## training

# SOCIAL LEARNING:

Trend or Transformation?

The emerging role of social learning in training and development

BY:

training TOP10 Hall of Fame

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ocial networking became the rallying cry for a generation that connects over the Internet as easily as previous generations communicated over the telephone. In fact, many Millennials entering the workforce actually prefer social media to spoken conversations.

Now, savvy trainers are leveraging the technologies that enable Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and blogs, among other options, to deliver learning—not just because they can, but because using specific media supports their training goals.

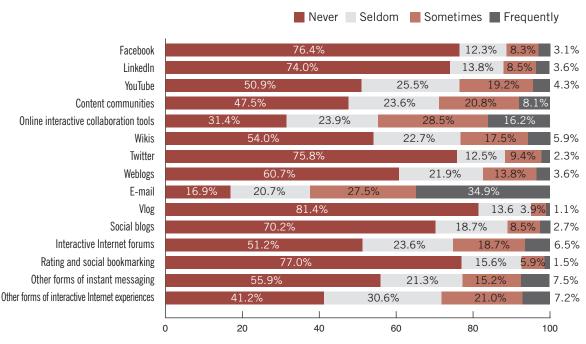
But what exactly is social media, and should it have a role in training? Many training organizations are grappling with those questions today. Training Top 10 Hall of Fame members, through this whitepaper, seek to make their decisions easier and well-informed by clarifying issues, exploring the roles of social media in training, and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the many types of social media available. Throughout this paper, realworld examples are discussed, along with insights from thought leaders in the training industry.

### The Now, Wow, and Pow of Social Learning

Social learning media is the natural evolution of technology-enabled communications. In the 1980s, when individuals needed specific information, they picked up the telephone or walked to a colleague's office. By the mid-1990s, they e-mailed. Now, they check Wikipedia, YouTube, and blogs, or crowd-source the information—asking questions on a networking site to pick the brains of many within a few hours—while they continue their work. In that application, social networks are like technology-enabled cocktail parties. They can stimulate awareness, desire, and knowledge; create or enhance capabilities; and reinforce behaviors and beliefs.

But the information is only as good as the source. When the information is questionable, others quickly

#### To what extent does your organization use the following social learning and networking tools to deliver training?



SOURCE: TRAINING MAGAZINE SURVEY OF 905 RESPONDENTS.

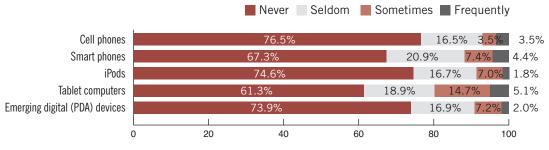
challenge the comments. When it is consistently reliable, the contributors become known as subject matter experts and, thus, enhance their own reputations while increasing the knowledge and resources available throughout the enterprise. Likewise, when CEOs blog or tweet, everyone following them gains perspectives that otherwise would have been confined to the executive suite. Learners who access blogs, crowd-sourcing, and other social learning options have the potential to gain expert insights and expose themselves to sources and viewpoints they would not normally encounter. Social learning is revolutionary for the contacts that are made as much as for the information. Booz Allen Hamilton is among those reaping the benefits. Social media has increased the potential for collaboration at all levels of the company and throughout geographies—something that is particularly vital for employees working at client sites. It helps employees remain closely connected with each other and with the company.

Social learning also is known for the speed with which information flows. For example, online materials can be updated as changes occur. A conference

attendee can tweet about the conference to share information or post a blog that evening, rather than returning to the office and writing a memo three days later. Crowd-sourcing—a.k.a., electronic brainstorming—can elicit insights in hours that which otherwise may take days or weeks. Social learning tools often enable people to do the same things they have done before, only better, faster, and cheaper. This is the power of social learning.

That said, social learning is not a panacea for all training needs. But it does serve as a tool that can enhance technical training, as well as soft skills. The challenge, therefore, is to leverage the transformative potential of social learning while remaining focused on the organization's training and learning vision and goals.

#### To what extent does your organization use the following mobile devices to deliver training?



SOURCE: TRAINING MAGAZINE SURVEY OF 905 RESPONDENTS.

### The Social Learning Tool Kit

Today's tools for social interaction rely upon highly accessible, scalable, interactive communications techniques. Wifi networks extended their reach, making

on-the-fly Internet access nearly ubiquitous. Waiting time is now an opportunity to listen to podcasts, check blogs, tweet, and visit networking sites. Just-in-time training is

> only a click away. Included in the social learning tool kit are: Blogs: Written blogs, video

blogs (called vlogs), and very short microblogs (such as Twitter) all can promote communication within an organization. Produced regularly, they must include valuable insights and news to build a loyal following. Blogs and vlogs combined were used frequently by 4 percent of 905 *Training* survey respondents to deliver training. PwC, for example, has a variety of blogs written from its global sites, in the local language. They dis-

Microblogs: Twitter and Instant Messaging (IM) are among the better-known microblogging media. These communication platforms broadcast short messages to defined groups for instant updates and breaking news, as well as file sharing. These microblogs may be broadcast via text messaging or instant messaging to mobile and fixed devices. According to Training's survey, Twitter was used by

cuss such issues as international

merger and acquisition news and

strategies, tax insights, and what

financial reporting standards.

recruits can expect.

#### **CASE STUDY:** IBM Connections and Purposeful Design

IBM is focusing on the overwhelming amount of learning that occurs socially by intentionally aligning people and resources to understand and promote the value of a social learning strategy. This initiative harnesses IBM Connections to blend social media around existing learning experiences, as well as create new learning opportunities that are socially aligned. Social media is helping close knowledge gaps in a global business that is transforming rapidly.

The goal is to recreate the type of collaboration common in smaller organizations and apply it to one of the largest organizations in the world. Because of the rapid pace and the demand for immediacy, leveraging the collective wisdom of IBM employees globally to solve challenges and develop talent reduces the burden on single individuals, events, or classes.

In 2010, IBM formally aligned learning resources to support its overall talent management strategy to create a culture of participation, conversation, community, connectedness, and transparency. To achieve those goals, social learning technologies were deployed for niche applications, such as IBM's YouQ for crowd-sourcing, blended into specific learning programs such as the Technical Leader Exchange, and in systemic implementations such as communities, forums, blogs, wikis, and profiles. Access is intuitive.

Using social media, the "one-to-many" learning model is augmented with a "many-to-many" model that helps rapidly expand the knowledge base and also disseminates institutional knowledge that otherwise could be lost as workers retire. That approach already is proving cost-effective, efficient, and almost natural as a learning process.

The greatest challenge for trainers is the subtlety of working in a social business culture. Unlike traditional learning, there's no discernible center or single measurement point. The culture of connectedness is, by its very definition, unstructured and, thus, unlike previous talent development approaches.

nearly 12 percent of respondents to deliver training, and Instant Messaging was used by another 23 percent.

Wikis: Wikipedia has become the go-to site for a broad range of information. As the people's encyclopedia, users can add to and edit listings as conditions change. Links to source materials often are included, which enhances reliability. Training organizations can create their own wiki pages behind their own firewalls for specific groups and projects, which are editable only by members of those groups. The broad contributions help keep the page current and relevant. They were used by approximately 23.5 percent of organizations in *Training's* survey.

Communities of Interest: Like the special interest groups found on LinkedIn and other networking sites, communities of interest are similar to online associations in that they provide information, news, and threaded discussions, all focused around a particular topic. Public communities typically are open to members of relevant industries, and often to the media covering those industries. KLA-Tencor supports special

functional and social communities behind its own firewall to protect intellectual property while encouraging the free exchange of ideas and expertise. Communities of interest were used by 29 percent of *Training* survey respondents to deliver training.

**Internet Forums:** Moderated forums evolved from bulletin boards as a place for members to discuss topics on particular themes. They may be elements in communities of interest. Unlike chat rooms, these discussions are archived at least temporarily. They were used by approximately 25 percent of *Training* survey respondents to deliver training.

Social Networking: Sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn feature member profiles and activity updates. PwC also uses these sites for recruiting and to help employees form their own communities. PwC's LinkedIn site, for example, lets job candidates track the career paths of graduate trainees already with the firm, while a Facebook page in the UK helps recruits establish their own communities of interest, even before signing

> on. According to the *Training* survey, training professionals used Facebook 11.4 percent of the time and LinkedIn 12 percent of the time to deliver training.

> Audio and Video: YouTube has evolved as the Web video resource. Organizations now use it to present short training topics and product demonstrations. Likewise, podcasts are becoming popular for expert interviews. Nearly 24 percent of *Training* survey respondents used such tools to deliver content.

> **Webinars:** Archived videos of conferences and Web-based training make scheduling less important and travel budgets irrelevant. Some presentations are extracted and are available on speakers' corporate Websites, on the conference site, or in the corporate library. TEDx, for example, dedicates itself to

#### **CASE STUDY:** PwC Tweets

PwC, formerly PricewaterhouseCoopers, has 175,000 employees in 154 countries. To help communicate with them. Chairman Dennis Nally tweets. So does U.S. Chairman Bob Moritz. These brief communications aren't expected to detail new policies or strategies but to enhance organizational connectivity. Establishing and fostering that connectivity, according to Nally, is as important as new products and services, and research and development.

The U.S. Twitter site. PwC LLP. follows 55 entities. These often are the tweets from PwC's offices around the world or tweets dedicated to specific issues. The company's U.S. Twitter account has more than 13,700 followers. Recently PwC provided new survey data, links to conferences, and thoughts on leadership, among other topics. They offer a quick way to peruse recent news that's valuable in the workplace.

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"ideas worth sharing" and hosts global, themed discussions and expert presentations on a variety of thought-provoking subjects.

Games and Simulations: Siemens and Marriott each employ online games to enhance learning. Siemens uses "Plantville" to train manufacturing employees and to increase awareness of roles beyond their own. Marriott's "MvMarriottHotel" on Facebook helps recruit employees globally and also helps interest students in the hospitality industry. The company says the site also enhances brand awareness.

Ernst & Young employs Second Life simulations,

using avatars in simulated real-world environments, to train auditors to take inventory. In the simulation, employees enter a virtual cookie factory, talk with people, drive a forklift, and see damaged products in the warehouse and on the loading dock. At the end of the simulation, those trained in a virtual environment showed a better grasp of real-world complexities, while classroom trainees exhibited a false sense of confidence.

E-mail: The most popular—and oldest—social technology in Training's survey, e-mail is used by nearly 63 percent of respondents, followed by online interactive collaboration tools at 45 percent.

#### CASE STUDY: KLA-Tencor's Communities of Interest

Behind KLA-Tencor's firewall, communities of interest address specific business functionalities, as well as social interests. The technical communities emerged from grassroots activities. For example, as social media became available, engineers leveraged customized tools to segue from their e-mail contacts to social forums, similar to wikis and other types of communications, eventually culminating in communities of interest, all behind the corporate firewall. Now, the communities are linked to technical databases, which provide manufacturers' specifications, field tracking information, and other expertise as needed.

These communities of interest address the issues surrounding tools under development and have created a robust database to leverage information to resolve recurring issues in-house and during tool installations. A similar database was developed on the service and application side, so engineers can access resources easily for system recipe setup, system repairs, upgrades, and best practices.

Discussions are among the most valuable capabilities of communities of interest. Questions that

often took days in the era before cell phones can be answered in minutes. These threaded discussions reflect the real-world insights of those closest to the issue. To ensure the quality—and usefulness—of the site, KLA-Tencor established a small quality board to review posts quarterly.

In creating communities of interest, KLA-Tencor advises identifying their goals, the areas that will create the greatest value, the purpose for each community, the issues that must be considered, and the right people for the communities. To succeed, communities also need a governance structure to establish the rules and guide their evolution. KLA-Tencor recommends starting small. For a community to be useful, it must be populated with valuable information for the specific community.

KLA-Tencor's Corporate Learning vision is that everyone is a teacher and everyone is a student. Therefore, the learning operation partners with employees on how best to use the communities of interest, recognizing that the communities are merely one of many learning tools.

### Implementing and Integrating Social Learning

The technologies seem ubiquitous, but implementing them effectively triggers significant concerns about protecting intellectual property and ensuring

privacy and the relative merits of private and public sites. At its best, social learning augments existing programs, providing resources individuals and

#### How to Make Social Collaboration Happen Right Now

A few critical steps can change your team and business forever.

While social media presents infinite possibilities for learning, collaborating, communicating, and innovating, none of it means anything without the simple human process of generating great ideas. Before your employees start dabbling in blogs, tweets, and wikis, they need better ways to brainstorm in order to come up with ideas worth sharing. Some tips:

- Turn any group into an idea factory. Set a time limit, go from person to person, and generate as many ideas as you can.
- Resist the irresistible urge to edit. Never shoot down an idea that sounds unusual.
- Relax and inspire. Keep things open, be supportive of teammates, and build on their ideas. Genius happens when people feel free.

The trick is to make this happen every day, on every team. Then their ideas have a chance of becoming reality as they share and develop them through collaboration tools such as:

- File sharing: Tools such as Box.net and Dropbox allow teams to share files easily.
- Knowledge management: Blogs and wikis allow for easy access to information.

- Project management: Tools such as Basecamp help users manage shared tasks and timelines.
- Cloud applications: Applications such as Google Docs can be accessed for free from any computer.

As one of today's world leaders in talent development, American Management Association (AMA) is all about creating the learning experiences that work best for its customers. AMA (www.amanet.org) offers a variety of training options to fit any professional need, including classroom and live online seminars, Webinars, Webcasts and podcasts, customized solutions, and business books.

Get your managers up to speed in social media by taking AMA's seminar, "Social Media for Managers: New Tools for Communication, Innovation, and Collaboration" (seminar #2148). They will learn the techniques and tools to engage customers and employees. For more information, visit www.amanet.org/2148 or call 800.262.9699 to speak to a training advisor. You also can follow AMA on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

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teams need to accomplish their missions. Trainers. therefore, are well-advised to design specific strategies that meet their objectives and to incorporate social technologies when they support those objectives.

Designing a thorough governance document is an important early step in developing the framework upon which social learning rests. It should address the protection of intellectual property, data

ownership, confidentiality, and privacy, as well as how material is updated, how and where data may be used, and whether it is vetted.

Before designing a social learning element, share the goals with the information technology department. Non-technical departments too often limit themselves by their assumptions of what is possible technologically. Discussing the ideal outcome with IT experts can help identify technologies and

#### CASE STUDY: Hello,bah.com

Consultancy Booz Allen Hamilton developed an integrated employee portal for networking, learning, knowledge sharing, and social media called Hello.bah.com in late 2007. Today, from a single link on the portal's landing page, employees can access their personal profile and those of the firm's other 26,000 employees, as well as more than 650 communities of interest; nearly 2,000 blogs; and many business-oriented wikis and workspace—all behind the corporate firewall and all geared to advance collaboration, networking, and expertise.

Most communities are formed around business interests—cybersecurity, for example—and function as discussion forums incorporating employees from multiple projects and multiple locations. For specific projects, workspaces may be created as a repository for project documentation, resources, discussions, contacts, expertise, and deliverables. To launch, a community requires a business case, a community manager, a request, and, finally, approval from the site's governing board. In most interests, new communities can be launched in a matter of days. Once the project is completed, these workspaces are archived.

Searchable employee profiles are particularly valuable in an organization that thrives by matching employees to projects. Profiles are referenced for assignments and positioning, to facilitate collaboration and networking, and to create a heightened awareness of colleagues in terms of their skill sets, knowledge, and geographic locations. They also help employees identify potential mentors using a mentormatching component that allows employees to search for mentors by interests, developmental goals, aspirations, or skills. Within months of deploying the new matching tool, the number of mentoring profiles on Hello.bah.com increased by more than 100 percent.

Blogs and wikis help keep the site relevant, as subject matter experts share insights and information on current topics and business challenges. On Hello.bah.com, there are more than 50 wikis that focus on learning and education. One wiki, for example, is dedicated to streamlining the onboarding process for new hires. One of the sites most visited by employees, it centralizes information and resources and enables staff to share best practices across teams and geographic locations.

methodologies that can achieve the actual goal more successfully.

It's also important to understand the financial and human costs of integrating social learning. With limited budgets, each dollar allocated to social learning is a dollar that cannot be used for other programs, so concentrate on strategies that deliver the most bang for the buck. Human costs of implementation decisions are more difficult to measure. They include not only the time invested in building, integrating, and maintaining social learning systems, but also the costs and benefits of eliminating some face-to-face interaction and networking in favor of just-in-time information and access to global expertise.

employment decisions and workplace behaviors. Specifically, 40 percent would accept lower salaries in exchange for social media access, mobility, and flexibility in choosing mobile devices, while 25 percent said the lack of remote Internet access would cause them to reduce the efforts they expended in their jobs.

#### **Ensure Value**

Social learning changes the training paradigm from push to pull, placing it into competition with all other options. Therefore, it must provide ongoing value to users. Whatever vehicle is used, it must offer information that is relevant, useful, and accurate. It's not enough to blog; instead, the blog must

Before designing a social learning element, share the goals with the information technology department. Non-technical departments too often limit themselves by their assumptions of what is possible technologically. Discussing the ideal outcome with IT experts can help identify technologies and methodologies that can achieve the actual goal more successfully.

contain useful information and insights—preferably insights from senior executives and subject matter experts. Likewise, it's not enough to build a networking site: instead, the site must attract the active participation of knowledgeable people willing to make connections and share insights.

The 2011 Cisco Connected World Technology Report shows another side of the ramifications: opportunity costs. That international survey of 3,000 college students and recent graduates indicates that access to social media affects their

It's one thing to decide to facilitate social learning, but another to commit to sustaining it. Take the case of blogs. It's easy to develop topics, but is the writer willing to commit the time necessary to write a compelling blog? If a professional writer writes the

blog, is the organization willing to support that professional with information and reviews and then to post the blogs in a timely manner? If the chairman or CEO tweets, will the tweets be frequent enough and substantial enough to developing a following, without being overwhelming?

Building awareness of the site is the next hurdle. To build traffic, e-mail employees when new content is posted with a link, a short summary, and directions on how to subscribe. Include the link in newsletters, meeting agendas, minutes, e-mail signatures, and other communications, Crosslink to similar sites by posting comments there and linking back to the blog for additional information. Remember to tell readers what action is wanted and what's in it for them if they do act. For example, if readers of a blog know their responses can influence decision-making, they're more likely to post. Model the desired behavior. If the site needs dissenting opinions, find an opinion leader to play devil's advocate.

#### The Bottom Line

Social learning can be transformative, putting individuals in charge of what they learn and when. enriching the learning culture within the organization and, ultimately, the capabilities and creativity of the entire organization.

Because it reaches across geographic boundaries, social learners extend their networks throughout the world. That's particularly important in multinational organizations. There often is no single best way of accomplishing something, so accessing global resources exposes learners to additional perspectives and approaches from which they may develop the optimum solutions to help achieve their goals.

The willingness to fully leverage the Internet sends the message that the organization is forward

thinking and open to new ideas. It. therefore, is more attractive to a generation of employees and clients for which the Internet is its native language. These employees generally already know how to use the technology. High-tech approaches let employees spend more time analyzing data than gathering data, thus building the brand and increasing competitiveness.

Social learning, however, is not ideal for every situation. Effectively employing it takes forethought. For example, a governance framework must be established very early in the evolution of social learning strategies to ensure that intellectual property is protected, confidentiality is maintained, and the organization remains in compliance with regulatory guidelines.

Organizations considering social media as learning tools frequently express concerns about inaccurate information. Such misgivings are valid, but are lessened by the social nature of the media—experts will challenge erroneous information, forming a framework against which to gauge ideas. Information uncovered through social media is like information gained through other fact-finding methods. Some is accurate, some is not, and all will be weighed before being given a pivotal role in any project. In that context, there is no need for an organization to attempt to vet the information, although some do clear their own social learning sites periodically to reflect only the best responses. At IBM, for example, vetting information on its social sites isn't an issue because of the collective voices that contribute to the information. IBM does. however, have guidelines to help users understand their responsibilities when posting to social sites (http://www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html).

For sensitive information, learning officers may choose to duplicate some social learning vehicles

behind a firewall to facilitate safe, enterprise-wide cooperation and information sharing. The downside is that this requires a greater commitment of time, effort, and resources from myriad departments and

about information reliability, a commitment of time and effort to continually provide relevant information, and the need for a governance structure to manage the media sites.

Social media provides additional tools to expand learning. It offers the advantages of immediacy, easy access, a broad range of perspectives, and contacts with subject matter experts. The integration of social media into the corporate learning culture implies a degree of innovation and forward thinking that is attractive to like-minded employees.

Ultimately, social learning is really just about learning, in the broadest sense of the word. The technology used to facilitate that learning is secondary. Just because social media is popular, or even expected, doesn't mean it should be embraced, but neither should it be dismissed as a fad. Instead. social learning technologies are best deployed when they bring people together to collaborate...to

individuals, including information technology, legal counsel, communications, training, and subject matter experts, to establish and maintain the sites and provide fresh content.

Conclusion

Social media provides additional tools to expand learning. It offers the advantages of immediacy, easy access, a broad range of perspectives, and contacts with subject matter experts. The integration of social media into the corporate learning culture implies a degree of innovation and forward thinking that is attractive to like-minded employees. The disadvantages, however, include potential risks to intellectual property, concerns

share information and insights...to learn.

The ideal objective is to design a learning environment using the tools best suited to the desired outcome and in a way that can evolve to encompass the technology of today, as well as of tomorrow.

# training TOP10 Hallot Fame

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