The Social Learning Revolution

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“A revolution is a fundamental change in power or organizational structures that takes place in a relatively short period of time.” (Wikipedia)

How we have traditionally understood “learning” to happen

For a long time now it has been the function of the Training Department to be responsible for “learning” in the workplace. The prime role of this function (relatively recently renamed as the Learning & Development Department) has been to package-up and organize learning events – both internally and externally – either in the form of face-to-face workshops or as e-learning courses – or even as blended solutions. Training departments have also had the responsibility of tracking and managing this “learning” - usually with the help of some form of training or learning management system.
And that is how managers and other parts of the business see the function of training too: simply to create and deliver courses to solve perceived learning problems – because that is the way they have been conditioned to think about “learning” as my colleague, Harold Jarche, has already pointed out:

“Since the latter half of the 20th century, we have gone through a period where training departments have been directed to control organizational learning. It was part of the Taylorist, industrial model that also compartmentalized work and ensured that only managers were allowed to make decisions. In this context, only training professionals were allowed to talk about learning”

In most cases this training requires participants to take time out of their daily jobs – often going to a separate place or room. Although more recently learners have been able to sit at their own desks and complete online course, they still have to stop what they are working on in order to study the course.

But things are changing …

**How we really learn in the workplace**

Firstly, it has become clear that most of how we learn to do our jobs happens **outside** training – in the workplace itself, as we do our jobs. Some studies state this accounts for around 80% of learning that takes place in the workplace, others even higher.
But let us be clear, the way that we learn here is very different from the way we learn in training. Whereas (most) training content is structured and follows a logical progression through a body of material, learning in the workplace is unstructured, some even call it “messy”.

For instance, we might learn from reading a document, from viewing a presentation, even from small pieces of random information we overhear, or by observing activities that our colleagues undertake.

We might learn intentionally (i.e. we might set out to find something out) or quite unintentionally. (Here’s a very simple example to explain the difference. So, if I ask someone “how do I unjam this printer?” and watch as they show me how to do it – that is intentional. But if I just happen to be standing beside the printer when it jams and I look on as someone else unjams it - that is unintentional.)

Sometimes we might not even be aware that we have learned about something or how to do something, until at some later stage we realise we know about or how to do that very thing.

This type of learning (often termed informal learning) might seem trifling – trivial even – but is actually very important. As one academic study points out:

“Most people instinctively know that they become competent in their jobs through learning as they perform those jobs ... and
that through this process they acquire knowledge and skills which are so entwined with the job, that they are referred to as ‘tacit’.

And whereas explicit or book knowledge can be easily codified into courses, tacit knowledge cannot.

Furthermore, this type of informal learning happens both individually – as people go about their personal daily tasks – as well as socially – when we are with others.

Social learning is therefore not a new term or training trend, it is something that has been happening since time immemorial – both inside and outside organisations – as we learn with and from others.

So we might learn from others (intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously) by asking questions of our colleagues, through discussions in meetings, or even in casual conversations by the proverbial watercooler. And, it is also in social learning that powerful insights to problems often arise that have been generated by the collective wisdom of employees.

Up to fairly recently, training departments have not really been interested in informal learning for many reasons:
• For some, it is irrelevant, since it hasn't been “delivered” by experts and doesn't involve studying or memorization.
• For others it’s too intangible, even invisible.
• And for yet others, since it can't be measured or managed in the traditional training ways, they don’t believe it is within their remit to worry about it.

But, once again things are changing ... informal learning is becoming even more potent in the workplace ... and this of course is where social media comes in.

**How we are using social media in the workplace**

What we are seeing now is that workers who have used social media in their personal lives now recognise how valuable they can be in their professional lives, as well as within their organisations for working and learning.

They realise they now have the tools to more quickly and more easily solve their own learning and performance problems, without leaving the workflow to do so – since the solution is just one-click away in their browser.

In doing so they are by-passing both IT and L&D departments.

Back in April 2011 Forrester Research estimated that around 47% of business users were doing this and expected the number to rise to 60% in 2011, and an article in CLO
magazine said that between 1/3 and 2/3 of employees were meeting their needs by working around L&D departments.

My own analysis of the situation – looking at the contributions to my Top 100 Tools activity over the list 5 years –shows this is an increasing trend.

In Summer 2011 I took a closer look at how people are using social media tools in the workplace. Here is a summary of what I found.

In general, people are using social media tools – quite autonomously – in 5 main areas:

1. for continuous personal and professional learning/development
2. for professional networking
3. for knowledge sharing
4. for collaborative working
5. for productivity and performance improvement

And here are some specific examples

- People are using Google to search the Social Web for solutions to their problems rather than using the internal LMS to search for courses.
- They prefer to solve their problems by accessing quick and simple resources on sites like YouTube, Slideshare and Wikipedia – in other words using resources that other individuals have created and freely shared – but...
which can prove to be valuable performance support resources.

- They are also happy to share what they know - using the very same social tools.

- They rely on a trusted network of colleagues (aka a Personal Knowledge or Learning Network – PKN/PLN) that they have built in public social networking services like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, as well as in private communities. And they interact with these colleagues in different ways, e.g.
  - to ask and answer questions
  - to share and receive ideas, resources and experiences
  - to solve problems and brainstorm together
  - to keep up to date with what their colleagues are doing and thinking
  - to learn from them in many different ways – sometimes even without even realising it!

- They keep themselves up to date with what is happening in their industry or profession through blog and news feeds as well as aggregated and curated content from their peers.

- And they constantly review their productivity in order to find better ways to do their jobs using new social media tools.

So what has the Training response been to this?
How the Training Department is responding

Some training departments have begun to incorporate social media into their face-to-face workshops or have included social elements into their online courses. Often this has been done by “blending” informal, social approaches with formal approaches, or by trying to embed formal approaches in the workflow – e.g. you go on a course and then you keep up with the course-related discussions in a learning community after the course.

This use of social media in training, however, still employs the traditional, top-down approach to learning; it doesn’t actually support informal, social learning – as it is happening naturally, continuously and spontaneously in the workplace.

“Social learning”, however, has become the latest buzzword in the training industry, and some product vendors are now using the term to actively market their products. My colleague Jay Cross, visiting an expo in Paris very recently remarked.

“Lots of French vendors are touting social learning although they no more get it than American LMS providers promising systems to manage informal learning. One outfit here claimed to deliver social learning experiences on CD-ROM. Catalog of courses? Social? Huh?”

So one word of advice when buying new products is to understand what “social learning” actually means to that vendor, and whether it helps with creating formal social
learning experiences or whether it can really support the natural, continuous, social learning that takes place in the workplace – which is a very different thing.

So how can L&D actually support social learning in the workflow – because it is a matter of “supporting” it, rather than “organising” and “managing” it?

Before we get onto that, there’s still a bit more of the story to tell – because now we are seeing the emergence of the “social business”.

The emergence of social businesses

More and more organisations now appreciate the power of social media. Many have seen its value for marketing and promotion of their business to their customers (e.g. using Facebook pages and Twitter), and are now realising it has an important part to play internally for employee collaboration and engagement.

Some of these organisations are now implementing their own internal social and collaboration platforms – either by upgrading their intranets into social intranets, or by adding extra social functionality onto their existing systems, using tools like Yammer, Smartforce, Chatter, Jive and so forth.

As they do this, knowledge sharing and collaborative working are becoming key features of the new social business, and what is more (informal) social learning is becoming its blood stream.
So what effect will this have on the Training function? Well, my colleague, Jay Cross says this:

“As all business becomes social business, L&D professionals face a momentous choice. They can remain Chief Training Officers and instructors who get novices up to speed, deliver events required by compliance, and run in-house schools. These folks will be increasingly out of step with the times.

Or they can become business leaders who shape learning cultures, social networks, collaborative practices, information flows, federated content management, just-in-time performance support, customer feedback mechanisms, and structures for continuous improvement.”

These are tough words, but it is clear that L&D can have a huge role to play in the emerging social business, although the function will need to change in order to do so. In fact, some L&D departments are already changing – and by doing so are playing a big part in helping to shape the future of their organisations. So what changes need to take place?

The new role of the learning function
The learning function will need to provide a much broader range of services than hitherto. Based on my analysis of how people are already using social media in the workplace and the future needs of the business, I believe there will be four main
service areas required, which I propose in a Workforce Development Services (WSD) Framework.

Larger version of this image appears in this Appendix

1. **Training Services** - The need for creating, delivering and managing formal training (aka “push learning”) will remain. But this will likely include more social approaches, like learning communities. But there will also be opportunities to integrate formal training into the workflow as much as possible through the use of working tools.

2. **Performance Support Services** – These services focus on supporting the use of “pull” resources by individuals – when they need them to do their jobs – both via internally created content or by use of resources on the social Web. This will help individuals use the Social Web effectively, safely and responsibly to locate useful external informational and instructional resources, as well as how to keep up to date with what is happening.
in their industry or profession – using Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) techniques.

3. **Workforce Collaboration Services** – These services focus on helping people work collaboratively in teams and groups and on helping them build communities of practice. Note: these are not traditional training services, but involve the development of a range of collaboration and community skills to enable groups and teams to become self-reliant in their work – by modelling behaviours – and might include:
   a. helping individuals build a trusted Personal Knowledge Network (PKN) of (internal and external) colleagues who they can call upon for advice and support
   b. helping teams set up and sustain an internal community of practice – to improve knowledge sharing within their team
   c. helping teams co-create and share content within their team – to support one another’s learning and performance

4. **Performance Consulting Services** – These services would focus on identifying the root cause of performance problems and proposing appropriate solutions, which might well be training, but are more likely to be performance support or workforce collaboration solutions. This will be a key service in the WSD Framework as it will serve as the main entry point to the department. In other words, instead of managers coming with requests for courses, they (will need to) come with requests for help with performance problems.
However, there may well be other entry points directly into the different service areas. For example, Compliance and Regulation might work directly with Training Services, and as businesses transition to social business another entry point might be direct to Workforce Collaboration Services.

Having said that, there is likely to be a high level of overlap in the services provided - as shown in the 2nd part of the WDS Framework below – particularly between Performance Support and Working Smarter services.

Although this framework does not recommend the amount of effort that should be spent in each service area, with a Performance Consulting Service in place, it is anticipated that the amount of training organised will reduce quite considerably over time, as other activities are shown to be effective.

In terms of tools and systems, the view of the Internet Time Alliance as well as others in the industry is that the hub of
“social learning” in a social business won’t be a training system (like a LMS - social or otherwise) – but the social and collaboration platform that an organisation uses to power the work in the business. It may well be that an LMS will continue to be required for compliance training, but in the longer term we believe it is likely to become a feature, function or even plugin of the organisation’s social intranet.

Clearly all this won’t happen overnight, but there are already changes in the way that some L&D departments are moving forward in the Social Learning Revolution. Indeed some are already well ahead of the game.

Although a first step might well be rebadging the department as a Workforce Development Department in order to send out the right message to the rest of the organisation, it will take more than just a name change to be successful. Since the new department will be offering a range of new services, this will require new roles, new practices and new skills of workplace learning professionals.

The key difference, however, in this new Department will be a **new mindset.** This means recognizing it will no longer be just about using traditional “command and control” approaches (that are employed in most training solutions to try and force people to learn), but will be much more about encouraging people to engage in new collaborative activities to support one another as they work, by helping them to “connect and collaborate”. Through collaboration there is a symbiotic relationship between “collaborative working” and “collaborative learning”. This, of course will be
a key feature of building and supporting the collaborative culture of a social business.

Workforce Development Professionals will also require a **wider skillset** than before. It won’t just require instructional design or LMS administration, but performance consulting, business, social media, collaboration and community management/leadership skills. However, as the Department will (due to the overlap of service areas) require a high level of teamwork, this would allow for specialization in key areas, and means that not everyone will need to have all the new skills.

However, what it will mean is **a whole new approach** to supporting organizational learning.

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**The Internet Time Alliance** helps organizations work smarter. We advise organizations how to get their people working and innovating in Internet time. Social, collaborative learning enables corporations to draw strength from the competence, ingenuity, and autonomy of their people. Our clients minimize time to performance, increase responsiveness to customers, and challenge workers and partners to be all they can be.

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Appendix

**Workforce Development Services Framework 1/2**

We have a performance problem?

**Performance Consulting Services**
- identifying performance problems and appropriate solutions, carrying out workflow audits
  - performance consulting skills
  - social media
  - business skills

**Training Services**
- designing/delivering/managing “push” solutions
- f2f workshops/e-learning/blended learning
- incorporating social media, learning communities
- instructional design skills
- project management skills
- training, facilitation learning administrator, social media & community skills

**Performance Support Services**
- supporting use of “pull” resources
  - internal: creating job aids & repurposing courseware
  - external: supporting use of the Social Web (content, tools & networks)
- information design skills
- job aid design skills
- social media skills
- personal knowledge management, PKM/PKN

**Workforce Collaboration Services**
- helping teams/groups to work (and learn) collaboratively, through connecting, sharing, co-creating content, conversations, etc, coaching & mentoring (internally and externally)
- modelling of collaboration and community skills
- social media
- community management, business skills

Supporting compliance and regulatory training

Supporting the emerging social business

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