Unlocking Smartphone Learning for the Life Sciences

red paper

Introduction

Being a learning and performance solutions partner, we often get questions about smartphone-specific mobile learning from our customers. As with most emerging trends in the learning and performance field, smartphone learning presents a conundrum.

- "How can we leverage smartphones in our overall training strategy?"
- "Should we be designing for mobile first?"
- "What's the best way to support our reps who are always on the road and have limited time?"

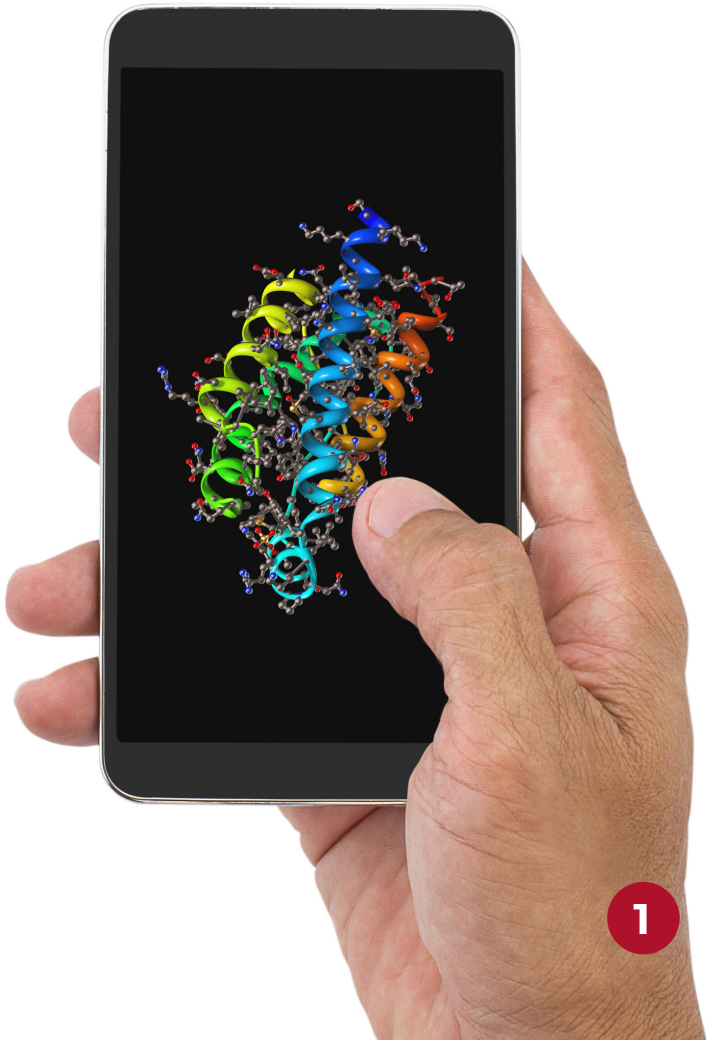
Our instructional design team made it a goal this summer to dig deeper on this subject. On one hand, there's a sense of urgency (real or perceived) around supporting the phones we carry with us every day. On the other hand, it's not immediately obvious how to do so effectively—or even where to start.

While our best-practice recommendations for smartphone learning have always been grounded in adult learning theory, instructional design research, and our own experience with customers, there's a need for more data about the effectiveness of learning and performance support solutions delivered on smartphones, as well as the strategies, tactics, and techniques most likely to produce successful outcomes.

What We Know

Nine of the ~100 organizations we partner with each year are actively creating and distributing smartphone learning. They are largely doing this using third-party tools (eg, Qstream, Axonify, Rcade, or Kahoot!) that are distinct from the company's LMS to create microlearning, assessment, or engagement assets. This type of smartphone learning largely serves as either a spaced learning event to increase retention or an engagement tool for a live meeting; it is not meant to deliver introductory content.

A larger percentage of our customers use an LMS that can deliver their introductory materials via smartphones. Yet we see organizations struggle to take advantage of this, largely due to increased development cost; while an online course can generally be delivered on both a PC and an iPad, quality decreases when displayed on a small smartphone screen. Short of increasing budgets, we see most customers prioritizing the development of introductory materials for PCs and iPads—and using the remaining funds for the third-party smartphone learning tools described earlier.



What does the research support? Some studies, like those from the I/ITSEC Conference and the International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies, have shown a neutral to positive result when adapting learning materials to a smartphone learning format (even for material with a longer seat time). This suggests that content can be successfully learned across devices of various sizes.

But...budgets! How should this be practically applied in life sciences training? Despite research showing that smartphone learning can be effective for all types of content, we must be realistic: with limited budgets, phone learning development efforts should be prioritized to create the biggest impact. Given that most learners will have access to a PC or iPad when consuming introductory content, Red Nucleus does not recommend putting this content on a smartphone. Instead, we recommend that smartphone learning is offered as self-directed learning for in-the-field consumption via a user-friendly design.

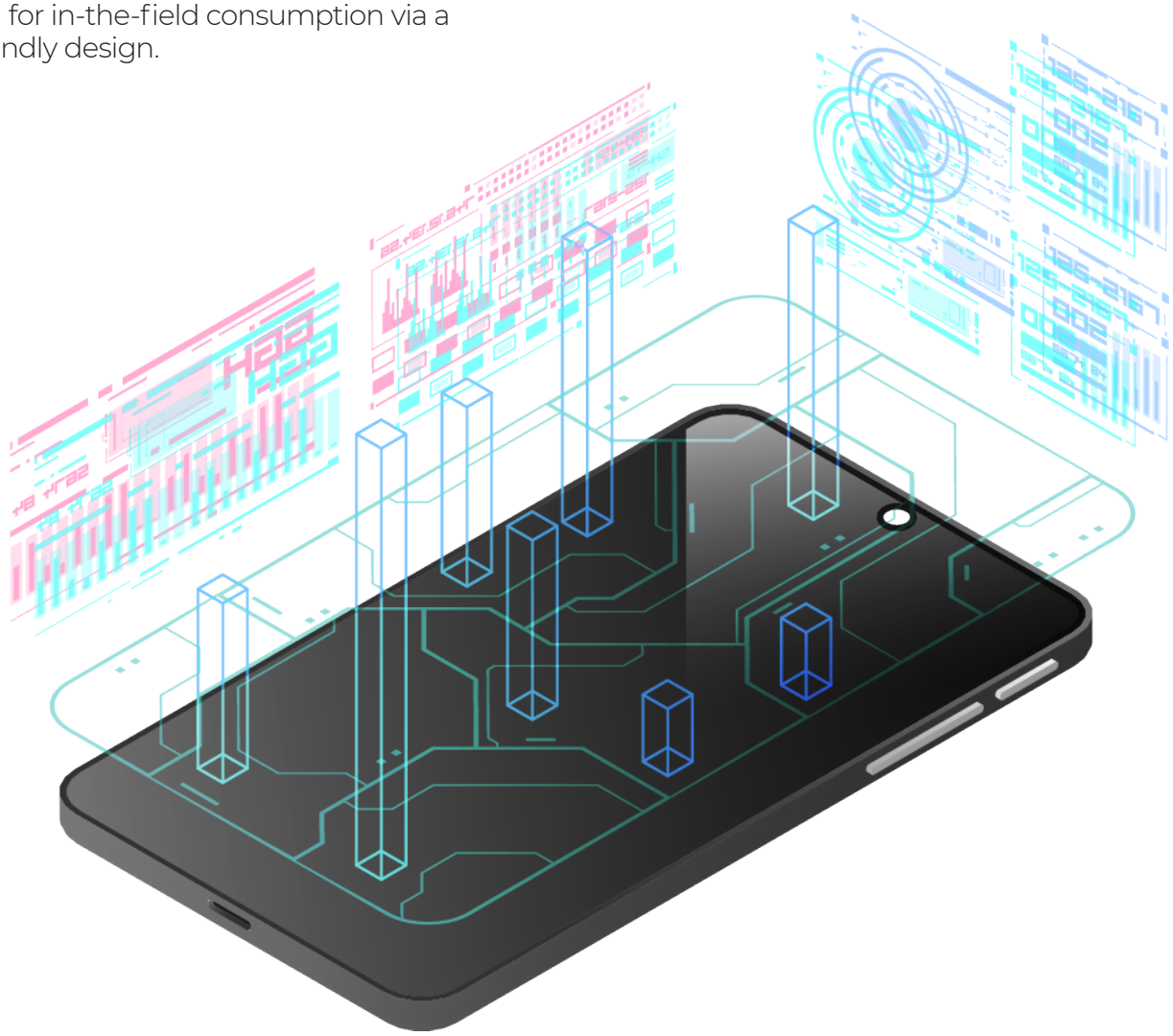
Critical Success Factors

The largest factor that contributes to smartphone learning success is learner perceptions: if learners perceive that the experience is useful, they will be more likely to focus on learning. If not, as you well know, there are a million distractions on a phone that can pull the learner away from the materials.

Other critical success factors include:

- User-friendly design of content
- Technical competence of learners
- Learning community development
- Content
- Ownership

(from the Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology)



Our recommendations are summarized here:

Consider **using** smartphone learning for	Try to **avoid using** smartphone learning for
Self-directed learning (ie, performance support materials)	Guided learning paths (ie, initial training curriculums such as new-hire curriculum, new launch/indication training)
Learners with some experience and a baseline of knowledge	New, inexperienced learners without a baseline of knowledge
Microlearning (ie, short, discrete, 1-topic pieces not reliant on additional training for comprehension)	Longer pieces, or pieces that rely on each other for comprehension
Content that can be PULLED upon by learners to answer their questions	Content that is PUSHED out to learners with mandatory completion requirements
Searchable content	Gated/locked format
Content that can be built to fit into the flow of the learners' workday	Unique tasks requiring a break from the learners' workday
Skill- and application-based training	General knowledge training

Topics: We recommend smartphone learning be used primarily for self-directed learning topics that learners would most likely want to reference during their workday, such as

- Prescribing information
- Clinical studies
- Sales messaging/marketing materials
- Objection handling
- Competitor information

Modalities: We recommend using the following modalities to deliver smartphone learning:

- Quick reference websites built via responsive design
- Mobile games
- Videos
- Coaching apps
- Forums or question boards

It's worth noting that this list does not include online courses built for the smartphone; instead, we recommend that smartphone learning is designed to be easy to navigate, to be searchable, and to provide content that can quickly be pulled upon for information.

Questions to Refine Your Smartphone Learning Strategy

Making the call to transition into smartphone learning should not be taken lightly or performed quickly. The good news is that you have time: remember, only 9 out of the ~100 organizations we partner with are currently engaged in smartphone learning.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Are your learners ready for smartphone learning? Do they have the necessary technical competence? If not, how can you get them there?
- What topics do your learners want to be able to easily reference in the field? What topics do they text or call their peers about? What work-related questions do they research online? This is a great question to start asking your learners to determine your best smartphone learning topics.
- How can your content be chunked into a microlearning format (ie, short, discrete pieces that cover 1 topic and are not reliant on additional training for comprehension)?
- How can you provide this information as something that can be "pulled" upon, rather than "pushed" out? Do you have the right programming tools to do that?
- How can smartphone learning be built into the flow of your learners' workday?
- If you are using your LMS and third-party apps to deliver smartphone learning, how do the 2 systems overlap? Are there ways to make the experience between the 2 systems more cohesive?

By asking these types of questions, your organization will be better prepared to align with industry best practices and your learners' needs.

The average US adult will spend 2 hours and 55 minutes on their smartphone every day this year according to eMarketer research—and that includes your life sciences learners. How will you take advantage of this time and attention to improve your learners' performance?

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