

# LEARNING IN THE FLOW OF WORK...

## DO WE REALLY GET IT?

JO BUUTS AND ALFRED REMMITS DISCUSS

*When talking about innovative learning approaches and how the principles of 70:20:10 can be applied, the terms “learning in the flow of work”, or “workflow learning” are often heard. Companies interpret the 70 in many ways with varied labels, but loose terminology threatens to lose the essence of what we really mean by workflow learning.*

### Speaker Bios:

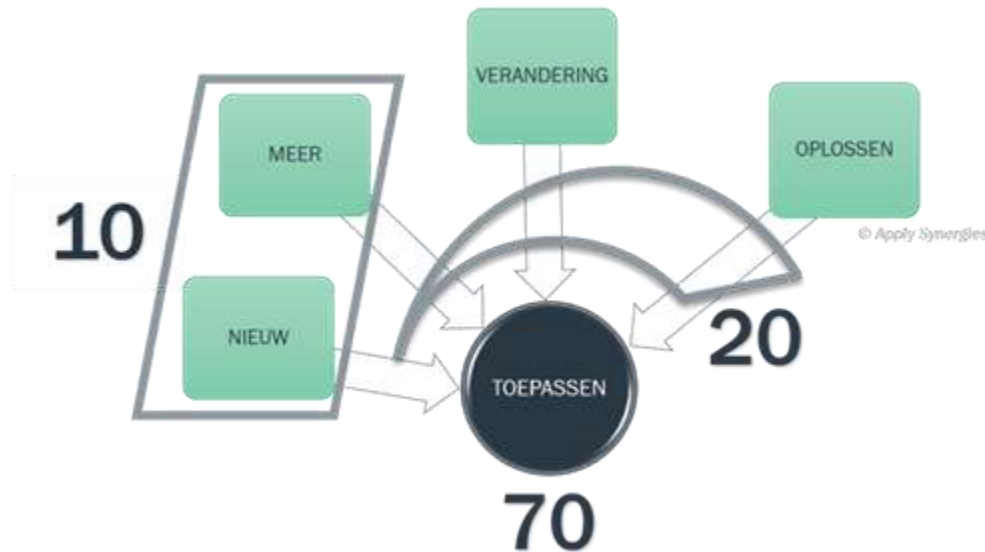
**Alfred Remmits is the CEO of Xprtise.** For the last 5 years, he and his team have specialized in designing and implementing workflow learning solutions in the Netherlands, the US, and Europe. **Jo Buuts** is an independent **Learning & Performance consultant** and shares with Alfred the belief that truly successful workflow learning is more than just transporting traditional learning forms and resources to the learner at work.

Recently, Alfred and Jo got talking about the characteristics of real workflow solutions and how they're different from traditional training. They explored what it means to design and develop these solutions—and measure results—and what technologies properly support them.

**Jo Buuts:** *Workflow learning is a hot topic. For a lot of professionals and self-appointed experts, that just means bringing traditional training methods to the learner at work. Old wine in new bottles, right?*

**Alfred Remmits:** Indeed, I get the feeling lately that L&D professionals, consultants, and vendors don't understand the essence of workflow learning. Their approach is to extend traditional forms of training and serve them up on the job. In practice, this means repackaging (shrinking) content from e-learning or training modules to make them more consumable. In organizations I speak to, workflow learning is often interpreted as moving the teacher into the workplace—teaching by the machine, or by a patient's bedside in the hospital. On websites, vendors offer standard or customized e-learning solutions under the heading of workflow learning or even as performance support solutions. These really don't reflect what a real workflow learning or performance support solution should be. Old wine in new bottles, yes, because they focus on learning in the sense of knowledge acquisition rather than learning that supports the performance of employees in their flow of work. That's what organizations should be focusing on.

**Jo Buuts:** *It's a pity. Large organizations are also seeing that this generic interpretation of workflow learning is failing to achieve their strategic goals. Are they missing an opportunity?*



**Alfred Remmits:** I think so. Larger organizations in particular understand that the rudder has to shift to establish new ways of learning at work. That explains the popularity of the 70:20:10 framework. In the last 5 years, I've seen many organizations in the US, the Netherlands, and Europe adopt 70:20:10 as the guiding principle when designing their learning solutions. But what we often see is that many of their solutions don't really fit into the 70. They still linger in the 10. Extra support in the form of coaching and/or mentoring make up the 20. Stretch assignments and moments of reflection are somewhat below what's needed in the 70. Both are valid activities, but too limiting to actually support employees while they do their work, where—according to the 70:20:10 model—most of the learning takes place.

As there isn't a good design methodology for the 70:20:10 model, it's hard to design the right solution for the 70 especially. As a result, most of the initiatives I've seen in companies in recent years don't go beyond what I'd call blended training. The main goal is to shorten the formal training time, rather than to properly address an employee's learning journey. As such, opportunities are indeed missed to really support employees in their day-to-day work, and to help them improve their performance on the ground.

**Jo Buuts:** *This repackaging of content produces short chunks that are available to support the learner while they work. Is that learning in the workflow?*

**Alfred Remmits:** Just transporting short pieces of content from the classroom to the learner at work is only part of the solution, as is the case with micro-learning. This is typically just traditional e-learning and videos that are shortened to bite-sized chunks of

1-2 minutes and made available through a Learning Management System (LMS) or perhaps a Learning Experience Platform (LXP) with an innovative User Interface (UI). It may or may not be supplemented with mentors, coaches, and supervisors in the workplace. It's still using the traditional master-student approach. This doesn't work because it almost entirely lacks any connection with the person's work context.

**Jo Buuts:** *What do you see as the effects of that approach in practice?*

**Alfred Remmits:** Learning technology providers bring advanced solutions to the market that make it easier to transport traditional learning methods into the workplace. With improved UI and increasingly intelligent Artificial Intelligence (AI), we can analyze user behavior. As a result, content can be brought to the attention of the learner more effectively. An example of this is the so-called *Netflix of Learning* model promoted by almost all providers of LXPs, like Degreed, Edcast, and Fuse, which recommend content also used by others in the study of a particular topic. The content offered is based on user profiles, but what is lacking in almost all these systems is the context of the work processes and work tasks. That approach always leads to an abundance of information, but I don't see people who need to solve a problem scrolling through a large number of learning objects while at work to find and study the most relevant topic for them. The choices are too numerous, and this approach lacks a thoughtful design methodology. What people need is the right content to solve a specific problem as quickly as possible, based on the context of their work and the specific task they want to perform in their specific work process.

**Jo Buuts:** *I think the use of this technology encourages that old approach to be maintained. Consultants and trainers can continue to offer their services in almost the same way.*

**Alfred Remmits:** And that's what they do! Learning consultants are offering content shortening/repackaging services to repurpose it for the new technology. I heard that a large pharmaceutical group guided by one of the world's top learning consultancies had all their existing e-learning content shortened to micro-learning to be better used during work. Talk about old wine in new bottles. Training agencies are also shifting their scope of activity from the classroom to work. They come with new products with sexy names like stretch assignments, mindfulness in the workflow, and reflection coaching. All of this has very little to do with workflow learning.

**Jo Buuts:** *Not that innovative indeed. Moreover, the needs of organizations—to learn in the flow of work—are not met in this way. Missed opportunities, then. Where do you think the cause lies?*

**Alfred Remmits:** The underlying problem is a lack of vision for what learning means and where and when it takes place. That limited view leads to the design, development, and organization of learning in the same format we have been using for the last 50 years. In an increasingly turbulent environment where knowledge is falling in value faster and faster, we still teach in classrooms, but now with a virtual teacher on your

screen. We still do e-learning but shortened to micro-learning of one to two minutes. To continue to confirm the success of this approach, we measure how often the source is clicked on and how the learner evaluates the content—through smile sheets, numbers of participants attending, and time spent on the e-learning modules. The focus is still on content and resources rather than on context and impact on business performance.

**Jo Buuts:** *How do we break that self-reinforcing way of thinking?*

**Alfred Remmits:** The rudder will have to turn. We need to understand that we need a completely different approach to design, develop, implement, and measure workflow learning. And that goes for all four of these aspects. You can't pick one or two at will.

**Jo Buuts:** *Let's start with the design. What's the big difference with design?*

**Alfred Remmits:** We need to design solutions for the entire learning journey of our employees, from novice to master, but we also need to address their continuous everyday learning needs as they cope with changes in their workplace. Learning cannot be summed up as a one-off event. Learning and working are inextricably linked.

I have been working with Bob Mosher and Dr. Conrad Gottfredson, the creators of the 5 Moments of Need™ methodology, for over 15 years. The methodology yields a mix of solutions for the entire learning journey. This is possible because the design approach understands that most learning takes place on the job, in the flow of work. So, a significant proportion of the content and resources should be available to support that work process, serving content in context.

When designing for the 5 Moments of Need™ journey, you first consider how to support employees when they execute their tasks (Apply), when they problem-solve (Solve), and when they respond to changing situations (Change). Only then do you consider if anything new (New) needs to be learned, or if more depth (More) is required. Another key difference with the design process is the distinction made early in the analysis phase between critical tasks vs. important tasks.

**Jo Buuts:** *Traditional training design does distinguish the importance of a task, so what exactly do you mean here?*

**Alfred Remmits:** Traditional designers consider the importance of a task to determine what and how much content should be developed. There is that emphasis on content again. The 5 Moments of Need™ framework focuses on the **criticality** of a task to assess where and when – in what context – content should be offered. Highly critical tasks may need formal training as well as learning in the workflow. Less critical tasks can be delivered solely in the workflow with a performance support system, without relying on intensive training or expensive e-learning.

It seems to be a small difference, but it has big impact. With this approach, you have a proven, objective method to convert what may previously have been a five-day course into a truly blended workflow learning solution.

**Jo Buuts:** *So, we need to develop solutions that enable employees to perform tasks, solve their problems, and cope with changing situations while in the flow of work. Are the design and development tools L&D professionals are using (e.g., the Adobe Articulates, the Moodle's) the right tools for this purpose?*

**Alfred Remmits:** We need more than this. In the same way that a whiteboard, a trainer/designer, and PowerPoint are the tools to develop a classroom event, now we must consider the tools that support employees in their flow of work. The most important tool is a Workflow Learning EPSS (Electronic Performance Support System). There are a few of these on the market. What you need is a powerful and innovative system that fully supports this new approach, where a visual work process map – an overview of tasks and steps within a defined work process – is the starting point for contextual accessibility of the right, relevant content for each moment. It needs to be a technology that ensures the employee is supported through all 5 Moments of Need™.

**Jo Buuts:** *So, workflow learning means that content is used when people are performing tasks, solving problems, and responding to new situations...in other words, as they are working in the 70 of the 70:20:10. Does that also mean a change in the format of the content?*

**Alfred Remmits:** Learning while working is truly the most powerful form of learning, but it is completely different from the way we have developed courses and resources for the last 50 years. When you work in the moments of Apply, Solve, and Change, you are often alone. You certainly don't have time to follow a 12-minute e-learning, watch a 7-minute video, or read an extensive PDF. You want help now! You want a solution that immediately puts you on the right track in 2 clicks and 10 seconds. You don't want to spend 20 minutes looking through all kinds of other resources, even if they are recommended by others. Resources and content should be short, to-the-point, correct, and relevant to performing your particular task and solving your particular problem.

**Jo Buuts:** *The LMS is a standard technology for L&D practitioners, and the LXP is on the rise. Are these systems suitable for this approach?*

**Alfred Remmits:** Vendors may say so, but an LMS or LXP is not suitable for this. An LMS supports the development, management, and provision of formal training and e-learning while providing insight into the degree of content usage. An LXP goes a bit further by involving the learner more and by responding more adaptively to employees' learning needs. It makes combining formal and informal sources easier for the employee. But what you really need is a Workflow EPSS.

**Jo Buuts:** *We talked earlier about measuring results. Not the easiest part of the L&D field. Does this approach help here?*

**Alfred Remmits:** Measuring and evaluating the success of learning solutions was always a problem. We rarely go beyond level 1 and 2 of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model. We use smile sheets and test people's knowledge. Measuring the real business impact is almost impossible, which is why we'd rather not get started.

With workflow learning and use of a Workflow EPSS, you can measure the impact of the solutions you offer in all 5 Moments of Need™. The relationship between working and learning is crystal clear from the beginning of the design. Performance Support is what the system provides. It supports the call center person to effectively help their customers—and that effectiveness is measurable. It supports the mechanic in troubleshooting equipment issues—and the number of fixed faults is measurable, as is the time it took to fix them.

For one of our manufacturing customers, equipment change-over time improved by 20% and the overall plant efficiency improved almost 3% in demonstrated performance improvements assisted by their use of a Workflow EPSS.

## In Summary

The terms learning in the flow of work or workflow learning are often used by organizations to cover a variety of applications for the 70 of the 70:20:10. This leads to confusion as to what workflow learning really means. We see many cases where formal learning—the 10 of the approach—is transported to the workplace in different formats. This completely ignores the essence, which is to learn while people are doing their work: learning with support while doing tasks, troubleshooting, and responding to changes. This is a completely different vision of learning while working, so it needs a significantly different method of design, development, implementation, and evaluation.

Instead of focusing on one-off learning events, we need to design solutions for the complete learning journey of our employees. We need to realize that learning and working are inextricably linked. Developed by Dr. Conrad Gottfredson and Bob Mosher, the 5 Moments of Need™ approach always leads to an assembly of solutions for the entire learning journey. This is different from traditional design because the approach is based on fully recognizing the context where learning mainly takes place, and that is in the flow of work. And right at the start of the design process, there is the distinction between important vs. critical tasks. To provide effective support while we work, we need additional technologies in the designer's toolbox. An LMS or LXP is insufficient for this. The relevant technology is a Workflow EPSS technology that fully supports this approach and ensures the employee is supported at all 5 Moments of Need™. This is completely different from the design tools and formats we have used in recent decades. Resources and content should be short, to-the-point, correct, and relevant to performing a particular task and solving a particular problem.

Learning in the workflow, supported by an effective Workflow EPSS technology, makes measuring the impact of learning solutions achievable. The relationship between

working and learning is clear from the upfront design to the end use by the employee.  
Its effectiveness is measurable.