



White Paper

Five challenges for L&D

Introduction

With newly developed technologies changing the way we think and learn, it's not surprising that we find ourselves at a tipping point for change. Social media recently saw Facebook log its one billionth user while the world shares its favorite videos via the global phenomenon of YouTube.

So how can we grasp these socially compelling opportunities to prove the business impact of L&D and propel it to its rightful seat of board-level influence? Let's examine five key challenges and opportunities in the year ahead:

- Social learning
- The move to curation
- The move from courses
- Leadership understanding of learning reaching critical mass
- The emergence of the true learning and development professional

For the reasons described below, the corporate world is at a tipping point for Learning and Development, a time in which we will start to demonstrate the true potential of learning and information sharing in the workplace.

1. Social learning takes center stage

Social learning takes place much of the time without being noticed. It typically occurs through conversation and has always played a huge part in how people develop, from learning with playmates as children, to picking up tips and insights from colleagues and others as adults.

With the advent of online social networking, the reach of social learning has exploded. From the small number of people individuals are in regular daily contact with, people can now interact with millions across the globe. It's now simple to find experts in any field, or others who share the same interests and challenges. Because the adoption of social networking has largely taken place outside the corporate environment, its impact for knowledge sharing and learning has been ignored, or resisted, by those in authority.

However, it is no longer possible to ignore the self-evident impact and value of social learning and it will move from a peripheral activity to an integral part of knowledge sharing.



Table of Contents

1	Introduction
1	Social learning takes center stage
2	From teachers to curators
2	From traditional lessons to intelligence in context
3	Leader understanding reaches critical mass
4	The emergence of the true learning and development professional

There are three types of companies adopting social learning. The first is those who have adopted it without a specific business purpose. There can only be one result for an attempt to get people to visit yet another site, or to use yet another tool with no particular reason: failure.

The second type is those who have adopted it as a technology for chatter rather than an intelligent balance of both dialogue and performance support. They, too, will fail.

The third kind introduces social learning with a specific purpose in mind. These companies are the ones who will benefit.

In the US, DIY store Home Depot has an employee social community site with more than 50,000 users posting over 5,000 times a day collectively. This massive, interactive environment has increased learning and collaboration between employees across thousands of locations. The impact is wide ranging: product and store management tips are shared, there is a higher level of communication with senior management, and innumerable expert communities have been set up around key products and services such as paint and woodworking.

The workplace culture is reaching the stage now where the evidence is irrefutable: people work better when they learn from each other. Social learning, driven by social networking, is here to stay. As Mark Oehlert of the US Department of Defense said at the time the US military considered banning social networking: “We trust our soldiers with live ammunition. I think we can trust them with Facebook.”

2. From teachers to curators

As social learning becomes ever more prevalent, L&D professionals will be faced with several challenges, including these two: how do they support informal learning without getting in the way, and how do they deal with the amount of information created?

One way to tackle these dilemmas is Seth Godin’s method. As the online marketer astutely observed in *The Curation Chronicles*, “We don’t have an information shortage, we have an attention shortage.” The trick, in other words, is in curation—filtering the information and adding context and interpretation where necessary to make it easy to find, understand and put to use.

New technologies that enable the easy spread of information and conversation are encouraging business leaders to move from the restrictive understanding of what L&D once was in the past to a much more positive view which mirrors more accurately how people really learn—through a combination of means, and, more importantly, through conversation and questioning. The result of these conversations and storytelling is user-generated content. It is often produced quickly and very often with a great deal of impact. L&D’s main role is no longer to create training materials; rather, the role is to provide the circumstances in which conversations can be held and stories can be told, to filter and share the best of it with the rest of the organization. In short, L&D needs to become curators.

3. From traditional lessons to intelligence in context

Just as modern learning technologies allows L&D to curate rather than create and to allow people to learn from each other naturally, they also allow users to escape the structures of the classroom and traditional courses.

The classroom, and the lesson, can be excellent for many things, but they are not good for two things in particular. The first is informal communication—the short conversations that make up so much learning naturally, and which are so greatly aided by social networking. The second is information transfer. Since Hermann Ebbinghaus's work at the end of the nineteenth century, we have known that it is inefficient to ask people to learn facts conveyed en masse, without context—which is exactly what happens in a typical classroom course.

The alternative approach for L&D is to ensure people are able to learn in context. In other words, shifting from a process-driven approach (where learning takes place at a time and place convenient to the L&D department) to a business-focused one, where learning occurs in the context of work, and sticks because of it.

The practical impact of this will be a smarter use of mobile learning technologies. There will be less emphasis on porting existing courses onto smart devices, and more playing to the strengths of hand-held technologies: delivering short videos for in-situ performance support, expert search, alerts, and the use of physical prompts to make it possible to retrieve information relevant to a particular context.

This use of learning technologies will facilitate learning in the workflow by being embedded in people's daily work. This is a long way from the sterile environment of the classroom. The ultimate measure of success will be when people learn, in context, by picking up information that is directly useful to them. When that happens, they don't call it learning. They call it 'doing the job better.'

4. Leader understanding reaches critical mass

Slowly, business leadership is coming to understand the impact of knowledge sharing on business performance—helped recently by McKinsey's study which reported the untapped business value of social technologies across the US economy at \$1.3 trillion. As a result we can expect a tipping point of understanding to be reached where social technologies become the norm for general business use.

When the marketplace reaches this point, there will be an escalation in organizations using rapid knowledge transfer to improve performance. This could be likened to The 100 Monkeys Effect or the shift from early adopter to the early majority status on Rogers' Innovation Diffusion Curve.

The move to knowledge sharing is no different from how workforce behavior changed and adopted new ways of working with all new technology advances from the telephone to the fax to the email to the web. However, it does bring with it certain implications: a challenge and an opportunity.

When social technologies become a business norm, knowledge sharing will escalate. As the old paradigm of jealously guarding information for personal gain becomes outmoded, so the benefits of sharing and its adoption will become more prevalent. The potential for L&D is clear: if it can help in this process, then it can improve both its standing within the organization and its impact.

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The other side of this opportunity, though, is a direct challenge to L&D.

Information sharing is easy. Making the most of that information is not. That is something which skilled professionals—L&D professionals—should be directly involved in. But those seduced by the ease of implementation of an internal networking platform, or by the rapidity of problem-solving among truly collaborative teams, may question why their organizations need an L&D function at all. At that point, the challenge to L&D is clear: step up to the opportunities that social learning represents, or risk irrelevance.

5. The emergence of the true learning and development professional

Now and in the future, corporations will see the emergence of L&D professionals who are truly focused on the effect they produce on the business. The L&D profession has gone through three states of evolution. Yesterday's professionals were entirely concerned with pushing out information through courses. Today's hybrid uses both push techniques and some technological and pull techniques to share information and stimulate conversations. But tomorrow's L&D professional will step back from full focus on creating and delivering content, seeing it as one part of their role. They will see their role expand to establish systems where employees can learn from each other and put in place filtering systems to enable the best information for a particular need to be found as quickly as possible. This will involve a combination of creative thinking, collaboration with the business and focus on speed and delivery against business objectives.

It is no coincidence that the learning profession itself is currently reviewing the skills it thinks it needs. The US-based ASTD has completely revised its Competency Model, because the 'training and development profession has undergone significant transformation in the last decade.' Meanwhile, the UK's Learning and Performance Institute launched its own Capability Map for the L&D profession, aimed at describing the skills of the learning profession. Of the 27 skills it describes, four fall into the category of 'Collaborative working.' The profession is undoubtedly changing.

Corporate entities are at a turning point for learning and development. From being the department for training, it can now become the place that helps learning happen faster, and information flow more smoothly, all with a focus on improving performance.



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