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Social Learning:
The Future of Education
In Enterprise

Foreword

For the past 50 years, the large majority of training delivered in the corporate enterprise has relied on a centralized structure – with a single person or team planning for, creating and delivering content to employees. But in recent years, savvy enterprises have recognized that by building strategies around "Social Learning" - the process by which employees learn from peers within their organization – a more effective means of education can be achieved that yields greater results at a reduced cost.

While social learning has always played a role in an employee's learning process, with the significant increase in peer-to-peer communication happening as a result of the use of social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and others, employees are bringing that passion for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing to the workplace– and now more than ever - are prone to seeking out these types of peer-to-peer interactions in the office.

In this paper, we aim to bring to the forefront key trends in the evolution of social learning within the enterprise, and highlight key considerations for companies to think through as they develop and roll out their own social learning strategies.

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The Backdrop for Social Learning

You spend what on training?

In 2015, US companies will spend well over $160 Billion training their employees. While there is no arguing the value of employee development and its positive effect on training new hires, developing internal expertise and helping employees progress through their careers, the general consensus is that training is not getting the ROI organizations are hoping for. In a 2014 study conducted by TinyHR, 66% of respondents stated that they did not see the opportunity to grow within their organizations. How could only 34% of US employees be the beneficiaries of a $160 Billion spend?
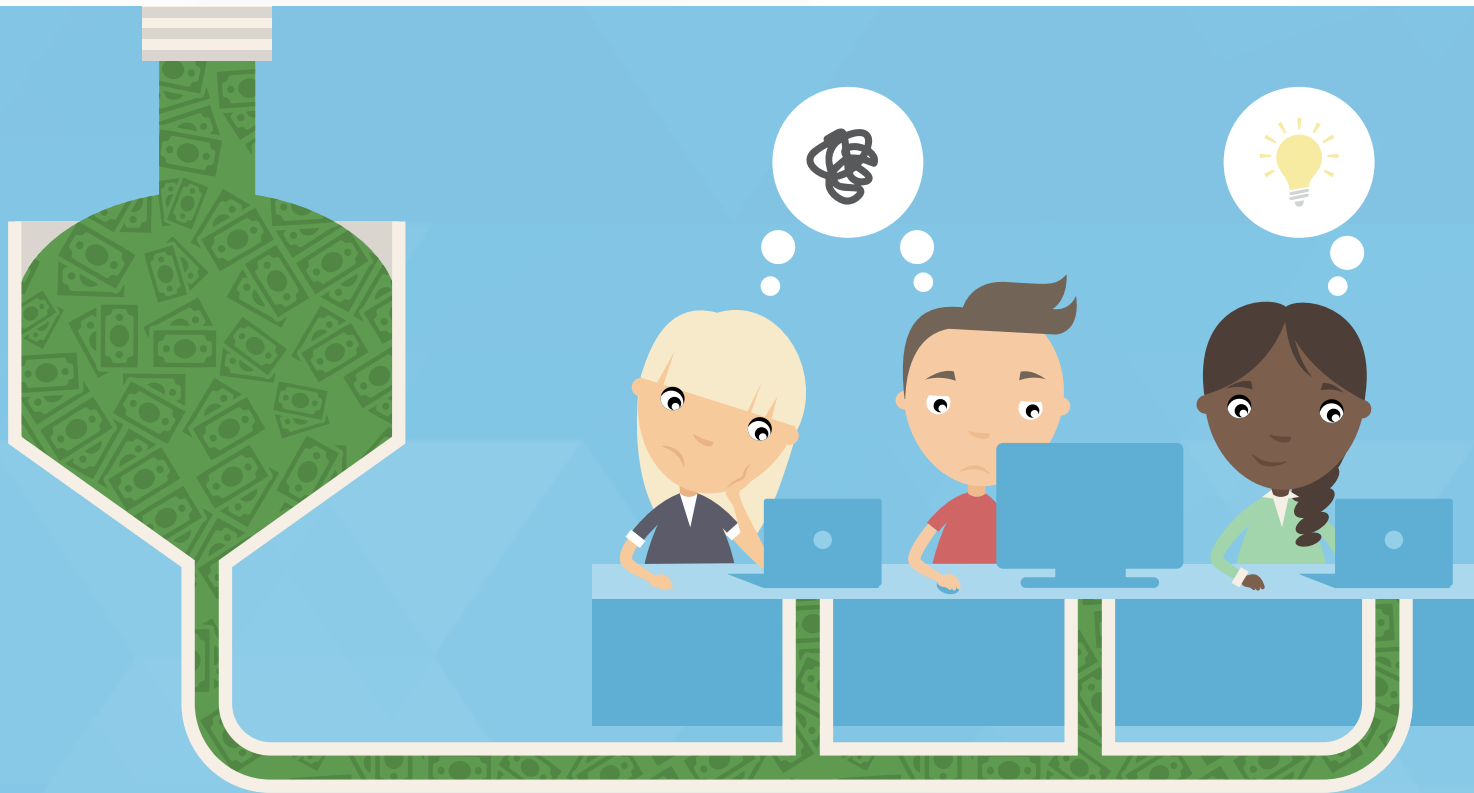
Organizations are spending a lot of money on training, employees are requiring training to be delivered as a prerequisite to staying and yet most employees are not seeing the development they need in order to make the commitment.

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Why Social Learning now?

Social media has already found its way into organizations. 49% of Millennials use some form of social tools for workplace collaboration according to a study conducted by Queens University of Charlotte.

The efficacy of these new tools is not limited to collaboration. When employees are charged with training and developing their peers there is a positive impact on performance, engagement and creativity as employees tend to respect the thoughts and guidance of those who have performed the role before them. In a recent initiative spearheaded by Harvard Business School around the launch of their social learning program, researchers found that remarkably, 90% of inquiries from students were precisely and accurately answered by a peer!

By focusing on social learning, companies can enhance the formal training they are offering. Rather then try and use formal training as a panacea for all employee development challenges, organizations now have multiple options to use to get their employees up to speed and beyond. They can select the best method of training for each situation and not be overly dependant on one modality. For example, a company may choose to deliver compliance training via formal classroom or online training, while other areas such as technical training, or role-specific skill training can rely more so on peer-to-peer channels.

In addition, as markets, technologies and organizational strategies change so frequently, it is extremely challenging for most training departments to keep their materials up to date. By leveraging their workforce for employee development, trainers can have relevant subject matter experts train others on areas with rapid change and focus their efforts on materials and subjects that may have a longer shelf life.

49% OF MILLENNIALS USE SOME FORM OF SOCIAL TOOLS FOR WORKPLACE COLLABORATION -QUEENS UNIVERSITY OF CHARLOTTE STUDY

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Key Considerations

Social Learning Defined: Key building blocks of your Social Learning Strategy

As organizations plot their respective paths in Social Learning, there are a handful of key elements to consider integrating into their plans. While specific execution details will vary based on company size, the respective industry and importantly, the unique aspects of the company's culture, these key themes are broadly applicable and should be considered to ensure success in Social Learning.

Connecting Employees With Experts - At Scale

All organizations, regardless of size, face the challenge of identifying their experts and connecting them to the people who need their expertise. Members of your team need to understand "who do I go to for what?" in order to problem solve effectively and keep work moving forward smoothly. Employees may default to "who is closest?" (i.e. who is sitting next to me who might know) instead of connecting with the colleague who has the most applicable set of knowledge. Key knowledge can even be lost if expert employees remain poorly identified. This challenge is exacerbated in geographically dispersed environments, where expertise is by its very nature, spread out.

In addition to this proximity effect, employees - many of whom have grown up using Google and other "instant gratification" sources - will grow frustrated as they search for experts within the company. Technological connections can help Millennials find the right people within your organization and thereby obtain the resources to do their jobs most effectively, another key to retention.

As companies develop their social learning deployment strategies, identifying the way in which you'll catalog employee expertise and make it available and searchable by others, is central and foundational to ensuring adoption and success.

New Hire Onboarding

You're never asked "if" any new hires are coming on board within the next 3 months: it's always "how many". Unfortunately, success in a new company is far from guaranteed: according to a BambooHR study, 31% of new hires quit within the first 6 months!

The rapid pace of change with today's teams and projects adds to the challenge: formal onboarding programs require nearly constant maintenance in order to stay relevant and provide new hires with complete and accurate information. How can we help new hires succeed when onboarding is such a moving target?

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Again, the best answer lies with the employees who will be working most closely with each new hire. After all, they know the work best! Informal training by close colleagues is the most customizable and scalable solution for new hire onboarding. HR can take care of the fairly steady organizational training and compliance requirements, and then let the new hire's team take it from there. HR can also provide flexible scaffolding – checklists, discussion templates, and key goals –to help the team ensure that all the bases are covered and in a timely fashion.

Of course, not everyone is a natural coach! There are additional opportunities to help employees learn how to best guide new colleagues: how to prepare, to check if things are clear, and to provide resources including key documentation and connections to the extended team. As companies contemplate their own social learning strategies, inclusion of a robust peer-to-peer based training program is a critical component to consider.

Informal One-to-Many Knowledge Transfer (e.g. " Lunch And Learns", "Brown Bags")

People are naturally curious about what others are doing, including their colleagues, and are eager to learn about new tools or challenges others are facing. You can help transform that curiosity into innovation and problem solving by simply providing opportunities for informal one-to-many discussions as part of your social learning strategy. Often called "Lunch and Learns" or "Brown Bags", these informal sessions can form a stable foundation on which to build a culture of peer-to-peer knowledge share.

Tech leader Bit.ly has an established tradition of weekly Lunch'n'learns, complete with catered food and a wide range of topics. The events have a spirit of comfortable friendliness and speakers can talk about whatever subject they choose, from professional to personal.

The Bit.ly team identified three key benefits of the program that make it well worth the price of lunch. It helped drive transparency and understanding through the organization, it built community across teams and also— importantly— helped to foster a culture of learning and growth throughout the company.

There are several ways to establish a lunch'n'learn program for your organization. Larger ones involving multiple teams will need some support with logistics and communications, but smaller events can simply use a budget for food or some other fun incentives. They can even be one-on-one discussions: "lunch roulette" is a novel method for shaking up lunch routines that even has its own app for companies. Talk with your teams and develop a system that works best for your culture and structure.

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Job Shadowing

Another key pillar to a vibrant social learning structure is the development of "Job Shadowing" programs. These programs give your employees valuable insight into their colleagues' roles is through job shadowing, in which one employee unobtrusively follows or "shadows" another to observe their work. This doesn't have to be a constant interaction — employees schedule certain times or meetings in advance, or an employee can simply tap the shadower on the shoulder if something of interest arises. It can also be a group effort, with the shadower following different individuals throughout the day. However it's structured, job shadowing provides a fast and effective way to teach an employee what a role "really" means.

Why would you use job shadowing? For new hires, shadowing an experienced employee can provide an invaluable part of onboarding. The technique also has several uses for current employees: gaining a better understanding of a complimentary team's work, preparing a high performer for a promotion, or providing a low-risk "sanity check" for someone evaluating a career shift.

Like many other informal learning techniques, you can get as creative as you want with job shadowing. The New York City Bar Association offers "Job Shadow Week" to high-potential high school students through its Thurgood Marshall Summer Law Internship Program. Participants include major news organizations, political and advocacy groups, major financial firms, and many more. Programs like this are excellent recruitment efforts as well as beneficial to the wider community.

Mentoring

Mentoring is by far the most sought-after perk in any business: this form of interpersonal investment provides an employee a strong sense of being valued. It's a fantastic way to train and retain top talent without spending tons of time or money – a good mentoring discussion can be as simple as meeting for lunch.

Mentorship is also meant to be a longer-term commitment and should be structured as such. Have all parties commit to regularly scheduled discussions early in the relationship. Provide opportunities for discussions in both formal and informal contexts: cheeseburgers are good, but feedback after a presentation is especially valuable.

While these mentoring programs may require a more significant investment to get off the ground, they can serve as key elements to an organization's social learning strategy.

Next Steps

Where do you go from here?

As you plot your own course, you may find the implementation of a social learning daunting. However, if you look around your organization, you'll likely be able to identify a number of programs and practices that have popped up organically at your company. Taking inventory of the existing programs you have in place can be a great place to start, and should allow you to develop a roadmap that takes into account the current programs and key initiatives that will be launched to deliver on your own social learning goals.

The expectations of employees are increasing, and as social media usage continues to increase, so do the expectations that they will bring to the workplace. Companies should move swiftly to evaluate their own current state with respect to social learning, and build their own roadmaps to fill critical gaps. As you contemplate rolling these solutions out, you should also consider leveraging technology to ensure appropriate scalability of your specific social learning solution (the showd.me platform is one tool that companies may consider). Regardless of the technology chosen though, it is critical that companies act quickly to ensure they are developing their own social learning strategy.

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