A History of Workplace Learning—and What It Means for Modern Safety Training



For OHS directors and safety trainers, understanding how workplace learning has evolved isn't merely an academic exercise—it provides critical insight into how far safety training has come and why modern learning methods are now indispensable. Over the last two centuries, the journey from informal, experience-based training to sophisticated mobile learning technologies has completely transformed how organizations teach workers to stay safe.

Today's safety professionals are operating in an environment our ancestors couldn't have imagined—one where training is digital, mobile, interactive, and far more effective. To fully appreciate today's innovations, it helps to look back at where workplace learning started.

19th & Early 20th Century: Training Through Trial and Error

During the Industrial Revolution, the need for mass labor and rapid production changed the nature of work forever. Large employers sometimes used classroom-style methods to pass on essential skills quickly, but this was the exception, not the norm.

For the average worker, learning meant:

- Watching someone more experienced.
- Figuring things out through trial and error.
- Accepting injuries as an inevitable part of the job.

Safety was based on "common sense"—a dangerously subjective concept. There were no structured learning pathways, no standardized procedures, and no protective regulations. New workers were often left on their own, and mistakes—sometimes catastrophic ones—were simply considered part of the learning curve.

A Costly Lesson in Absence of Training

In one small 1910s machine shop in Pennsylvania, a new employee, eager to impress, attempted to run a stamping press with no formal instruction. The

resulting injury left him unable to work for months, and production slowed down as the shop scrambled to find a replacement. The owner later admitted that the accident “taught him more about training than any handbook ever could.” This type of incident was painfully common across North America at the time.

Mid-20th Century: The Rise of Formal Training and Regulation

By the 1950s, vocational education began shaping students for specific trades before they even entered the workforce. Schools introduced practical, job-focused training, and by the 1970s, regulatory bodies started enforcing stricter standards in industry.

This period marked a turning point:

- Companies were required to provide safety training.
- Classroom-style sessions became commonplace.
- Rules, procedures, and compliance were emphasized.
- Safety stopped being guesswork and became formalized.

However, early corporate training had its flaws. Many sessions were dull, repetitive, and instructor-dependent. Workers often saw training as a mandatory chore rather than a meaningful opportunity to stay safe.

Savvy employers began experimenting with blended approaches—mixing hands-on practice with structured learning. These early innovators set the stage for the training transformation that would follow.

Late 20th Century: The Technological Revolution Begins

The 1980s and 1990s introduced a radical shift: computer-based training—what we now recognize as the first version of eLearning.

For the first time, organizations could:

- Standardize training across locations.
- Reduce instructor dependence.
- Deliver training more cost-effectively.
- Allow employees to learn at their own pace.

But with innovation came new challenges. Early learning systems were bulky, expensive, and difficult to update. Companies invested heavily in rigid learning technologies, only to find they couldn’t adapt quickly enough to evolving safety requirements or technological advancements.

This stagnation frustrated many forward-thinking safety leaders who recognized the need for agility and continuous improvement.

A Company Held Back by Its Own System

In the late 1990s, a mid-sized manufacturing business in Ontario invested heavily in a custom-built computer learning system. It worked well—until safety

regulations changed. Updating the system required months of work and thousands of dollars in contractor fees. Trainers were stuck delivering outdated content while waiting for updates. Today, the company uses cloud-based mobile training that can be updated in minutes, not months.

The New Millennium to Now: Mobile Learning Takes Center Stage

After decades of rapid evolution followed by a period of training stagnation, innovation has re-accelerated. Modern mobile learning platforms have transformed how safety training is delivered.

Today's tools provide:

- Anywhere, anytime access.
- Faster content delivery.
- Highly interactive multimedia formats.
- Real-time updates and analytics.
- Seamless integration across devices.

Mobile learning doesn't replace the classroom—it expands it. Safety content can now travel with employees onto job sites, into vehicles, or onto the production floor.

What this means for OHS leaders:

1. **Training is no longer tied to a physical location.** Workers can access critical safety information whenever they need it.
2. **Learning happens continuously, not just during scheduled sessions.** Microlearning modules, quick refreshers, and just-in-time reminders reinforce safe behaviors.
3. **Training becomes more engaging and personalized.** Employees can learn how they want, when they want, and in the way that works best for them.

The evolution from chalkboards to smartphones is not just technological—it's cultural. Workers now expect flexibility. Regulators expect precision. And organizations expect cost-effective, scalable training solutions.

What This Evolution Means for Today's Safety Trainers

Understanding the history of workplace learning shows just how critical it is to adopt modern training methods. Safety training has moved from reactive to proactive, from rigid to flexible, and from instructor-dependent to learner-driven.

For safety professionals, leveraging today's digital and mobile learning tools isn't simply convenient—it's essential for:

- Reducing incidents.
- Improving retention.
- Boosting engagement.

- Meeting regulatory demands.
- Supporting diverse learning styles.

The future of safety training belongs to those who embrace technology and remain agile—just as the pioneers of workplace learning once did.