought. No matter where your organization is right now, at some point, there will be a venture into mobile learning and you want to be ready. Be *intentional* in the design of your microlearning modules and test on a mobile device before going live. Make sure it makes sense on a small screen and it has a reusable quality to it. This way, you won't have to worry about whether your content makes sense on a mobile device in the future, and your learners will want to access the content more in the moment of need.

2 Think about Learning *and* Performance

With increased pressure on organizations to do more with less, and rush to competence in the field as quickly as possible, thinking of learning in isolation no longer makes the cut. And as learning starts getting rebranded as "Performance Support," these two worlds collide and are becoming synonymous

with each other. With every microlearning asset you create, ask yourself, “How can this make sense in the performance moment?”

This not only has incredible functional use for your users, but saves considerable costs in terms of development overlap. Why create one microlearning video for training and then another for performance support when they can be the same thing? Microlearning allows you to make content reusable. If you are building interactivity within your microlearning for increased learning engagement, design it in a way that allows it to be removed at a later date for a more sharpened performance-first focus. One of the benefits of microlearning is its agility and flexibility to address organizational needs. Allow yourself the ability to stay agile by creating microlearning that not only adds value with what is being said, but also *when* it is needed most.

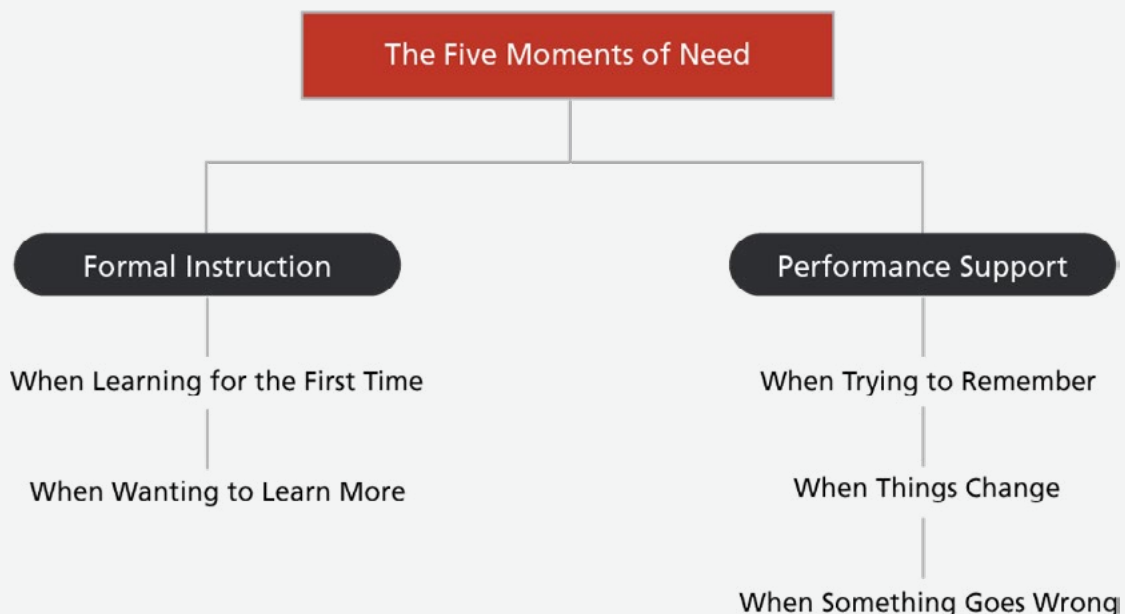
3 “Micro” is a relative term

The microlearning “trend” is certainly taking over, with a lot of misinformation about how long or short your learning should be and why. It’s easy to be confused by all the noise out there, certainly when it comes to microlearning and ideal length. 20 minutes? 10 minutes? 5 minutes? 2 minutes? Some even believe in the concept of “nanolearning” (in case we needed any more jargon). Wherever you stand in this debate, microlearning is a philosophy, not a rigid set of principles. And that philosophy is simple: Chunk out your learning into the smallest, punchiest and most engaging units *as possible*. Explaining a 4-step procedure for changing a coffee filter can take seconds, but what about a complex life-saving medical procedure? The goal is not to create arbitrary rules to abide by, but to understand what works best for your organization and create a philosophy of “less is more.”

Nothing is going to replace large-format learning and some ideas are not ideally suited for a microlearning approach. But in the world of microlearning, you are now dealing with an audience that thinks and acts in terms of moments, not events. Push the agenda with your instructional design team and ask them to bring down their complex learning into simple, consumable, accessible chunks. Challenge your organization by asking, “How short can we make X?” and take on a posture of learning by seeing what is resonating with your learners and what they “crave” in terms of content. Strike a harmonious balance between microlearning and large-format learning and consider the relationship between the two. Every organization, rightfully so, has their own definition of how long microlearning should be. Your first step should be to define what that is.

4 Address the Moment of Need

If there is one key area of your organization where microlearning is most effective, it is in the moment of need. Mosher and Gottfredson (2012) developed the notion of five moments of need in training and performance:



What's noteworthy here is how often the moment of need arises in performance support rather than formal instruction. In fact, in performance support, these are often high stakes moments with increased pressure to deliver.

In the moment of need, we are looking for exactly what we need and nothing more. This is a moment that involves seconds, not minutes. When designing your microlearning assets, ask yourself how it serves the moment of need. Does it make sense to build your microlearning strategy according to need? For example, rather than having a 5-minute module on "Helping customers understand the benefits of our products," does it make more sense to have a 60-second video called "5 key benefits of our new products."?

It's critical to consider the "User Experience" of the moment of need when creating your microlearning. What are the design requirements for microlearning in this exact moment? What are your learners looking for? What are your learners not looking for? This will help refine how you go about formulating your strategy for microlearning content.

5 Don't forget about reinforcement!

Try to make your microlearning assets as versatile as possible so that they can work under as many learning contexts as possible. One of these contexts is reinforcement. Whether digital or analog, a reinforcement strategy is incredibly powerful in terms of the impact it can create for learning retention. Extend the shelflife of your microlearning in your training programs by leveraging it for use in a reinforcement strategy within a continuous learning environment. This is a great way to provide learners with "pick-me-up" content in case of knowledge gaps or dropping retention. This will also avoid costly retraining and curb lost productivity.



6 Make it shareable, consumable... VIRAL!

Think Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. A “post” is only successful if it is shared, not just consumed in a one-off manner. Design, write and produce your microlearning in a format that has a certain viral quality to it. Use your microlearning to support your social learning infrastructure and to support grassroots user-driven learning. Your learners will be your greatest advocates for microlearning so you need them on your side. Create content that they will crave - high quality, high energy and high utility. Monotonous talking heads on a noisy background will not make the cut!

7 Work with technology that maximizes the benefits of microlearning

Having great content is important, but you also have to be able to unleash that content at the right time and at the right place. Think through the technology ecosystem within your organization (both hardware and software) and ask yourself, “What’s the easiest way to access content?” That’s where you want to place your microlearning! Microlearning is supposed to be responsive and agile. Don’t let your technology get in the way of the moment of need.

8 Attach Meaningful Metrics

When you bring your content down to a granular level, it allows you to get granular with the data you collect. This is arguably the most underrated benefit of a microlearning strategy. It allows you to better understand and support your learners, and depending on where you place your

microlearning, it can even help you understand performance needs. Work with your organization to establish metrics that leverage the benefits of small-scale learning in order to optimize how your L&D can best support your organization.

Here's a high-level example of how a well supported microlearning strategy can yield instant benefits for your learning unit:

Microlearning Metric	Benefit
<p>Assets tagged to competencies - Which resources are being accessed compared to others?</p>	<p>Helps you understand learner need. Are they pulled more to Topic A or Topic B?</p> <p>Where do learners need further reinforcement? Further emphasis on a particular topic?</p>
<p>Drop off rates - When do users turn off the module? When do they become disengaged?</p>	<p>Helps you understand the ideal length of a module within your organization. Optimizes workflow and production of learning assets.</p>
<p>When are learners accessing a microlearning module?</p>	<p>Helps you distinguish between what is valuable in the performance moment versus the learning moment.</p> <p>Helps you understand the right time to deploy microlearning within a learning campaign.</p>

A strong microlearning strategy tied to meaningful metrics gives you actionable data to help you stir the right course for your learning development needs, and helps you move even further beyond into how to better support *performance* needs.





Conclusion

In a world where we can only dedicate 1% of our workweek to learning, we are left with minutes - not hours or days - to create impact. Microlearning is not only scientifically-proven to be a more effective means of pedagogy, but is also a necessary means to engage today's learner.

An effective microlearning strategy can transform the performance of your L&D unit overnight. It will not only optimize your user experience and save your organization money, but will also help pave a new and exciting way to move your learning strategy through data-driven design. This starts with meaningful conversations within your organization on how adopting a microlearning approach will lead to immediate business impact.

Need help navigating through your microlearning strategy?

Get in touch with [SwissVBS](#) today.

About the author

Josh Cardoz is the Principal Learning Strategist at SwissVBS. Leading the Learning Experience Design Team, he has been a central figure in the design of several microlearning initiatives. He currently also teaches at the University of Toronto on "Online Learning Environments" and "Learning Experience Design."

[Follow Josh on LinkedIn.](#)

About SwissVBS:

SwissVBS is an award-winning full-service digital learning design and production agency focused on providing value at every step of the learning journey.

Find out more at: www.swissvbs.com
or email info@swissvbs.com

How we can help

SwissVBS provides a full range of microlearning offerings to meet your needs.

Our award-winning microlearning platform (ECHO) is designed to simplify the delivery of microlearning content.

Learn more about ECHO.

Our microlearning professional services are there to provide you that extra hand in getting your microlearning projects up and running.

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Our microlearning animated video solution (BURST) offers a quick and easy way to produce high-energy bite-sized modules that target specific learning objectives.

Learn more about BURST.



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