Using Social Media for Learning Gets Better Foothold in Workplace (Mar 13)

Large U.S. firms tripled their spending on social tools such as internal blogs, wikis and communities of practice in 2012, a new report says.

Social learning may not yet be a mainstay of corporate training departments, although it's more than a trend inside larger enterprises.

A Jan. 22 report from Bersin by Deloitte, an Oakland, California-based research firm formerly known as Bersin & Associates, says large employers are fueling increased adoption of social-learning tools, such as internal employee blogs, wikis and online expert communities. Enterprises with at least 10,000 employees spent an average of $46,000 on social tools in 2012, three times the average two years ago.

The uptick contributed to an overall spending jump of 12 percent on employee training last year, according to *The Corporate Learning Factbook 2013: Benchmarks, Trends, and Analysis of the U.S. Training Market*. The study is based on research involving 300 organizations of various sizes and industries.

Most U.S.-based employers use some type of social tool to facilitate greater employee learning, including internal blogs, wikis, subject-matter directories and "communities of practice," in which employees develop and share their expertise, says Karen O'Leonard, a Bersin by Deloitte analyst who authored the report.

"The big challenge for learning and development professionals is to create a new mind-set of continuous learning, not thinking of social tools as one component within a specific program," O'Leonard says.

Organizations using social tools face another near-term hurdle: how to seamlessly organize the increasing volume of user-generated content. "We expect content management will become a growing issue. The research shows that the most effective learning organizations have created a strategy for content management and knowledge sharing," O'Leonard says.

This year's report uses Bersin's proprietary "maturity model," which lets an organization benchmark its learning function based on four levels of effectiveness and business impact.

Most companies are not at the highest rung of maturity, but there is a marked difference between those that are highly mature and those that are still getting there, O'Leonard says. The most effective learning functions are less involved with program management and play an active role in developing long-range strategies.

"High-impact learning organizations have L&D professionals who are very adept at performance consulting and building the capabilities the organization will need in the future," O'Leonard says, referring to learning and development. "They're outsourcing noncore competencies and getting away from the business of delivering ad hoc training."

Also, the manner in which companies spent their training dollars reflects the varying level of effectiveness and maturity. U.S. companies spent about 16 percent of their training budgets on outside learning services, products and consultants in 2012, up from 12 percent in 2009. In general, organizations spent less money on expensive customized training and opted instead to purchase commodity-priced vendor products, the report finds.

At organizations deemed highly mature, the inverse is true: they invested money in instructor-led custom content and assessment programs, with off-the-shelf training products a lower spending priority.

Other notable findings:

The 12 percent rise in training expenditures equates to about $706 per employee. However, companies at the top end of the maturity scale spent $867 per employee—34 percent higher than spending by companies at the lower maturity level.

Many companies beefed up their learning and development staff last year, but the gains were offset by faster growth in the number of employees receiving learning. That dynamic has led to a decline in the trainer-to-learner ratio at many companies and is "one sign of the changing role of the L&D function" from clearinghouse to facilitator.

Training spending increased the most in the technology and manufacturing sectors, which each posted year-over-year increases of 20 percentage points.

The 12 percent spending surge shows companies are reinvesting in skills development after a long period of financial instability, O'Leonard says.

Garry Kranz is a Workforce contributing editor.