Going Social

Effective social learning requires a culture of experimentation • BY MICHAEL E. ECHOLS

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As recently as a year ago, I viewed informal learning, social media and mobile learning as buzz terms. My reaction was summed up perfectly by my Alaskan fishing guide — "all hat, no cattle." Translated from the Katmai Wilderness of Alaska to today's organizations, it means "lots of show but no substance."

I was especially skeptical of a recent CLO Breakfast Club audience poll of who in the audience was on Facebook and for how long. I confess I am still not on Facebook even in the face of considerable pressure from my sisters in Florida to become their friend. Hell, I'm already their friend and have been since their birth years ago.

But while I was highly skeptical a year ago, today I am a believer. I believe there will be many debates between now and years from now when social learning becomes a relatively stable, widely deployed learning strategy.

So what changed my mind? New technology tools, an "aha" moment or a particularly compelling and convincing colleague showing me the way? No. What changed my mind were customers and the market.

The earliest information came from retired Air Force Gen. Frank Anderson — my dear friend and former president of Defense Acquisition University (DAU) — and what he calls "learning at the point of need." DAU was the first corporate university I saw aggressively deploying a learner pull model. This user-initiated pull model is very different from the push model of traditional learning. This latter conclusion applies to both instructor-led training (ILT) and electronic-based delivery in computer-based training (CBT) systems. The hotly debated ILT vs. CBT learning issue completely misses the point of social learning.

The next pieces of evidence came in rapid secession. I became a colleague of Karie Willyerd, former CLO of Sun Microsystems and an early collaborator with Bellevue University's Human Capital Lab. While at Sun, Karie championed two Human Capital Lab projects important to the social learning question.

The first study, "Sun Microsystems University Mentoring Program," deals with how to measure the business impact of mentoring. Mentoring is a form of social learning where content is unique to the relationship, and behavioral elements — particularly trust and respect — override traditional learning success factors.

One interesting finding from the study was that measured impact on financial performance occurred for mentees and mentors. The results were not intuitively obvious.

The other key study Karie championed was Sun Learning Services' Sun Learning eXchange. Karie has since left Sun and set up her own company, Jambok, which has the rights to the technological platform created around eXchange. At Bellevue University, we use Jambok as the technology platform for our knowledge management system, another form of social learning.

The final compelling evidence for me was delivered at the Fall 2010 CLO Symposium in conversations with clients and in compelling evidence from Best Buy, The Gap and others. When I combine that data with proprietary programs going on with two Fortune 100 clients, it's obvious that social learning is real.

The first reason it's real is behavioral. Demographics suggest that within the next decade, millennials will constitute the majority of our employees. They will not only assume leadership positions, but also define organizational culture. The millennials' culture is one of social media.

The second reason is financial. Organizations are drowning under the accelerating pace of product information required to support customer-facing associates. In the near future, the amount of content required to support operations will become overwhelming. Customer-facing associates already are swamped by the tidal wave of information required to do their jobs. The content push model of traditional training simply cannot keep up with the pace of change.

You may be saying to yourself: "Echols, this tale of hats and cattle is all well and good, but what's the bottom line? I need best practices to convince my management." Well, right now there are no best practices to emulate, but there are lots of experiments going on to define solutions. I repeat, these are experiments, and to succeed, your organization needs to have a culture of experimentation. Experiments produce failures most of the time. Acceptance of failure and disciplined learning from those failures is key because the winners in this arena will be the organizations that learn the fastest, and you can't learn if you don't try. CLO