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WRITING ON SOMEONE'S WALL IS NOTHING NEW

BY RANDY EMELO

People have been learning from one another forever, but new technology can use it to provide employees with the information they need to do their jobs better and faster in real time.

U.S. companies spent \$13,675 on average on social learning tools and services in 2012, an increase of 39 percent from 2011, according to Bersin by Deloitte's "Corporate Learning Factbook 2013." Bersin and others predict this number will continue to grow as companies seek to connect their employees via more informal learning activities and capitalize on the growing use and comfort with social tools.

As social learning matures, so will its practice, and that has implications for learning leaders. Even the definition of social learning has changed from what CLOs are used to, according to Mike Cooke, chairman and CEO of research and advisory services company Brandon Hall Group.

"Social learning is not a technology or social networking or only for Gen Y," Cooke said. "It is truly just a natural and well-documented way to learn that harnesses the power of technology to make the learning process smoother and easier."

"It is completely ludicrous to imply that somehow learning has suddenly become social," said Clive Shepherd, author of "The New Learning Architect." "Social learning in a general sense is nothing new. We are social animals, and we crave interaction when we learn in order to share our thoughts and perspectives, ask and answer questions, give and receive feedback, benchmark our progress and so on."

While certain iterations of social learning are not new, the technology used to support it has exploded during the past several years. Brandon Hall Group's June 2013 research paper, "The Evolution of Social Learning," describes what it calls relationship-centered learning, or RCL organizations, which have "a proactive orientation to learning." Some 73.8 percent of RCL companies use public social media platforms for learning, and 72.9 percent use corporate social platforms for learning. In non-RCL companies, those numbers drop to 54.9 percent and 51.1 percent, respectively.

ON THE WEB

Virtual worlds can be an extremely effective piece of the collaboration puzzle. Here are five examples: blog.CLOmedia.com/?p=2352.

Cooke said for relationship-centered learning organizations, it all comes down to a focus on employee collaboration. “They want people to share content, thoughts and ideas,” he said. “They want their employees to be a community of learners who build dynamic learning networks in an effort to develop knowledge or expertise. Those characteristics are what set them apart from other companies.”

Social for a Reason

However they're defined, social learning activities won't work without a purpose. Further, social learning needs to be structured to lead people to quality connections and interactions.

Most people use social learning to look for specific information, and each person may have a different way to do that. People may want a greater understanding of practices in their field or to collaborate about innovative practice areas that relate to their work. They may want to gain greater understanding of adjacent areas of practice that could affect their jobs. They may even use social learning to pursue skill development in other fields, a kind of self-directed career mapping related to any career moves they want to make. No matter what the reason, the purpose is to learn and gain knowledge.

“In my experience, social learning can work very well with a formal, blended course, normally because it is a required behavior. You are expected to interact with your peers and tutors using forums, blogs, wikis, etc.,” Shepherd said. “In a more informal context, it seems to work well with people who are used to problem-solving collaboratively.”

Improved collaboration and knowledge sharing among co-workers continues to be a top priority for leadership. In IBM's 2012 “Leading Through Connections” study, 75 percent of CEOs identified collaboration as a critical trait for employees. Using social learning technology effectively can help companies achieve better collaboration across the workforce, break down barriers among employees and support broad knowledge sharing among the rank and file. In a 2013 *MIT Sloan Management Review* report, “Social Business: Shifting Out of First Gear,” companies cited social business software as important to the following organizational objectives:

- Improve or increase collaboration (71 percent).
- Identify expertise and internal knowledge (60 percent).
- Improve productivity (56 percent).
- Break down internal silos (52 percent).

Despite this evidence showing that companies see potential value in social learning, Cooke said organizations cite the lack of a business case as one of the main reasons they are reluctant to move forward with efforts to enable this process. In the *MIT Sloan Man-*

agement Review report, researchers identified three reasons why companies aren't becoming social businesses: lack of an overall strategy (28 percent of respondents), too many competing priorities (26 percent) and lack of a proven business case or strong value proposition (21 percent).

“Frankly, what I tell companies that seek our counsel is that they need to get on board or get left behind. Social learning is not going away, and the cost of technology is not prohibitive to making this investment,” Cooke said. “When they can identify a business issue that is a source of pain for them, and then make the connection to see how social learning can help address that pain, that is when the light bulbs finally go on.”

Strategies for Sustainable Social Learning

Making the case for social learning and showing how it can affect business — not just learning — goals will help forge the future of this practice. Almost every great sustainable movement starts with a boom and a bust before sustainability emerges. Think back to when the dot-com bubble burst. The Internet didn't go away after the bust; it just became more sustainable. The same thing is happening with social learning. Best practices are emerging and a sustainable practice is taking shape.

Consider these strategies to forge a sustainable social learning culture.

Provide structure focused on learning. Too many social learning tools are just social media tools that allow for broad, general broadcasting; they are not designed for learning. The tools used for social learning must be designed with development in mind. A critical factor to consider is the structure provided within these tools. Learning structure should allow people to identify learning goals, form groups centered on specific learning objectives, collaborate with one another within the confines of the group, and rate progress against corporate learning and performance competencies. People should be free to do this on their own without directives telling them what to learn about or focus on. This provides the structure they need for learning with the freedom they desire to guide their own development.

Move beyond formal learning. To participate in social learning, many companies add a social feed to a formal learning process or learning management system and consider their work done. This is the wrong tack to take. Being able to ask the trainer a question is not enough. Companies need to have structures in place that allow people to connect with their colleagues and learning cohorts before, during and after a formal training course. This lets people continue conversations after the course is finished and provides them with peer support on the job to

READER REACTION

Social learning has been all the rage the past few years. Has it lived up to its hype?

Twitter



@JenWhitbeck:

Yes! — but I worry companies are compartmentalizing it too much with labels, rather than engineering systemic/cultural support.



@loriniles:

Love social #learning but large companies still try to control. To work, they must let go. Let learners share freely.



@gordjohn1111:

Perhaps not “hype” as much as confusion re: meaning. Most #learning is naturally #social. Best to discuss specific goals/functions.

LinkedIn



Valerie Bock: As with most initiatives, the success of social learning programs has varied with the level of investment. Who invests is a critically important variable. Where the learning organization set up a forum on a “build it and they will come” model, results have been disappointing. Where focused efforts to bring new hires and veteran performers were given C-level visibility, clients have been gratified with the efficiency gains among the new hires.

Abdul Basit Abbasi: Social learning’s full potential can only be achieved with the right environment, so that people can learn voluntarily in an informal manner. Furthermore, individuals’ observation and analytical skill sets need to be enhanced to at least intermediate level so what they observe can be translated into a meaningful pattern.



Rick Maher: The next wave of social learning might be what some would call “informal” in that there is little to no orchestration by a training organization, no formal classroom time per se. In this “future vision” the learning organization creates expectations in terms of competencies and (of course) has training programs of a more formal nature in place, but they also create an environment where skills and knowledge get shared through social interactions (online and otherwise) with and among peer groups. The learning organization’s role becomes one of being able to assess what has (and has not) been learned and certifying learned skills (read that as badge-based learning). In this way, I could literally test out of formal training. Such an era of social learning is a coming wave and will force learning professionals to adapt to new and important roles.



Bill Bruck: I don’t think that by and large social learning has lived up to its hype, for several reasons, including: Our fascination with shiny objects — the technology of social learning; our confusion of social with informal learning, and subsequent lack of attention to formal social learning; and the common lack of alignment between activities and learning or performance goals.



Carolyn Henning: Social learning by definition is the learning that goes on between people. This learning has been going on forever, long before we put a cool label on it. There should be no hype. It just is.

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help implement the new theories or practices they learned in the formal course.

Connect learning with real-time work issues. People don’t want to take time out of work to go sit in a class on a topic that does not connect to their daily work, and they can’t afford to be away from their job for training that does not directly tie in to their duties. What people need is a way to find experts and peers who can answer questions about specific problems at the moment when they need them.

People will inevitably ask: What’s in it for me? Learning leaders need to be able to show that social learning will provide employees with targeted answers so they can do their jobs better and faster. It’s more than just reading a book review or combing through thousands of shared documents hoping to find one that will shed light on a problem. Learning has to be contextualized and customized to have an impact.

Adjust corporate cultures and attitudes. Many leaders do not see the value of social learning because they do not have a clear understanding of how it can affect business objectives and organizational goals. Learning leaders need to provide evidence that social learning can impact the bottom line.

Respondents in the aforementioned *MIT Sloan Management Review* study indicated they have seen operational benefits to using social business software, such as breaking down silos (34 percent), faster time to innovation (31 percent), and improving employee morale and motivation (31 percent). Going beyond soft results and showing that social learning can have hard impacts on the business will help adjust how the C-suite views social learning and their attitudes regarding it. Once their views shift toward the positive, they can help shape the corporate culture so the positive outlook on social learning trickles down to all levels of the company.

Those at lower levels already may have a positive view of social learning because they take advantage of it on a daily basis. A 2013 Microsoft Corp./Ipsos study found that 46 percent of employees think social tools at work help increase productivity. The disconnect comes with leadership. That same study showed 30 percent of companies underestimate the value of these tools and often restrict their use.

Social learning is not a fad, and it is not going away. It will change. It will evolve. It will likely become something that we haven’t envisioned yet. But it is here to stay. Companies have to figure out how to make it a sustainable part of their learning strategy if they want to remain competitive. **CLO**

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