Comprehensive learning networks

Bring your workforce together for social, collaborative and networked learning, advises **Randy Emelo**

When we learn, we grow our skills, our insights, our understanding, even our curiosity. We shift from doing something by rote, and often without any deep awareness, to thinking through the situation and adjusting our actions as we try new ideas.

That personal level of learning plays a key role in organisational learning efforts. It becomes the catalyst for pushing companies, and employees, further and helping them innovate. When given the opportunity and support, employees can turn mistakes, challenges, victories and failures into learning moments. A critical aspect of this is sharing these learning moments with others. As a result, organisational learning and development needs to be driven by what I call networked learning.

Networked learning is personalised, collaborative, and socially driven. Creating a comprehensive learning network typically occurs through a combination of any of three learning modalities (see Figure 1):

1. Learning communities that provide on-the-job support.
2. Learning cohorts that provide on-the-job action.
3. Learning pairs that provide on-the-job guidance.

Let's look at each modality more closely.

Learning communities

Learning communities, or support communities, are groups of people who come together to focus on an area of development that they all have in common. Personalization of the learning in these communities is typically on the lower end of the spectrum simply because the concepts are broad or considered more basic information that people need to know. People can take and use information and participate in activities at their discretion.

For example, all new hires at an organisation could be placed into an Onboarding Learning Community that spans divisions, locations, and roles, and which focuses on such things as becoming familiar with and ensuring compliance with HR policies. The people who make up this community will typically self-organise and people will rotate in and out of the community as their needs and availability dictate.

Using technology to facilitate a learning community can allow for better use of resources — both human and inanimate. Smart software can easily provide insights to community members regarding who in the company is willing and available to act as appropriate advisers in order to help others learn. It can also curate content to generate suggestions on the most relevant resources to peruse and share with community members that make the learning contextual.

Learning cohorts

Learning cohorts, or action learning groups, are smaller, more focused groups that concentrate on specific developmental goals, curricula and agendas. Group members are often brought together because they all work in the same department or because they all want to improve a specific skill. For example, team members in IT could form a learning cohort to work together on learning a new computer language for building apps. Or colleagues in sales and marketing could come together as a learning cohort to learn about new techniques for penetrating emerging markets.

These groups typically have a learner-to-adviser ratio that should not exceed 12:1, with the optimal range being a 6:1 ratio. The targeted

Figure 1
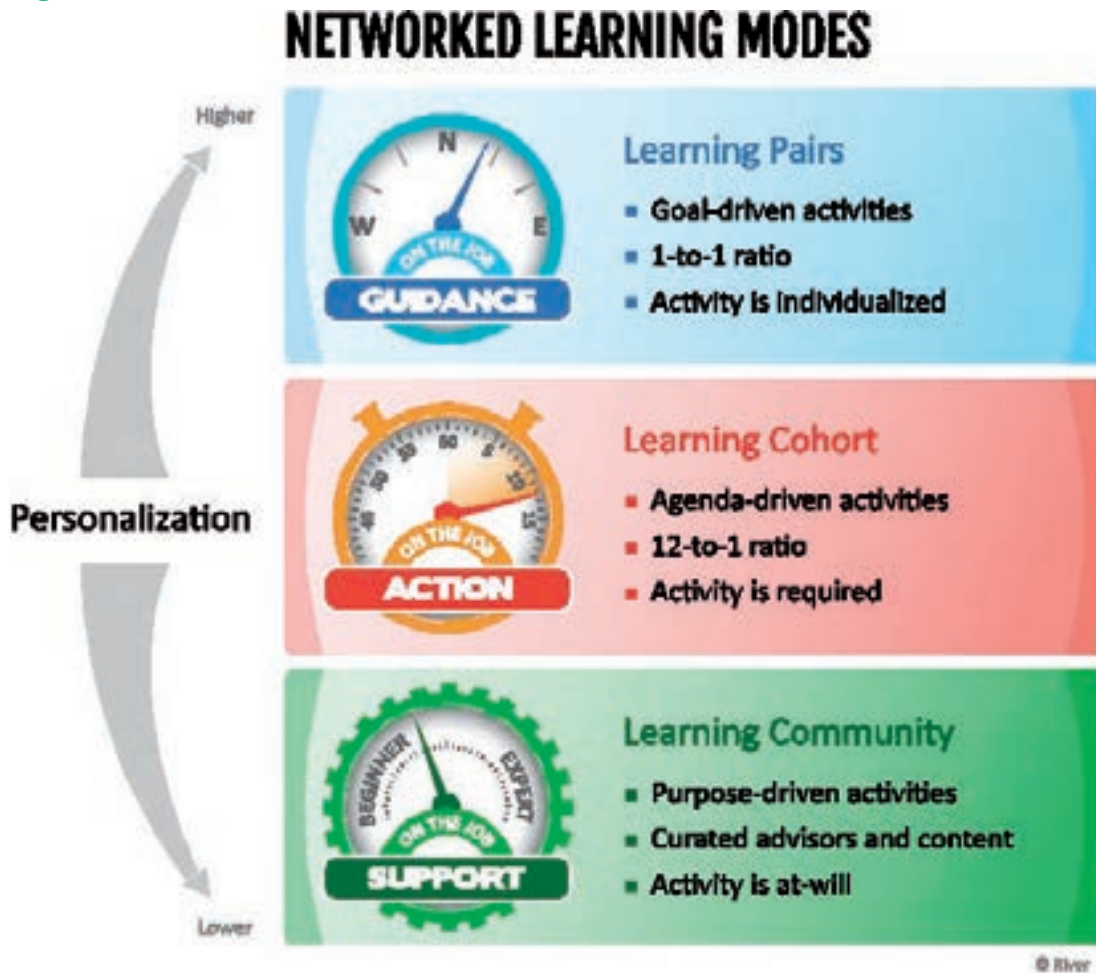
agenda and facilitation by the adviser drives the learning activity of the group, which centres on application-based learning. Learners are required to participate in group activities, and learning is more personalised on the spectrum because people apply the learning to actual work and report back to the group on the progress they are making or observations they see. This helps them gain critical feedback from both the adviser and peers.

Learning pairs

The third modality of this new networked learning concept is learning pairs, which provides on-the-job guidance to the learners. These pairs are 1:1 relationships between a learner and a coach, mentor, peer adviser, or even a supervisor. The relationships focus on goal-driven activities that are tailored to the individual learner's development needs, making it highly personalised. Goals can be set by the learner, the supervisor, an instructor, a mentor, an adviser or a coach. Recommended activities and immediate feedback

are given as the learner puts their new knowledge into practice, making this a critical component of developmental growth.

The person acting as the guide in the relationship can observe the learner's work, vet actual work product, provide new opportunities to apply learning on-the-job, and so on. This makes it important to bring the supervisor into the fold with the learning pair in some capacity so that progress is communicated, challenges are addressed, and opportunities for growth are given as appropriate. This can also make the individual's learning opportunities more practical and applicable to daily work.

How it works at Cognizant

Cognizant Technology Solutions makes great use of networked learning and the various learning modalities incorporated in the model by leveraging social learning technology. "Social learning is potentially one of the most engaging means of learning. Cognizant leverages social learning by

They help people find social learning groups and communities that can support them beyond the classroom

infusing a meaningful, purposeful context within which employees seek help, or more importantly, help others to learn in effective ways. River [social learning technology] enables us to do that by having built-in features that act as a lever for us to capture, communicate and develop those contexts," says Hariraj Vijayakumar, global head of L&D at Cognizant.

The learning architects at Cognizant embrace the full spectrum of learning within Cognizant and support the entire 70:20:10 learning model. Their social learning activities fall into the 20 portion of the model, where learning from others is the focus.

These learning architects are responsible for learning design throughout the company. They create learning tracks and activities for employees based on individuals' roles and growth paths. They help people take part in formal learning and help them find social learning groups and communities that can support them beyond the classroom.

"The Learning Solution Architects focus on crafting developmental solutions for our employees' needs using design-thinking principles; they ensure capability outcomes are in place and are effective in helping the learners absorb and process the material. The expectation

is that the Learning Solution Architects will continuously review trends in the L&D space [like digital technology options or neuroscience applications] and introduce those into our programmes as appropriate," says Vijayakumar.

To help support these creators of learning, they themselves take part in social learning groups and form learning networks with their near peer colleagues. Too often, organisations don't provide ways to create learning networks for near peers in an intentional way, instead relying on informal learning to occur. Cognizant is breaking that mold and tapping into innovative ways to promote and encourage intentional learning among its employees.

Vijayakumar explains that to help these learning leaders remain on top, the company assigns them stretch projects that are designed to be challenging while at the same time aspirational and fulfilling. They also use action learning and mentoring, which are proven and effective means of developing the learning leaders, according to Vijayakumar. "Many of our learning architects come from a multifaceted background, having a strong base in Cognizant's business, or technological and domain skills. They are also seasoned L&D professionals. We believe that their respective domain expertise, coupled with their L&D experience, provides them an edge."

By using River with its Learning Solution Architects, Cognizant provides networked learning support that focuses on role-based development. Domain knowledge and high order instructional design skills are the most basic prerequisites for these employees. Other essential skills include problem-solving, seeing the big picture while connecting the important dots, and effectively communicating. They use learning communities, cohorts and pairs to support these critical employees, who will in turn help support the learning and development of the entire Cognizant employee population.

"Features such as MyConnect (River) actively recommend and connect our employees in mentoring, coaching and learning relationships through the lens of our Cognizant relevant competencies. The business teams are able to witness the growth of our employees, and establish the foundation for a stronger 'expert' community," says Vijayakumar.
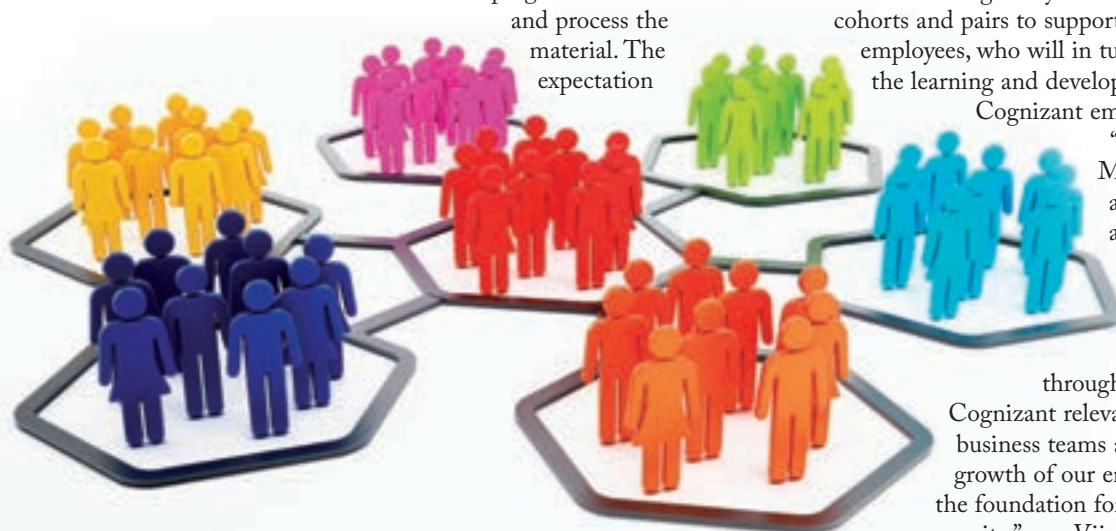
Figure 2

	Community Focus on:	Cohort Focus on:	Pairs Focus on:
High Potential Programme	Advanced Leadership Concepts, Practices, and Models	Action Learning or Job Shadowing	Mentoring and/or Coaching
Leadership Development	Basic Leadership Concepts, Practices, and Models	Functional Groupings (IT, HR, etc.)	Mentoring
Project Management	Standards and Certification Support	Disciplines (approach, process, topics)	Advising
Sales Enablement	Product and Sales Method Support	Regional Groups, Product Pitch, Sales Method	In-role Coaching

© River

"As learning architects, we basically chisel the career path for our employees and provide a complete visual graph step-by-step roadmap to achieve the same. So one needs strong domain knowledge, understanding of various career trajectories, adaptive learning mechanics, and the ability to process core foundational skills in learning solution and instructional design," says Vijayakumar. By bringing people together for social, collaborative, and networked learning, they can create an active and engaged organisation of learners.

Make your own networks

Learning networks can form in companies of all types and sizes. Here are some ideas on how to use all three learning modes within some common development programmes and initiatives in an effort to help you visualise ways to build learning networks.

To help you get started and to take these concepts even further, consider these tips:

1. Connect the new networked learning model to a programme that you manage or have influence over. This will provide you with some measure of control over how you implement a networked learning approach, when you launch it, who you invite to participate, etc. Which leads me to …

2. Use at least two of the three learning modalities with your programme. You want people to be building learning networks, but if you only give them the opportunity to take part in a learning pair, for example, you are stifling their ability to connect with others through additional learning modalities. Don't hold people back!

3. Move away from course-centred activities. Or let me put this more bluntly: stop pushing courses and start pushing connections! People want to learn from those around them and from the experiences of others. Don't make it harder for them to do so!

4. Realise that learning through each modality is not delivered through the same person. For example, Charlotte may be a new hire who is taking part in an onboarding learning community in which she is connecting with multiple people. She may also be in a learning cohort led by a subject matter expert from her division or department. And lastly, she may be active in a learning pair with her direct supervisor as her coach. None of these learning modalities has the same expert, but they all have the same learner — Charlotte.

5. Use learning modalities to ground learners in practical understanding and application. The whole point of a learning network is to help people connect and learn from one another. This allows for more personalised and contextual learning to occur. By setting the expectation early that learning networks are people-centred, you will help your participants set the right focus for their learning activities.

Vijayakumar explains that a more comprehensive social learning environment should allow meaningful dialogues to take place and be captured in ways that augment the learning experience of employees. "More specifically, it should empower learners, irrespective of their current capabilities, to be ready in accomplishing their professional goals in an enriching manner. It should also facilitate the ability to form learning tribes which will leverage our pool of experts to effectively build more experts."

With these tips and ideas in hand, it's now your turn to form your own tribe of learners. **TJ**

Randy Emelo

is founder and chief strategist of River and he can be contacted via www.riversoftware.com