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THE POWER OF DISCOVERY

BY RANDY EMELO

Learning should be more like Amazon or Netflix. Let learners have a say in what they learn, and then push out additional recommendations based on what skills and competencies they need and want.



People logged nearly 6 billion searches into Google each day in 2013. That adds up to more than 2.1 trillion Google searches that year. That's the nature of the world today. There is an abundance of information available, and people search and look, and search and look some more.

When it happens on the job, sometimes they find the answers they need and move on with their work. But often they scour multiple resources for just the potential of unearthing that elusive nugget. Knowing what to search for, how to search for it, where to search for it and what search result is most relevant are questions today's knowledge workers must tackle to find the knowledge, insight and learning they need to be productive.

Learning leaders cannot rely on the same search and look method for organizational learning today. People don't always know what they need, and searching through a course catalog is not going to help.

Learners today need learning recommendations that are personalized and tied to something, such as skill development or a specific training track. Think of it like Amazon or Netflix.

ON THE WEB

Some companies are taking the Netflix trend a bit further and turning online development programs into binge-friendly ones: CLOmedia.com/Netflix.

For consumer products, these companies use software that learns about buyers based on activities or profile information, such as past purchases or past shows watched. The software then runs an algorithm that recommends other items to possibly purchase or other shows to watch based on that person's activities. It even offers up recommendations based on what other people liked who also purchased that product or watched that show. This shift in how information is delivered allows people to engage in discovery rather than searching.

Seth Godin wrote about the difference between search and discovery in his April 2014 blog post: "Search is what we call the action of knowing what you want and questing until you ultimately find it. ... Discovery, on the other hand, is what happens when the universe (or an organization, or a friend) helps you encounter something you didn't even know you were looking for." It is harnessing the power of discovery that organizations should ultimately strive for.

David Wentworth, senior analyst at Brandon Hall Group, said this trend will affect corporate learning. "Learners respond much more to material that is contextual and relevant to them," he said. "No one wants to wade through an endless array of content that may or may not be helpful to them."

By helping to narrow the search through smart recommendations based on profiles, past actions, desired outcomes and the like, companies can provide more relevant learning opportunities to employees that feel personal and meaningful to the individuals.

Wentworth said Brandon Hall Group's research shows higher performing organizations are 40 percent more likely to offer learning opportunities based on personal strengths, weaknesses, job roles or other criteria. Further, companies are experimenting more with this concept. He said there is a move to create more in-depth learner profiles that include more than just a name and a job role, but also interests, hobbies, additional skills and more.

"These learner profiles can then be used in combination with robust content profiles to create connections and relationships that may have always existed, but could never be optimized," he said. "This creates a relationship-centered learning environment where learners are connected to content, subject matter experts, instructors and to one another."

School of Recommendations

Technology innovations are nothing new to Xerox Corp. It's embedded in the company's corporate DNA, and leaders are helping to pioneer recommendation-based learning as early adopters of this practice within Xerox Services University. The Learning Services Intellinex team at Xerox formed XSU to pro-

vide a way for its employees to develop the skills and learning relationships needed for individual and organizational success. It built a commons area within XSU that uses social learning technology to support modern mentoring, collaboration, peer coaching and more. This is where recommendation-based learning opportunities exist.

"A key element of our project objectives was to support the competency framework that had been created for leadership development," said Phil Antonelli, learning strategist and Xerox Services social learning manager for learning services at Intellinex, a Xerox company. Antonelli and his colleague Kerry Hearn-Smith designed their social learning framework within the commons so people entering the site are presented with schools that guide them down a distinct development path. These recommendations help participants easily locate and engage in appropriate learning opportunities that use preformed social learning groups and corresponding curricula.

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Brandon Hall Group

The XSU schools guide participants through a learning process that incorporates formal, social and experiential learning, and address their overall level of proficiency. Five schools exist within XSU:

- The School of Creativity and Innovation equips methods, processes, tools and techniques to think and work creatively and drive innovation.
- The School of Operational Excellence provides principles, practices and tools to achieve process excellence and build a culture of continuous improvement.
- The School of Leadership equips tools and resources to engage and develop teams, establish a shared vision, inspire and motivate others and continuously improve team performance to achieve business goals.
- The School of People Management enables develop-

ment of the interpersonal and organizational management skills necessary to motivate individuals and teams toward accomplishing strategic business goals.

- The School of Business Foundations provides business acumen about financials and sound decision-making to drive Xerox's sustained profitability and growth. Each school centers on a unique focus and provides structure that employees need to advance their careers and build new skills. The courses and authoritative content contained in each school connects to the focus of that school, but because people can take part in multiple paths at once, cross-pollination of ideas, content, best practices, policies, etc., will occur.

"We are seeing some great results, with close to a 100 percent conversion rate on click-through to the social or the formal learning pieces in the Commons," Antonelli said. After the program had been live for two weeks, more than 1,000 people had signed up for XSU, 615 courses were completed and 323 courses were in progress. Antonelli attributes some of this success to the recommended learning paths that people see as soon as they enter XSU. These recommendations help point people in the right direction so they can immediately start to develop their skills in a particular area.

The recommendations don't stop there. As people use the system, input their skill strengths, and identify areas for growth and general interest, the social learning software generates additional personalized and targeted recommendations. These become participants' a-ha moments as they encounter learning opportunities they didn't even realize they wanted.

Learners want suggestions on whom to collaborate with, what learning groups to join, what courses to take, what training materials to use and so on. Employees want and need help understanding what they should be learning and where they can find the resources they need.

People want learning to be more like Pandora or Netflix. They want to be shown, for instance, "Because you're interested in learning about X, you might also be interested in learning about Y." Or maybe, "Other people who were interested in X were also interested in Y." Xerox is making this happen.

The Xerox Services team helps make XSU stand out by giving employees the ability to take part in learning activities across the 70:20:10 continuum in a unified and organized fashion. Employees may not realize they have access to something special because all they see is that their knowledge needs are being met when they need them in ways that make sense.

That is the epitome of good learning — when it doesn't feel like learning. XSU gives people a seamless learning experience, giving them ways to put learning

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READER REACTION

Amazon, Netflix and Pandora help people discover items of interest by offering them up based on past activity. How can we do that in learning?



Mahesh Varavooru:

Amazon, Netflix and Pandora use big data for recommendations. The problem with learning is there needs to be user intent. In case of someone shopping on Amazon, there is an intent to buy. In case of learning, you need to use these kind of recommendations only when the user shows and intent to learn. You cannot just pop up a window and say, here, go learn this.



Anand K. Chandarana:

Even if we can predict/plan a learning path for employees, we can't wait for our learners to go to the LMS and seek out their recommended training. It needs to be delivered to them via multiple avenues that they already engage with: the main company portal page, developmental discussions with managers, other more heavily trafficked and learning/development/career-related sites within a company intranet, etc.



Srinivasan Venkatarajan:

Whenever an employee logs on to the learning portal, show them a message "your team members have taken these courses" and list the courses. Also show them the message "see what your peers in the organization are learning" and show the top five consumed courses/programs.



Saurav Jaiswal:

Recommendation engines used for end consumer facing applications like those in Netflix, Amazon, Pandora could indeed work well in corporate learning environments. However for recommendation engines to work well there is a dependency on data — learner data. If learning applications/environments are built to recognize their users/learners based on their roles, skills, learning needs, styles and learning activities this could usher in intelligent learning systems, environments and truly create a pull learning mechanism benefiting the entire organization, especially the learner.



Gordon L. Johnson:

These days, a good LMS has access to more than enough profile information to make thoughtful recommendations for employees, and sometimes, customers and partners.

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ventions, such as removing barriers, strategic recruiting and executive education investments; agrees on officer succession; and builds talent pipelines. These tasks cannot be delegated.

2. Replace competency models with behavioral models for every level of leadership. The Institute for Corporate Productivity's research has consistently shown that ensuring leadership behavior is consistent with strategy as a practice that is extremely highly correlated with market performance. However, most GLD programs are anchored in a competency model developed by HR professionals. Competencies describe contributing factors that enable leaders to function in their role, such as knowledge, experience, skill and attitude. Behaviors, on the other hand, are demonstrated actions, attitudes or activities leaders exhibit to show proficiency in a professional skill. Behaviors are a better gauge for leadership effectiveness because they are observable and can be measured.

3. Address current and future needs. The majority of leadership models and curriculum today are based on the past and don't leverage data to anticipate changes in the organization or its markets. The senior leadership team should have data pertaining to gaps in workforce supply and demand based on future-focused critical roles so they can determine which leadership behaviors, at each leadership level, are needed to drive the organization forward.

Like all investments, the GLD program must be reviewed and managed with vigor. Quality of movement — which provides data on internal placement rates, promotion rates and other organizational movements — is important. It is especially critical to monitor assignments in other countries and to follow up on performance after a move.

A subset of this is to examine how many individuals who complete the GLD program fill key roles. The quality of these "hit rates" can help reveal deficiencies in GLD selections or development processes, as well as post-program support resources.

Quality of attrition — which tracks departures from critical roles or among those who have been identified as high potential — is also a key metric. This reveals undesirable, voluntary turnover, which has a high cost on the business, including lost revenue and income, as well as decreased employee engagement and morale. **CLO**

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into action to address performance by aligning their learning environment with business strategies.

Making It Work

To make recommendation-based learning work, consider these tips.

Go beyond keywords. Recommendations should not be based on keywords alone or profile data only. Learning leaders need smarter systems that consider other pieces of data, such as competencies, interests, skills and past activities. "The biggest thing holding companies back from this type of learning environment is the amount and type of data necessary to make it work. The learning function already struggles to analyze and leverage the basic data they collect today, such as course completions, smile sheets, etc. Now we are asking them to mine some deeper data and apply some more complex analysis," said Wentworth of Brandon Hall Group. With a smart learning system, the analysis and recommendations can take place through algorithms built into the system, rather than through hands-on work from learning leaders.

Fill the void. To achieve success, Xerox's Antonelli said companies should "identify a social learning manager to manage communication and drive adoption." Few companies employ someone in this position, but the shift toward social learning may require them to create such a role. A social learning manager or director will need to take a consultative approach to identify how the social learning process can be leveraged. This person should help others develop plans for technology rollout and expansion, and should help consult to create different programs around how they can best use the process or communicate value to their constituencies.

Give up control. XSU incorporates authoritative content into the Commons and the five schools. This allows people to find relevant content from trusted sources. However, Antonelli said learning leaders should go a step further. "Information is the fuel that makes these systems work. Let go of your desire to control every bit of the process, and move from structured design to emancipated design where the learners are the subject matter experts and own the learning as they create the content." This will help build a robust resource center from which recommendations can flow from practitioners who are on the front lines and who can share practical insights and materials. **CLO**

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