

# How @Twitter Handles #Learning

BY KELLYE WHITNEY

For a social media platform like Twitter, technology is everything, right? Wrong. When it comes to learning, Melissa Daimler says face-to-face interactions and feedback trump digital every time.

It's easy to get the wrong idea about Twitter Inc. Young company, digital focus, Silicon Valley location — it probably has one of those crazy startup cultures with apps and avatars and such oozing from every developmental pore, right? Not really.

According to Melissa Daimler, head of learning and organizational development, Twitter is far more traditional. For instance, technology is not at the center of its learning strategy. Instead, it acts as one of many enablers helping to create the connections the company works so hard to cultivate.

Daimler uses words like building, creating and infrastructure when describing her role at Twitter, which recruited her about 3½ years ago. She started when the company had about 800 employees, and said she found it inspiring that learning was such a keen focus for an organization with a relatively small workforce.

Globally, Twitter now has about 4,000 employees. While it may be logistically trickier to connect, learning is still primarily about relationships, collaboration and sharing — all of which makes perfect sense given the company is an online social network. Using the latest and greatest technology falls firmly behind the ability to give continuous feedback and just make people better.

## A Little Girl Goes Global

Daimler said as a child she thought when she grew up, she'd get a job and get married, aspirations common for a girl with a traditional Midwestern upbringing, but things changed when she started visiting her grandfather at age 7. When her friends would pack up their station wagons and go visit their grandparents somewhere in Minnesota, she would pack up her suitcase and go to Sweden.

“I discovered a whole new world; a whole new cul-

ture around how people live and work and different languages. I became interested in learning new things and having new experiences. That translated into a very nontraditional career path,” she said.

Her first big job was at a training company in New York — a place she'd never been before. She became a certified executive coach, then started her own executive coaching business at 24. Next, she moved to Silicon Valley. During that time, she said fun, creative titles were all the rage at dot-coms, and she became the director of people for a small startup with a focus on coaching the executive team. She was later promoted to head of human resources.

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—Melissa Daimler, head of learning and organizational development, Twitter Inc.

Adobe Systems Inc. came calling next, wanting her to help build out its coaching program, which she subsequently expanded into an organizational development function and later evolving the learning arm as well. Twitter recruited her next with a similar request — create a learning and organizational development func-

tion. “I’ve never taken a job that was based on some kind of job description,” she said. “I’ve always either co-created or built something.”

Daimler said from the beginning that the intent wasn’t to come in and build a bunch of training classes at Twitter. Learning, she said, is not about training. “We’ve always been about creating an environment of learning for employees similar to how we think about our platform. Everything that we design at Twitter, whether it’s a formal training program or a team-based initiative, is based on similar principles. Just like the Twitter platform, we ask ourselves, ‘how do we make this so that it’s relevant in the moment for our employees, something that is scalable globally?’ ”

Employee and then organizational needs consistently trump technology as the first consideration for learning discussions. Which is as it should be, according to Ed Cohen, former chief learning officer for companies like Booz Allen Hamilton, HCL Technologies and Tech Mahindra, and current executive vice president of Nelson Cohen Global Consulting.

“John Naisbitt wrote a book called ‘Megatrends,’ and his No. 10 megatrend was the higher the technology, the higher the touch,” he said. “No matter how much technology we have, relationships are going to require face-to-face in order for them to remain healthy.”

That hasn’t changed since Naisbitt wrote that book more than 30 years ago. Without that personal, face-to-face component, it’s too easy for learning to derail. Cohen used the example of sending a tweet all in caps. A common assumption might be that the tweeter is angry, and without that in-person emotion and explanation, a positive, potentially educational interaction might stop right there.

Daimler said learning at Twitter must be meaningful in addition to providing the necessary just-in-time learning experiences needed to advance the business. Formal presentations and classes were changed — and subsequently became more effective, the context directly tied to what employees had to do on the job. That might mean presentation training for someone who is about to speak at a conference, and it certainly meant a big push around management development.

She and her team developed the Twitter Core 5, five skills that every manager should have and practice. These core skills — coaching, delegating, deciding, directing and developing — were chosen with input from managers and employees and continue to evolve.

As befits an organization that’s life blood boasts a 140-character limit, PowerPoint slides and tons of content fall back in favor of brevity as a development approach. “It’s more about sharing a few perspectives, maybe a model or two, but then giving people an opportunity to be interactive and practice,” Daimler said.

For example, management sessions are more for-

mal, but they’re delivered in bite-size pieces. Every week for eight weeks, managers come together and they talk about one of those core five skills for two hours at a time. The global Tweeps — Twitter’s special name for its employees — have a two-day opportunity where they come together, in addition to informal monthly gatherings to continue conversations.

“I’m seeing some really fantastic uses and opportunities from crowdsourcing,” Cohen said. “For example, I’m working with a client now, and when somebody doesn’t know something, they go out to a professional group on their internal social media. They’re able to launch a discussion around that topic and very quickly learn by having other people share their experiences.”

Speaking of crowdsourcing, Tweeps naturally connect through Twitter. Handles such as @TC5 and @learning help them share what they’ve learned as well as some of their key successes. Technical skills learning, for instance, has a community of engineering Tweeps who develop during informal chats, gatherings and by teaching their peers more formally in an engineering management development program tied to the Twitter Core 5.

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—Brian “Skip” Schipper, vice president of human resources, Twitter Inc.

“Melissa is a big picture thinker who seeks diverse perspectives and innovates through experimentation — two of our values at Twitter,” said Brian “Skip” Schipper, vice president of human resources at Twitter. “She has a collaborative approach with all levels of the organization. One thing we value at Twitter are team members who are both strategic and scrappy — it’s important to both know where you’re going and be willing and able to execute on a daily basis.”

### Learning Is Everyone’s Job

Twitter is also exploring how to put additional teeth behind informal learning. To that end it launched a learning portal — what Daimler calls the internal

Twitter — for the entire company. “New technologies and perspectives are allowing us to think about learning as not just consumption, but about participation,” Schipper said. “In today’s workplace, everyone can be an expert. It’s our job to find them and connect them with other experts and learners in a way that works for each individual.”

Daimler agreed. In this day and age, learning practitioners can’t be the only people responsible for creating content. “Our job is about curating the right relevant content at the right time.”

Learning at Twitter likely will never be just an isolated event, for which one person bears sole responsibility. Daimler’s scope of responsibilities includes learning and organizational development as well as talent management. The integration allows her to look across the organization as it grows to ensure processes and systems are scaling within the company.

One key initiative from last year was to think holistically about what makes employees successful at the company. Essentially, what is the success profile for a Tweep? There are 10 aspirational values that have been around for years, but she went back to employees to ask if those values still resonated. Daimler said the answer was by and large yes, but there was something missing. Global focus groups subsequently identified four organizational skills that epitomize successful Tweeps — be clear, be courageous, be a team player and be forward-thinking. There are five micro skills underneath each of those.

Learning is now building out a number of formal and informal development strategies such as creating learning paths with this mindset: How do you get/become better?

“Our philosophy and purpose as a learning and OD [organization development] function is, we’re not only setting Twitter up for success, we’re setting Tweeps up for life,” she said. “How do we help them develop the skills not just for Twitter but beyond? That’s for all levels.”

Daimler said she feels confident that people can use work as a growth opportunity. Feedback is a huge part of that. Creating opportunities to reflect and discover what employees do well or what they need to improve will be a significant area of focus for the company going forward.

## The Power of Face to Face

“We talk a lot about internal innovation here at Twitter, and we believe that everybody is an entrepreneur,” she said. “We’re working to shift our feedback process from just being an annual or semi-annual event to an always-on, real-time data collection process that is more effective for both managers and employees.”

She and her team piloted an initiative this summer to align the company’s learning philosophy with the new evolving feedback strategy, and promote timely



Twitter, based in San Francisco, recruited Melissa Daimler from Adobe Systems Inc. to create a learning and organizational development function.

feedback conversations up, down and across teams. It knocks the traditional annual talent review process askew, disdaining annual discussions about past performance in favor of giving employees the feedback they want and need to learn as they work.

Launched in July and slated to roll out globally this month, evolving feedback has four parts: always on, more holistic, future orientation and greater empowerment. The pilot is partially online in that people have access to internal tools, but it deliberately holds on to the face-to-face nature of feedback as a focal point.

It also fits neatly with another of Daimler’s pet projects: the skills check-in. At any point in time, Tweeps can launch a check-in with their colleagues, direct reports and boss. This flexibility in evaluation helps them understand what’s working, their gaps and what they’re doing in the organizational hierarchy.

“It’s funny. When I first started here I was excited about diving into more technology, mobile learning ... but we forget — and I think this is important — to always balance. To be truly innovative, you can’t forget the basics,” she said. “Face-to-face will never go away. We’ve talked about doing more virtual learning and more connections through a platform, but people have said over and over they appreciate coming together and sharing best practices in person.” **CLO**

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