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Perpetual student

Ask learning experts how busy professionals can maximize learning throughout their careers and they may tell you to “go Spanish.”

By Alexandra Samur

Spanish cuisine is famous for small plates of food called tapas, which began when innkeepers used the snacks to tempt and fortify travellers in the middle of long journeys. Today, employees in the midst of long careers are being offered similar sustenance; in this case the rations on offer are not food but knowledge. Called micro learning, it is the equivalent of educational tapas: small bites of knowledge that can make a big impact on one's career.

Many organizations are integrating micro learning into the workplace to close skill and knowledge gaps, rather than forcing employees to take a leave of absence to take classes, says Korinne Collins, the **Canadian Credit Union Association's** vice-president of professional development and education. Learning on the job at one's own pace and in the workplace often provides opportunities to see the value of, as well as quickly apply, new skills and information.

For example, more members are using credit union digital offerings than ever before. So CUsource Professional Development and Education began putting micro learning “nuggets” into enhancing digital skills for credit union staff. “They have to understand the mobile app platform and which members would benefit from using it,” Collins says. “They need to know how

to talk to a member via Skype, rather than being face to face. They need far more digital awareness.”

Dorothy Sidhu, a senior corporate training consultant and facilitator at **First West Credit Union** (240,000 members, \$10 billion in assets) agrees that digital skills are increasingly in demand for staff at all levels, from how to network with clients on social media sites like LinkedIn to



communicating more efficiently internally with work colleagues using chat networks instead of email.

Interpersonal prowess is also in high demand for frontline staff. “We need to make it easier for our employees who are often having conversations with our members that trigger emotions,” says Duane Clark, a senior manager in learning and development at **Servus Credit Union** (370,000 members, \$15 billion in assets). “For example, for some people, there’s

shame attached to their finances, so empathy is a skill that we want to build.”

As with so many industries, the future of learning is in the metrics: measuring the outcomes of both hard and soft skills learned. Collins's team at CUsource is experimenting to better understand how the investment in employee learning is benefiting their members and ultimately the credit unions. This could include measuring the impact of a new sales program and whether it has translated into an increase in sales or referrals. Or it could mean determining how confident a member feels banking on a mobile device and whether staff feel confident talking to members about it.

Depending on the skill or preferred learning style, training programs vary. “We’ve got more generations in the workforce now than we ever have and people learn in different styles. Our credit unions are member-centric

so we’re trying to be learner-centric,” Collins says. Accordingly, the CUsource product line has evolved to provide offerings for different types of learners.

In addition to providing learning opportunities on the job, some employees have expressed a willingness to pursue educational opportunities in their off hours. “More and more people are willing to take learning home: an hour here, an hour there, integrating it into their career or their personal life,” Collins says.

Of course, there are those who still prefer more traditional ways of learning, such as a three-day workshop or a formal multi-week course led by a post-secondary facilitator, such as CUsource's professional accreditation programs, which was developed in partnership with Dalhousie University.

These different approaches create a veritable learning buffet for both management and employees. So whether your learning preference is tapas or turkey dinner, “always be learning” is the new mantra for lifelong education. ■