

Social Learning

Eight truths

By Pam Boiros



Most learning professionals are keenly interested in the topic of social learning, but many organizations have not yet figured out a way to leverage the potential. One reason is that it is difficult to separate hype from reality and focus on elements that are really important.

This list of eight “truths” has been compiled to provide a foundation for learning professionals who are launching social learning in their organizations.

1. Social learning is a three-legged stool

To be successful, three elements are needed: a technology platform, a vibrant community and great content. If one of these legs is missing, it can spell an early and disappointing end to your social learning initiative.

The platform is pretty obvious — you need a place to capture the interactions of your organization. Hopefully, it’s a place that’s easy to find and use in the course of everyday work. However, with just a platform you risk the dreaded “empty drum syndrome”. People may come to visit your new social platform once or twice out of curiosity, but if there isn’t anything there to engage them (interesting content) they won’t be back. If they don’t come back, you will never develop a vibrant community.

However, if you seed your platform with great content, it is much easier for employees to jump in and offer their first comments. Nuggets

of content act like magnets for comments, and these comments attract other comments and before you know it you have a flourishing community that’s engaged in active discussion. But it all starts with the seed of content.

Starting with the right content is also important. It should be something that is not only interesting to your audience, but also provides business value. And as learning professionals, we have the trusted information and learning content that can form the basis of these discussions. So building your social learning program around your existing base of learning content makes a lot of sense. With valuable business or technical content as the seed, you are much more likely to surface conversations that add unique business value (as opposed to gabfests about the weekend social scene).

2. Social learning doesn’t add to the problem of information overload, it helps alleviate it!

We are all bombarded with new messages and bits of information all day long, and many learning professionals are managing content collections with thousands of assets. Over time, this rich abundance of content can become a challenge. When a user needs some specific piece of information to solve a business problem, it can be impossible to find! Social learning communities, with their power to amplify the most relevant content, can act like a spotlight on the most useful



resources. This in turn drives a higher level of productivity, because time isn't being wasted searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack of information.

There are a number of ways your community can do this. If your social platform allows users to recommend platform allows users to recommend or "like" certain assets, this can be very helpful in directing people to the most relevant content for their needs.

3. Make social part of your blended learning strategy

For years now learning leaders have been creating programs that blend traditional, instructor-led learning experiences with online learning. They have found that there are benefits to both approaches, and used in conjunction, they can reinforce each other's value. With social learning, we now have another tool to make our existing instructor-led and e-learning initiatives better, more engaging, and with improved learning outcomes.

The role of social learning in the new blended learning paradigm takes several forms. Some organizations have found that by enhancing the social experience of learning, they are likely to get better participation from employees, especially if programs have a significant element of self-directed learning. With the ability to reach out to peers involved in the same program, or get help on a particular topic, learners are more likely to stay engaged and complete their program of study.

Another way that social learning can enhance the overall organizational learning program is by supporting the knowledge transfer and actual behavioral change after the "formal" learning event has ended. Let's face it, the only kind of learning that is valuable is the kind that gets applied in the workplace and contributes to improved business outcomes. And making the link between a learning event that may occur away from the job (sometimes literally away in a classroom or often just outside the flow of work) and the work itself can be difficult. If a learner encounters a problem, or simply does not receive reinforcement for the new behavior, the effects of the learning can be lost.

Social systems can be used to encourage and recognize performance, and this can make the difference in whether the learning actually transfers into a new and improved way of working.

4. Build the equity of experts

One of the greatest values of social learning is that it helps to identify your internal experts. The line between learner and teacher is constantly blurring in today's highly specialized workplace. Often the person with deep knowledge of a topic is sitting three cubicles away, but the difficulty in finding that person, or the exact nugget of information needed to solve a business problem, can be immense.

This is especially true in today's global, virtual, dispersed organizations where job titles don't tell the whole story about a person's range of skills and expertise. With so many of our knowledge workers operating from remote or home offices, the informal transfer of knowledge is much more difficult. So the social learning platform becomes a sort of virtual water cooler: a place for colleagues to gather and exchange information. In this way social learning can contribute huge productivity benefits by helping to find that resident expert, whether that person is three cubicles away, or three time zones away.

5. Don't overlook the importance of discovery

Building on the idea that your organization is a network of experts, the issue quickly shifts to the ability to search for these experts and find them quickly. The knowledge captured within your system will be of little value if it can't be pinpointed when a need arises. A social learning platform with the right set of features for capturing information and then discovering it later at the point of need is turning

out to be a very effective way to achieve the goal of expert location. For this to work, the platform needs:

- A way for experts to self-identify
- A way for community members to recognize others for their expertise,
- And a search function that identifies experts as a unique kind of learning resource.

6. Make sure your social initiatives have cross-generational appeal

Organizations need to appeal to the entirety of the work force if they want to achieve maximum benefits. It's not a stretch to think that Millennials will gravitate to social learning tools — they grew up with these technologies and experienced them as an integral part of their formal education during high school and college, not to mention that they are a huge part of their lives outside of work. But social learning tools should also appeal to your Gen-X, Boomers, and even Traditionalists. This is especially true because capturing tacit knowledge (Truth #7) is such an important part of the rationale for implementing social learning to begin with.

7. Capture tacit knowledge (before it walks out the door)

The impending retirement of the baby boomers has long been a source of hand-wringing by managers, HR professionals, and executives concerned about losing the decades of institutional knowledge that's in the heads of these key employees. Often the most important pieces of information that can be captured have to do with seemingly mundane institutional know-how: processes, people and systems that are unique to the organization. Managers have long known that the ability to tap this organizational knowledge is one of the most important factors in the success of individual employees.

8. Make it simple and secure

Consumer-oriented social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have set the bar high in terms of ease-of-use. Learners in organizations will expect a similarly intuitive experience from organizational social learning technologies. If your social learning tool mimics the basic elements of already-accepted social systems, this will simplify and speed the process of getting people started. Also, keeping the initial requirements of setting-up a user profile to fairly basic elements will encourage users to jump in. They can always add more color to their profiles in the future.

In Closing

Time-strapped learning professionals don't have the bandwidth to support a new program that requires hand-holding or a lot of encouragement. So your social learning initiative needs to provide obvious value, be easy to find and also be relevant to employees. This is also the beauty of building a social learning platform on top of existing learning and information resources — you're leveraging existing content and behavior to drive adoption.

So, are you ready to get started with social learning? There is no time like the present. The sooner you begin the more you will learn and the greater the benefit to your organization. **TEL**



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