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WORKING: orce for Development?

In today's economy, organizations are searching for ways to do more with less. Combined with the rapid pace of change and complexity in organizations, there is an increased need for just-in-time learning solutions that cannot wait for the discipline and rigor required by traditional instructional design.

By Marjorie Derven

Social networking can address this issue and support the need for learner involvement by narrowing the gap between learning and application.

A learning solution

Social networking, the broad term that encompasses wikis, blogs, LinkedIn, Facebook, and other tools, is ideal for facilitating interactions between people who cannot easily meet in person, whether due to geographic distance or difficulty identifying needed skills, resources, or other information. With just a few clicks, technology facilitates such connections.

With its unique abilities to connect people and provide real-time interaction, social networking offers exciting potential for learning solutions. Cost pressures and the availability of a multitude of social networking tools are other compelling factors. Further, with the presence of four generations in the workplace today, technological solutions that

address different learning styles deserve consideration.

Social networking can promote decentralized decision making and collaboration. And the relationships and connections formed can help build engagement. Additionally, finding ways to improve the implementation of new skills on the job is an issue that the training profession has long wrestled with—training and development professionals acknowledge that most learning takes place not in the classroom, but as work is accomplished.

Social networking success in the workplace

IBM serves as a great example of how to successfully implement corporate social networking to address applied learning. Ted Hoff, vice president of the center for learning and development at IBM, points out that the organization's business focus and size have facilitated this adoption.

"IBM is used to [using] collaborative approaches, and being a technology



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Social Networking: Here to Stay

A few factoids reinforce that social networking is no passing fad, but rather a fundamental change in how human beings can interact.

1. Flu epidemics are first noted by Google search queries, which are faster than the Center for Disease Control data.
2. The first global, tuition-free social networking university, the University of the People, has been founded by Shai Reshef in Israel.
3. Desiree Rogers, Obama's White House social secretary, previously held the post of president of social networking for Allstate.
4. Millennials, the generation born after 1981 and expected to comprise 46 percent of the workforce by 2020, are a driving force behind these technologies.
5. Pope Benedict has called social networking "a gift to humanity," as reported by the Associated Press.
6. 75 percent of online adults aged 18 to 24 have a profile on a social network, according to the Pew Internet American Life Project survey.

company, we have a proclivity to use these tools, as well as a technical comfort level," Hoff says. "Moreover, as the most global company in the world—we operate in 170 countries and two-thirds of our workers are outside of the United States—we need to learn from each other. We find that the learning is reciprocal and doesn't flow in one direction; we learn a great deal from our emerging markets as much as they learn from us."

Hoff emphasizes the benefits that IBM has realized from these tools. "Discussions are focused around serving clients; for example, individuals will search for one another based on whether you have experience in a particular industry or with a particular client, such as helping a health-care system navigate reimbursement. You will find IBM employees asking, 'send me the proposal; what kind of business did you get from this; and what did you learn?' It becomes a peer review system, and we hold one another accountable for providing useful information."

Organizations known for using corporate social networking effectively are often in consulting, technology, or other knowledge-based professions. Sun Microsystems and Ernst & Young are also part of this growing list.

Social networking tools may also be used to help the learning function. Matthew Valencius, manager of sales learning design and development at IBM, explains, "Within learning we have EXCaliber, our patent-pending Web 2.0 service. It provides an easy way to surface experts on a webpage while allowing those experts to manage their instant messaging availability. We have this on more than 100 intranet sites, and it enables our site visitors to quickly get answers to questions, such as how to enroll in a particular course or how to best engage with some content—similar to how good online retailers provide their chat functionality.

"We also use EXCaliber to add vibrancy to our pages by displaying pictures of the last people to visit them. This creates a sense that a page is popular—much like you can see people in a physical conference room—and provides an opportunity for visitors to expand their personal networks by showing who is interested in the same content."

As most IBM employees are actively engaged with this technology, the learning function leverages the tools to involve learners as well as to market their services internally. "There is greater transparency into the learning organization, and it provides opportunities to expand personal and professional networks," Valencius says. "Clearly, these technologies are helpful in terms of delivering information and content virtually, which cuts out travel costs."

Social networking technology for learning

Social networking technology provides learning professionals with many creative means by which to affect the learning function.

Link learners before or after a formal training event. Social software can help employees locate others who are applying new skills and share best practices, discuss obstacles and solutions to application, and foster collaboration. For example, at IBM, the intranet-based "Blue Pages" help employees to connect around business issues.

Engage next generation learners.

Gen X and Millennial workers currently comprise 22 percent of the workforce, and this number is expected to grow to 46 percent by the year 2020. These generations enjoy the interactivity of the technology and tend to be plugged in, so social networking is an effective way to involve them.

As Jeanne C. Meister, founding editor of *New Learning Playbook* describes, "Organizations that want to effectively reach out to this group, whether for recruiting or learning, have to use the tools that they are already comfortable with. Social networking is a natural way for people to learn, especially among the Millennials."

Provide content before a face-to-face learning event. Use technology to establish a baseline of common knowledge and information before a training session, so classroom time will be spent on application. "Clearly, these technologies are helpful in terms of delivering information and

content virtually, which cuts out travel costs,” says Valencius.

Provide links to resources related to new learning content. To reinforce learning, provide links to articles, webinars, and on-the-job examples of the desired skills being applied. This can be a highly effective way to refresh and expand knowledge and reinforces the importance of using the new skills.

Paula Patinella, of Capability Center Lead, Managing the Business from IBM, explains how she leverages online communities that span all business units and geographies across the organization by promoting connectedness to all levels of expertise. “We use intelligent tagging to link multiple threads of ideas together and assess ideas in so-called innovation circles,” she says. “We also hold ‘mini-jams’ or online discussions covering myriad topics from healthcare, energy, and green solutions to our IBM values promoting innovation.”

Determine future training needs and issues. By using tagging capabilities, learning organizations can search for emerging training needs, such as communication problems related to new organizational structures, or a pattern of searches related to new policies. Such online discussions may serve as the new electronic water cooler, where attentive learning professionals can identify skills gaps that need solutions.

Reinforce and sustain learning. Meister is a proponent of Twitter, the free social networking tool that uses “tweets” limited to 140 characters to share information. She envisions Twitter being used to

- provide an archive of team communications and progress
- remind participants of upcoming training events
- provide links to articles, webinars, and other resources related to training
- create follow-up webcasts
- share different points of view and best practices among training participants
- send reminders about key learning points.

The functionality of Twitter—short,

focused communications—drives the selection of applications.

Use as a coaching and mentoring tool.

It is axiomatic that most learning takes place on the job; coaching and mentoring helps individuals understand how to apply newfound knowledge and skills from others who have the experience. With the new economic realities, young professionals are finding that mentoring becomes an important aspect of career development, with fewer opportunities in the short term to move, according to a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* called “Finding Anchors in the Storm: Mentors.”

Technology can be used to match up mentors and mentees. These relationships may be quite fluid and form and dissolve around specific issues, such as helping younger people to build their professional networks.

As the *Wall Street Journal* article also points out, such relationships are likely to be most effective when there is a degree of reciprocity involved. For example, a vice president of marketing may help a young professional to understand

the organization’s pricing models, and in turn, learn from the mentee about how to use Twitter.

Of course, peer-to-peer coaching may take place without the use of technology; “high-touch” approaches offer many benefits. Pat Baxter, an executive coach, used a low-tech approach in her former role as organization development director for a global customer service organization to define what coaching looked like for her organization. “We found it to be less expensive than hiring external consultants for developing people,” Baxter says. “Following training of peer coaches, it was very easy to implement and access. We used peer coaching in a variety of applications, from onboarding, to developing high potentials, to dealing with performance problems without discouraging people.”

The advantage of peer coaching, according to Laura Mindek, president of MindShift Solutions, is that it’s a no-cost development strategy that can be implemented before any other tools are launched, with a built-in measure

Can Social Networking Address Downturn Impact for Employees?

With widespread layoffs as a result of the current economic woes, social networking may address some of the issues that result.

Issue	How SN May Help
Loss of institutional knowledge	Preserve and nurture organizational knowledge
Churn of “survivors” who are less loyal and engaged (estimated to be between 13 and 30 percent)	Create and rebuild new sense of community
Need to communicate a positive organizational vision for the future to reassure employees	Use employee blogs to “take the pulse” and determine corrective actions
Loss of valued networks as colleagues have been let go	Build and synchronize new collaboration
Need to do more with less	Use social networking as an efficiency tool

Is Corporate Social Networking Right for Your Organization?

When considering using social networking as a learning tool, the top two considerations are: 1) is social networking already being used in some internal functions, thereby making adoption easier, and 2) how will this technology fit into your learning strategy?

Additional questions may help determine if this is a good fit. Does your organization have

- geographically-dispersed employees
- a learning strategy that promotes on-the-job development
- the need to foster cross-functional collaboration
- a significant employee population from the “next” generation
- business priorities that require synchronized teams
- a need for sharing knowledge quickly
- an increased emphasis on innovation
- an appetite for experimentation
- a culture that supports decentralized decision making?

If you answered “yes” to a large number of these questions, you may have a high level of readiness to implement corporate social networking.

of success common to cross-functional groups, rather than as an add-on to other processes.

“It is an elegant solution to development, because all that is needed is a mindset, or should I say, a mind shift,” Mindek says. “Once the ‘feed forward’ methodology (based on Marshall Goldsmith’s techniques to provide feedback before an event, rather than after) is introduced via a

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— Ted Hoff, vice president of IBM’s Center for Learning and Development



demonstration, visible support from management is important, but not resource-intensive.”

Select the type of learning. Clearly, not all training is appropriate or relevant for social networking applications. The technologies have limitations, and you need to make sure that you are getting the right value.

“If something needs to be done face-to-face, don’t try to accomplish this virtually,” says Valencius. “Deliver the content that you can online, but if face-to-face is the best way to learn something, that should drive the solution.”

In addition to considering factors such as the need to have in-person interaction as part of the training, quality control is another consideration. How can you ensure that the ideas, content, and recommendations that are exchanged are in fact high quality and reflect corporate priorities?

IBM has solved this dilemma. “We have an expertise assessment tool where all employees conduct an annual self-evaluation that defines their skill levels and ability to serve clients along five tiers, and these are manager-verified,” Hoff explains. “The first three levels of expertise within IBM are entry, foundational, and experienced. Then level four is expert, and level five is thought leader. These rankings help individuals access others who have the knowledge, experience, or resources that they need for a particular skill or capability. If you state that you are at the expert or thought leader level, then this [ranking] needs to go through another level of verification by a second line manager and subject matter experts.”

Without a system such as IBM’s, the next best approach is some kind of monitoring. Baxter suggests that it is important to use an editor for online postings to be sure that the content reflects how the organization wants to be perceived externally and used internally. There is some degree of blind faith that the information sharing will be at a high level. The tradeoff is to limit the possibilities for innovation, collaboration, and networking.

Identify risk factors and how these may be mitigated. Certainly, these technologies have become almost mainstream in terms of their usage. However, they do present risks related to competitive threats, loss of control of information, and privacy issues.

Social networking has served to blur the line between the public and the private. In the past, it was extraordinarily difficult for private citizens to express

ideas in a public forum; today, this can be accomplished in a few clicks.

Without a corporate firewall, and once data is available on the Internet, it may be used for purposes that are different, or even contrary to their intended purposes. Information that seems benign may actually be of great interest to competitors in ways that may not be anticipated.

"People are rightfully apprehensive when they don't know how to interact online and are concerned they may divulge proprietary information and say something inappropriate," says Meister. "There have to be guidelines, and people need training. When email was introduced, there were similar concerns, but we have adapted."

Meister emphasizes that these risks, while real, need to be managed rather than avoided, because "the train has left the station, so it is important for organizations to figure out how they can harness the power of these tools, rather than try to block usage." She points out that people can easily access the tools on their cell phones and BlackBerrys, so trying to block access is ineffective.

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Hoff is such a strong advocate of these tools that the risk-benefit issue is not a factor. "We don't see this as a high-risk endeavor. Our employees know that they need to use IBM assets appropriately and in an ethical manner, and that includes social networking tools. We have our business conduct guidelines, and once a year employees must certify that they have read them.

"We also provide social networking guidelines. The way that people need to conduct themselves online is truly no different from the way they need to operate face-to-face. We have a culture at IBM that was established 100 years ago, and it still guides our actions: to behave in an ethical manner and put our clients first."

For organizations that do not have Enterprise 2.0 tools, it may be more problematic to monitor and control information and content, because employees may also be blogging and interacting online in their private lives as well. Just as social networking will undoubtedly yield new benefits, unanticipated risks are likely to emerge.

Lessons learned

As a new and emerging set of tools, social networking requires a degree of experimentation. "A limitation of social networking tools for learning is that it can be hard to predict what kinds of connections people will make," says Valencius. "You have to try different things, see what pans out, and not become overly invested in one particular approach. Use a layered approach, with multiple technologies and limited investments. Enhance what works and weed out the other ideas."

Meister also recommends being proactive about trying the technology. "The biggest issue is overcoming a mindset of fear. Instead of taking the approach that 'I am too busy doing my job to use LinkedIn,' figure out how to make this part of your job. Get your hands dirty by first using these technologies for something you care about personally. Say you have a passion for wine tasting—become a contributor to a blog and then see the power of being connected."

Encouraging social networking involves not only trial and error, but also visible support from senior management, according to Hoff. "First of all, you have to foster usage of these tools and engage senior leaders around this. Social networking is a powerful way to build teamwork, so it's important not to fight it or fear it...submit to the process." **T+D**

IBM is a member of the ASTD Benchmarking Forum.

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A Glossary of Social Networking Terms

Social networking: online communities who share interests, providing ways to communicate and interact

Web 2.0: a term for new trends in the worldwide web, based on technologies and design

LinkedIn: a business-focused networking site that uses "gated access" for registered users to build business contacts and interact with others who share similar interests

Blogs: a term that combines "web" and "log," these postings typically consist of commentary, news, or personal diaries that others may access

Wikis: web pages that users may edit or contribute to

MySpace: a social networking site that includes blogs, photos, and music

Facebook: founded by Mark Zuckerberg when he was a student at Harvard, it initially spread to other Ivy League colleges; the free site now has 150 million active users and is open to all

Enterprise 2.0: also known as enterprise social software, this term denotes intranet-based social networks and applications



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