



White Paper

# Can social learning succeed alongside a Learning Management System?

## Introduction

With the increasing presence of social media sites in our everyday lives, we are forced to ask ourselves several questions of the Learning and Development (L&D) profession. How are these tools impacting employees' ways of learning and their expectations? How should we integrate them within our L&D practices for business impact? And possibly most difficult to answer—how can we use social approaches to learning with our existing learning infrastructure, particularly the Learning Management System (LMS)?

These questions in turn lead to others:

- Does the success of social learning mean the demise of the LMS?
- If not, can I use social learning in addition to my LMS?
- How can I use social learning as an integrated part of my learning program?
- Is social learning a fad?
- How can I convince management that social learning delivers commercial benefits?
- How will social learning affect the future role of L&D?

These are questions that demand to be answered. Our world is increasingly socially connected. If L&D does not adapt to, and fully exploit, social technologies, it runs the risk of being sidelined as other parts of the organization put them to good use for learning.

And this is not merely a matter of using the latest technologies for their own sake. There are good business reasons for adopting a social approach at work. Respondents to KPMG's 2013 Retail Industry Outlook Survey report that social media such as Facebook and Twitter, mobile and online shopping, and promotions and coupons through mobile and online channels are having the most significant impact on their businesses. When asked, "Which of the following technology-related trends is having a significant impact on your business?" 71% listed social media like Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.<sup>1</sup>



## Table of contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 What social learning is... and what it is not
- 3 Getting social with your LMS
- 4 Five ways to add social learning to your learning offering
- 5 Showing the value of social learning
- 6 The future role of L&D
- 6 Where do we go from here?

<sup>1</sup> KPMG, "2013 Retail Industry Outlook Survey," 2013

Against this background, we have a new generation workforce, a digital-age group of aspiring young professionals utilizing the latest online resources as they move into the working world. The Millennial approach to learning is self-paced and highly collaborative. Millennials want to explore information on their own and then share it with their peers. They want access to information in a just-for-me, just-in-time platform that produces gratifying results. These young people are already part of the workforce, and have brought a naturally collaborative approach to work with them. As their numbers and influence increase, we can expect organizational culture to become increasingly social and collaborative.

As learning and development practitioners, we ignore these trends at our peril. This white paper explores how to best exploit the power of social learning while retaining the existing strengths of organizational L&D and any installed technologies such as Learning Management Systems.

## What social learning is... and what it is not

Tony Bingham, President and CEO of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), defines social learning as “learning that happens outside a formal structure or classroom and is really the way people have always learned from each other. Social learning centers on information sharing, collaboration and co-creation.”

Social learning is clearly anchored in collaboration: “we learn alone but never without others.” It happens at conferences, cafes or online. It happens with or without social media tools. This collaboration creates knowledge as those engaged capitalize on one another’s resources and skills, asking each other for information, evaluating one another’s ideas, monitoring each another’s work.

And what is social learning not? It is certainly not new! It is a natural part of how we humans learn. Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) stressed the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition, as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of ‘making meaning’. Nowadays, however, social learning uses social media to expand and amplify the reach of social learning, making social media the venue where social networking and learning take place. Social learning combines the power of social media technology with the appeal of a collaborative environment that encourages ongoing informal learning, knowledge sharing and transfer. This shift in how we find, search for and share information transforms us from knowledge consumers to knowledge publishers who actively participate in, and manage, our own learning experiences.

Social media allows the learner to rate, tag, comment, share and contribute or modify content, as part of the wider web experience that enables learners to deliver content and participate in a website. But despite being largely technically enabled, social learning at work is not just about technology. It is a powerful business approach that impacts the bottom line.

Social learning does not replace formal learning. It complements it. The old saying that “you don’t know what you don’t know” remains the case, and when an employee needs to learn a skill or pick up some important knowledge, formal learning may be necessary. This may be to meet compliance requirements, or because a new product has been launched, or for many other reasons. In all these cases, social learning can still form a vital part of the learning blend.

Clearly, therefore, social learning is not exclusively informal. For example, a company running a compliance course on (for example) financial dealing, may find it very useful to ensure its employees have a social forum running alongside the course in which they can exchange their thoughts about the course, their tips for success, and so on. Or it could be that sales people are invited to rate learning materials concerning new products and to contribute to a wiki about them, and so on. Social learning can and should be made part of formal learning initiatives.

Following on from this, the short answer to the question “Can social learning succeed alongside an LMS?” is emphatically “Yes”. Not only can it succeed, it will be a vital part of organizational learning in the future, driven by both learner expectation and the value it can add to the learning experience.

## Getting social with your LMS

Of course to succeed in this way, it is not enough to—for example—bolt some forum software onto an LMS. On the contrary, the LMS should be designed to incorporate collaboration from the start.

There is a new generation of learning management systems which has evolved to include—among other things—collaboration and mobile delivery in a bid to grow increasingly learner-centric. These LMSs succeed because they allow learners to engage more than before, putting instant information to hand as well as in-depth learning opportunities, and including with everything the ability to comment and share.

In the new generation of LMS, learners can rate, recommend and share resources, courses and user-generated content. They can create materials with each other, and courses with the central L&D team. Their forum posts and questions are not only a rapid way of providing answers to much-needed performance issues; they are also gold dust for detecting which skills are required for the organization.

Below are examples of how the development of the LMS now encompasses a full spectrum of interactive tools, inter-office communication, and real-time problem-solving features.

- **Activity feeds**—Start a conversation and share information in real time
- **Spaces and groups**—Unlimited sub-communities
- **User profiles**—Get personal with walls, status updates, photos, and more
- **Forums**—Keep everyone talking
- **Blogs**—Get your community talking by setting everyone up with a blog
- **Wiki**—Share collective knowledge and best practices
- **File sharing**—Streamline workflow and break free from hard-drive folders
- **Messaging**—Help users break free from email for good

A socially-enabled LMS such as this becomes a powerful vehicle to naturally promote and evaluate learning content, and a place where employees can learn from each other. With this new approach, learners decide and share what they like and don't like in detail, providing feedback far more valuable than a “like” or “don't like” button. They organize their own content by tagging it in ways that make sense to them, creating their own folksonomy. Indeed when the interaction with fellow employees and with the organization's resources is so profound, learning takes place without the individual even necessarily being aware of it.

Social learning offers a solution to the age-old L&D challenge—how to accelerate time to competence in a fast-changing environment, without demanding extra budget. But it cannot be imposed from the outside. To be effective it needs to be as much a part of people’s natural workflow as possible.

The use of social networking as part of a blended learning offering is not a recent phenomenon either. In 2004, energy giant Total launched a similar initiative which proved to be a powerful starting point for improving training. By tracking the questions asked, the L&D department was able to understand the key areas where support was needed—both geographically and in terms of subject matter. Knowledge gaps were easily identified and it became possible to design ways of dealing with them, including—but not limited to—the provision of formal courses.

One of the greatest benefits to L&D teams is its ability to market the function and to communicate its value—one of the biggest challenges L&D faces today. In short, it improves L&D brand recognition.

## Five ways to add social learning to your learning offering

### **1. Design the right learner experience and be learner-centric**

Use social media tools to provide a means of social learning for distance learners. This form of learning is important for solving small everyday problems before they get too large, creating an environment that supports creativity, forming ad hoc workgroups as needed, and building a flexible work environment.

Guide learners to create their own collaborative knowledge bases, rather than relying on others to do it for them. Increase the feeling of being a team for distance learners by encouraging participation. Share the rules of usage: The way to use the tools may not be crystal clear: Ensure that your learners have all the necessary information to connect, use the tools and contribute in the right way.

### **2. Make it safe for your teams and your company**

This is a must-have. Almost certainly, someone in your organization will have concerns about the security of any social network. Work with IT teams to secure bandwidth, integration and data confidentiality. Benefit from communication teams’ advice regarding community management and PR.

### **3. Use the tool to deliver your learning objectives**

The best way to fail is to incorporate social media tools without considering your learning goals. The power of the tools comes from their ability to be used in different ways to originally planned, but which are focused on learning.

You can use picture-sharing tools to make a journal during field trips or on-the-job activities; try using micro blogging tools to synthesize key learning’s or wikis to co-construct reference documents (such as information for a specific job or what you need to know when joining a company). And of course you can use blogging tools as the thread running through a training program that lasts over several weeks.

---

**Consider change management strategy: What is the purpose of introducing social learning to your enterprise? Which programs do you want to impact and how? How will you engage learners and train your internal teams and train your trainers?**

#### **4. Evolve to learning community management**

Transform the role of your program manager, from guide and motivator to learning community manager that ensures productive learning. This is a big step for traditional L&D departments to take, and it will not be an easy transition for all of them, but it is essential for social learning to succeed. You cannot approach the ‘pull’ of social learning in the same way as you do the ‘push’ of formal learning.

#### **5. Keep it simple**

Don’t try to do too much at once and be careful not to use social media for its own sake. For example, it can be appealing to create a wrap-up for an event around a micro-blogging tool, but what is the real social aspect of this? What is most important? To create a collective list of key points through Twitter? Or to stimulate a live debate within a group in person?

Choose launch programs carefully—they should reflect company goals and culture rather than the technology you’ll be using.

Consider change management strategy: What is the purpose of introducing social learning to your enterprise? Which programs do you want to impact and how? How will you engage learners and train your internal teams and train your trainers?

And one final point: Above all, however you implement social learning in your organization, identify and list out the top KPIs that will enable you to evaluate success.

## Showing the value of social learning

Whatever L&D does, it has to show that it is working. But how do you demonstrate that with social learning? To do this, there are three possible approaches of measures to use.

The first approach is to consider activity or ‘Vitality’. While this does not show the impact of social learning, it does show—crucially—whether or not people are engaged:

- **Vitality**—Short-term  
Are learners using the environment? Is it sustained over time? What are the most heavily used components?

In addition, we can look at the medium term—how is social learning adding to the work of the L&D department? Is it adding to ‘Capability’?

- **Capability**—Medium-term  
Is usage supporting the identified learning use cases? Do learners perceive value from their involvement?

Finally, the key question: Does this help the organization overall? Does it have business impact? To show value, we have to show that social learning is—like any other activity—having a direct effect on business metrics:

- **Value**—Long-term  
Which business-related learning issues have been addressed? Which business KPIs have been directly impacted, and how?

## The future role of L&D

How will the role of L&D change in the future to incorporate this need to include social learning? It will expand. Just as classroom training did not die when e-learning arrived on the scene around the year 2000, so e-learning will not die with the arrival of social learning. In other words, the role of the L&D department just expanded.

Key responsibilities for the future will include:

- Managing content (publishing, curating, tagging)
- Leading / moderating communities
- Welcoming and helping community members
- Shifting learning from “know-what” to “know-how” and “know-who”
- Monitoring, measuring and reporting progress, value and benefits
- Managing technological issues, tools and learner experience

To be specific, L&D should be involved in:

- Pre-building blogs, wikis, etc.
- Entering conversations, or asking for the advice of others
- Welcoming participants
- Providing accurate resources
- Suggesting experts to follow, events and conferences to attend

There is no doubt that making the most of social media will require the L&D department to pick up a whole new set of skills. Without these skills, the best learning technologies can only go so far.

## Where do we go from here?

L&D departments in organizations have to expand what they are doing or be by-passed by a wave of new ways of interacting at work. Individuals are learning all the time and we must reengineer our L&D strategies to create a continuous learning environment comprised of formal and informal components. This trend forces all L&D professionals to rethink their internal skills, to continue to revamp their tools and technology, and to build a “learning architecture” that makes continuous learning a regular part of all learning solutions. Social learning can certainly succeed alongside an LMS, and within it. The question is really whether we as a profession are equipped to make social learning succeed within our organizations.



641 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10011  
800-260-2640  
infor.com

## About Infor

Infor is fundamentally changing the way information is published and consumed in the enterprise, helping 70,000 customers in more than 200 countries and territories improve operations, drive growth, and quickly adapt to changes in business demands. To learn more about Infor, please visit [www.infor.com](http://www.infor.com).

## Disclaimer

This document reflects the direction Infor may take with regard to the specific product(s) described in this document, all of which is subject to change by Infor in its sole discretion, with or without notice to you. This document is not a commitment to you in any way and you should not rely on this document or any of its content in making any decision. Infor is not committing to develop or deliver any specified enhancement, upgrade, product or functionality, even if such is described in this document.

Copyright© 2014 Infor. All rights reserved. The word and design marks set forth herein are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Infor and/or related affiliates and subsidiaries. All other trademarks listed herein are the property of their respective owners. This document is provided for informational purposes only and does not constitute a commitment to you in any way. The information, products and services described herein are subject to change at any time without notice. [www.infor.com](http://www.infor.com).