

# Welcome

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# **Social & Collaborative Learning**

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**"Social learning is an evolution of eLearning  
" - *what is social learning?***

## **Organisations need to work even harder than ever to attract and retain talent**

To create cultures of learning and collaboration, to increase productivity, innovation and competitiveness and to address skills gaps, now and in the future.

Smart, ambitious individuals see themselves as professional nomads, gathering knowledge, skills and experiences as they move from job to job.

Learning and development professionals must recognise and embrace the social dynamics that, driven by technology, are shaping modern life and, by extension, the modern employee.

Ubiquitous access to information and resources is driving a trend towards self-directed learning. Digital natives expect their education and training experiences to be just as digitally connected as the rest of their lives.

**The design,  
organisation, planning,  
funding and delivery of  
learning and  
development must  
evolve.**

**By designing learning experiences that mirror the way in which learners use technology on a daily basis - collaborative, on-demand, in bite-size pieces, wherever they are and at their convenience - we significantly increase the impact of that learning.**

This is not about dumbing down - it is about creating a compelling, engaging, learner-centred experience.

Corporates are in a period of transition: the learning management systems that have served large organisations for a decade or more are no longer fit for purpose as they lack the features, dynamism and interactivity of today's freely available social learning tools.

The concept of the “student” now extends to anyone with a computer, an Internet connection, and a desire to learn.

We no longer look to the teacher/trainer as the sole distributor of knowledge. Rather they are the curators or guides of our learning experience. This means that it is the learner who governs their own learning pathways.

**Social learning addresses these challenges.**



**When the social aspect of eLearning is genuinely harnessed, the experience becomes compelling.**

Learners are empowered to engage in knowledge transfer and peer learning and a collaborative learning dynamic is created across an organisation. Social learning enables learners to form online cohorts and communities of practice that support and enrich their learning.

More than this, social learning creates myriad opportunities for interaction with instructors, facilitators and coaches. This multi-faceted dynamic is unique to social learning environments.

**"80% of managers stated that their company is failing to use digital learning well for leadership topics. 60% want the experience of digital learning to be more social and collaborative."**

CMI and Oxford Strategic Consulting report

**We live in an age of sharing and feedback - from where we buy our books to where we eat out, social technologies have exposed many parts of our daily experience to the power of the crowd - and learning is no different.**

**Social learning** creates continuous opportunities to feedback to peers, to content creators, to employers, to tutors, so that we can constantly improve and adjust our learning experience.

**Social learning** is transforming our notion of what 'training' is - today, training happens constantly, in many different ways and throughout entire organisations.

**Social learning** gives the learner the power to initiate, manage and progress their own learning - on their own terms, whilst simultaneously benefiting from other learners.

**The three most important factors for employees are about learning/training:**

- 1** Flexibility - being able to train at times that suits me
- 2** Personalisation - having training tailored to their specific needs
- 3** Expertise - Being able to bring in outside expertise

Large, multi-national companies are seeing the benefits of using Social learning and approaches to 'crowdsourced' content to thousands of learners in different places coming together at the same time.

*That's social learning.*

**"Learning technologies  
should help people to  
connect and  
collaborate."**

Technology should reduce barriers and bring people together

**"At its most basic level, new social learning can result in people becoming more informed, gaining a wider perspective, and being able to make better decisions by engaging with others. It acknowledges that learning happens with and through other people, as a matter of participating in a community, not just by acquiring knowledge."**

The New Social Learning, Marcia Conner and Tony Bingham

**For learners, social learning offers accessibility (and, by extension, convenience), flexibility and, of course, interaction with others.**

Social learning rewrites the rules around how, when and where we learn, and, more pertinently, who we learn from. Social learning is changing the context for learning – we can now access our learning experiences on any device and at any time of the day or night. Just as our social lives are not inhibited by proximity, so our learning can now escape the boundaries of the traditional learning context.

**This is an essential and defining point about social media; it has turned the concept of “learning” on its head.**



**"It's no longer about waiting to be taught or trained, but about individuals having the power in their own hands to deal with their own learning problems much more quickly and efficiently than before."**

From The Social Learning Handbook, Jane Hart

**Social learning is both expanding the possibilities of learning** – in terms of the amount of content that is now accessible – and also creating a much more granular, on-demand experience. Learner-driven micro-learning is enabling learners to create individualised learning moments that support their specific and immediate learning objectives.

We are now able to learn from our peers in real-time. By connecting us to learners who share our interests and who are at the same point in their learning journey, social learning facilitates an exchange of views, ideas, opinions and experiences that, in some cases, renders the role of the trainer obsolete. Collaboration between learners often outlives the course itself with students continuing to interact after the training is complete.

**In this way, social learning can be a catalyst for lasting professional communities of practice that can be a powerful way of supporting continuous learning.**

What's more, social learning specifically helps develop the attitudes and behaviours that are most valued by employers and colleagues – collaboration, multi-disciplinary skills, pan-organisational working, cultural awareness, innovation.

Those who embrace social learning can see an increase in their professional mobility. They have the freedom to pursue self-improvement at their own pace, in their own way and in a safe environment.

***They are empowered.***

***The company is empowered.***

***The end users are empowered.***

**Social learning is powerful for organisations looking to increase the level of skills and knowledge within their workforce.**

Much of the content currently available is free of charge and access is via any internet-enabled device. For organisations looking to develop their people, the cost alone is a key selling point.

This is partly about competitive advantage – organisations will attract and retain talent by recognising the value of social technologies within a business context and embracing this for the benefit of their employees.

It's also about building smarter organisations.

Some have criticised completion rates for online learning which have, until now, been low. However, the use of online social learning tools within the workplace is bucking this trend.

**Learners are motivated by the opportunity to further their career or improve their performance. They are much more likely to finish what they started.**



**Social learning tools also connect to a wider cultural aspect of every organisation.** By creating a context for collaboration and knowledge sharing, organisations can provide their employees with a space where they can co-create new knowledge and explore novel ideas.

**In this way, social learning is not simply about professional development but is also about stimulating and nurturing innovation.**

By embracing social learning, organisations generate opportunities for employees to practice and learn through experience.

Social learning assignments and projects enable learners to collaborate, to think, to lead, to manage, to explore and **to fail**.

Furthermore, learners are then able to receive feedback on their performance from peers, trainers and superiors, thereby maximising the learning. This feedback and reflection loop – allied to experiential learning – is a powerful facet of the social learning paradigm.

**Working smarter is the key.**

**"Knowledge work and learning to work smarter are becoming indistinguishable. The accelerating rate of change in business forces everyone in every organization to make a choice: learn while you work or become obsolete. By helping individuals work smarter, organisations can reap huge rewards, for it is in social (workflow) learning where the REAL learning in the organisation takes place."**

The Working Smarter Fieldbook, Jay Cross



**Education and training are being disrupted in a similar way to the travel, transport and media sectors; control is increasingly de-centralised as learners connect with each other to get what they want and need.**

Embracing social learning may involve 'letting go' somewhat – or, at least, supporting employees in their personal quest around professional development.

**The new democracy of workplace learning will require learning and development staff to have an open mind.**

Research and opinion indicate that there remains a lack of understanding around online learning options amongst L&D managers and staff alike. Part of this can be attributed to the ever-growing list of new terminology, acronyms and platforms in the industry, and it is clear that there is an opportunity to communicate these options more clearly in order to bring the benefits of online learning to as many businesses and employees as possible.

**The technology at the fingertips of today's employees is often more sophisticated and better suited to working and learning than that which an employer can offer - this requires organisations to be adaptable and open to change (and to shed any controlling instincts they may have about the professional development of their staff).**

## **Content Curators**

The amount or availability of content is not the problem. It's the opposite. In 2010, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt estimated that every two days we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilisation up until 2003. And that figure has now increased beyond even Google's predictions as internet adoption and the growth of photo, video and social and messaging platforms continues unabated.

**The challenge is how to marshal, organise (curate), sign-post and evaluate the content that is out there.**

The need for content curators – and the imperative for collective feedback loops woven into social learning technologies – is clear.

# Challenges

**We must further educate those responsible for learning and development to ensure that they understand how to fully capitalise on the burgeoning opportunities that social learning offers their business.** Right now there remains a lack of clarity as to how large organisations can effectively integrate online social learning into their existing systems and internal culture. In some cases, this may precipitate the complete redesign of those systems (which may be a difficult pill for some to swallow).

Larger organisations also have the option to consider SPOCS – small private open courses where confidentiality is a concern. This approach allows the organisation to retain the benefits of open social learning, whilst mitigating any intellectual property risks associated with discussing commercial activities in an open or unrestricted online environment.

While many managers may be happy to encourage employees to explore open social learning platforms (many of which are free or low cost), some may also be a bit more wary, and may feel unsure about the impact of such culture shifts.

Provided there are systems and processes for proving employee engagement and progress, **incorporating these concepts into existing learning and development strategies will challenge the human resource and corporate learning departments to rethink and re-imagine their strategies and deployment models.**

The 4 key challenges that organisations face right now – in relation to social learning are:

- **Readiness** (of learning and development professionals),
- **Relevance** (of available content to a corporate environment),
- **Integration** (with existing enterprise learning infrastructure) and
- **Engagement** (of the learner to overly long/ academic content).

Social learning providers recognise the demands and requirements of the business market and are developing content and tools that are relevant, coherent and aligned with the needs of both learners and the organisations for which they work.

Maybe they already exist? ***Do you use Slack or Microsoft Teams?***

The concept of 'blended learning' has been commonplace for many years. Now, as social learning gathers momentum, learners are increasingly switched on to a mix of face to face interaction, digital content and online social communication.

**Designing learning experiences around this blended approach will be critical for organisations as they embrace the new dynamics of professional development.**

The growth in social learning is pinned, in part, to the evolution of social media technologies. As such, the future for social learning will likely see greater implementation of features from mainstream social networking tools. This might include building links between community members by following other learners, rating discussion comments and competing with others to take on learning challenges.

Social learning is intertwined with the pervasive nature of mobile devices. Social learning is inherently mobile and this is driving its growth, an area of professional development that



many commentators believe will be the single biggest trend in learning and development over the next year.

The concept of gamification has become a popular topic of discussion amongst learning and development experts and practitioners. By connecting game dynamics with the realities of social learning, the training experience becomes genuinely compelling and, as a consequence, significantly more impactful.

The application of social learning has not only broken through the boundaries of the classroom, but has gone beyond learning and development altogether. These technologies are creating a new type of social media.

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**Organisations are now exploring how they can use social learning tools to build relationships with current and prospective employees, customers and business partners.**

## **Conclusions**

It seems that social learning is coming of age as platforms, content and connectivity converge in a way that meets today's learners' and customers needs and expectations.

**Social learning has huge potential for learning and development in the workplace because it can:**

- Enhance innovation through knowledge sharing and cross-cultural learning experiences
- Integrate high-value external expertise across the organisation
- Break down organisational silos and hierarchies to provide fresh insights and new ways of thinking/doing

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