



White Paper

The Eight Truths of Social Learning. Now.

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Executive Summary

Many learning professionals are keenly interested in the topic of social learning but relatively few organizations have begun to implement it. One reason is that it is difficult to separate the hype from reality and focus on the elements that are really important. This paper seeks to uncover the fundamental requirements for a successful social learning program. Based on early experience with our own social learning tool, this list of eight “truths” has been compiled to provide a foundation for learning professionals who are launching social learning in their organizations.

A little less than a year ago I wrote the original “Eight Truths of Social Learning” as a blog post on the SkillSoft corporate site. It was one of the posts that generated a surprising amount of traffic and discussion. Clearly this is a topic that people are seeking information on and there is no lack of it out there: webinars, workshops and white papers galore. But even with the tremendous amount that has been written and spoken, relatively few organizations have jumped into social learning with both feet. A recent report from ASTD found that only 24% of survey respondents reported that their organization’s informal learning activities include a social networking element.¹ And in my conversations with SkillSoft customers, I still find a great deal of uncertainty about how best to implement this new approach.

So I thought I would revisit my Eight Truths now, given that we have about a year under our belts with our own social learning platform—inGenius®. (There’s nothing like having your own horse in the race to really make the topic more meaningful!) In the year since the introduction we’ve learned a lot—not only about social learning, but about the organizational dynamics that surround it. Most of what we initially believed has held up pretty well, but we’ve also expanded our thinking in some unexpected ways.

The Eight Truths – One Year Later

The idea behind the Eight Truths blog post was to try to uncover the fundamental requirements for successful social learning—the things that would hold true for organizations of all sizes and types. This is a tall order, but in a world where there are new buzzwords, fads and products popping up all the time, we need to be able to cut through the hype to the bedrock principles that can form the foundation for social learning programs.

Since this was written, there is certainly no less interest in the

topic, and people are still hungry for guidance and straightforward answers in the midst of the hype. And while I’ve done some tinkering, the basic ideas behind the eight truths have held up pretty well. This paper elaborates in more detail than the original post, and brings in learnings I’ve found in my discussions with many HR and Training professionals, as well as social media gurus.

Like all topics social, this one would not be complete without your voice. So please go to the SkillSoft Facebook page (www.facebook.com/skillsoft) if you would like to contribute your own truths!

1. Social learning is a three-legged stool

In the original blog post this observation was tucked into the introduction, but it deserves its place among the Truths because we have found this to be the most important concept for those who are venturing into social learning. To be successful, three elements are needed: a technology platform, a vibrant community and great content. If one of these legs is missing, it can spell an early and disappointing end to your social learning initiative.

The platform is pretty obvious—you need a place to capture the interactions of your organization. Hopefully it’s a place that’s easy to find and use in the course of everyday work. But with just a platform you risk having what John Ambrose (our vice president of strategy and business development) refers to as the dreaded “empty drum syndrome.” People may come to visit your new social platform once or twice out of curiosity, but if there isn’t anything there to engage them (interesting content) they won’t be back. If they don’t come back, you will never develop a vibrant community.

However, if you seed your platform with great content, it is much easier for employees to jump in and offer their first

¹Paradise, Andrew, Laleh Patel, Holly B. Thompson, Mark Vickers, and David Wentworth. *The Rise of Social Media: Enhancing Collaboration and Productivity Across Generations*. ASTD. © 2010. Books24x7. http://common.books24x7.com/book/id_38019/book.asp

comments. Nuggets of content act like magnets for comments, and these comments attract other comments and before you know it you have a flourishing community that's engaged in active discussion. But it all starts with the seed of content.

Starting with the right content is also important. It should be something that is not only interesting to your audience, but also provides business value. And as learning professionals, we have trusted information and learning content that can form the basis of these discussions. So building your social learning program around your existing base of learning content makes eminent sense. With valuable business or technical content as the seed, you are much more likely to surface conversations that add unique business value (as opposed to gabfests about the weekend social scene).

2. Use social learning to address the problem of information overload

We are all bombarded with new messages and bits of information all day long, and many learning professionals are managing content collections with thousands of assets. Over time this rich abundance of content can become a challenge. When a user needs some specific piece of information to solve a business problem, it can be impossible to find! Social learning communities, with their power to amplify the most relevant content, can act like a spotlight on the most useful resources. This in turn drives a higher level of productivity, because time isn't being wasted searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack of information.

There are a number of ways your community can do this. If your social platform allows users to recommend or "like" certain assets, this can be very helpful in directing people to the most relevant content for their needs. If the social

platform allows users to post comments on the material contained in the book or course, this can create a layer of unique business knowledge on top of the trusted knowledge contained in the resource. So, for instance, a book on networking may be annotated with the specifics of your own organization's networking topology.

Positive comments and discussions can draw attention to a little-known book or report that may be used for instant problem-solving, but social interactions can also support

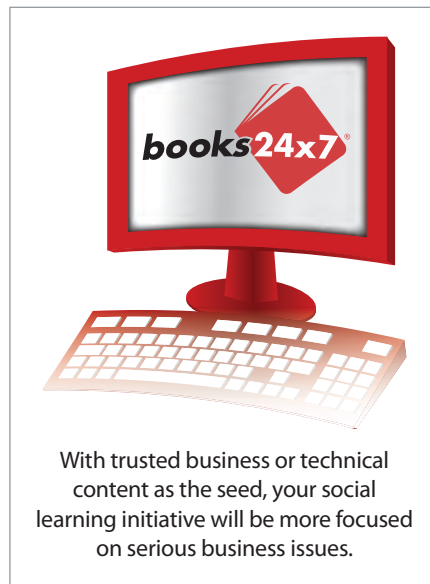
long-term outcomes. When one member of the community recommends a course or development program that helped them in their professional career, you are likely to see a flurry of interest in that program. This is one of the ways that social platforms can help bring about more self-directed learning within your organization. Word-of-mouth has always been the most credible form of advertising—and it still is!

3. Make social part of your blended learning strategy

For years now learning leaders have been creating programs that blend traditional, instructor-led learning experiences with

online learning. They have found that there are benefits to both approaches, and used in conjunction, they can reinforce each other's value. With social learning, we now have another tool to make our existing instructor-led and e-learning initiatives better, more engaging, and with improved learning outcomes.

The role of social learning in the new blended learning paradigm takes several forms. Some organizations have found by enhancing the social experience of learning, they are likely to get better participation from employees, especially if programs have a significant element of self-directed learning. With the ability to reach out to peers involved in



the same program, or get help on a particular topic, learners are more likely to stay engaged and complete their program of study. This can also be enhanced with face-to-face or virtual group interaction at key points in the program, such as a kick-off or the achievement of a milestone.

Another way that social learning can enhance the overall organizational learning program is by supporting the knowledge transfer and actual behavioral change after the “formal” learning event has ended. Let’s face it: the only kind of learning that is valuable is the kind that gets applied in the workplace and contributes to improved business outcomes. And making the link between a learning event that may occur away from the job (sometimes literally away in a classroom or often just outside the flow of work) and the work itself can be difficult. If a learner encounters a problem, or simply does not receive reinforcement for the new behavior, the effects of the learning can be lost. Social systems can be used to encourage and recognize performance, and this can make the difference in whether the learning actually transfers into a new and improved way of working.

4. Build the equity of experts

One of the greatest values of social learning is that it helps to identify your internal experts. The line between learner and teacher is constantly blurring in today’s highly specialized workplace. Often the person with deep knowledge of a topic is sitting three cubicles away, but the difficulty in finding that person, or the exact nugget of information needed to solve a business problem, can be immense.

This is especially true in today’s global, virtual, dispersed organizations where job titles don’t tell the whole story about

a person’s range of skills and expertise. With so many of our knowledge workers operating from remote or home offices, the informal transfer of knowledge is much more difficult. So the social learning platform becomes a sort of virtual water cooler: a place for colleagues to gather and exchange information. In this way social learning can contribute huge productivity benefits by helping to find that resident expert, whether that person is three cubicles away, or three time zones away.



5. Don’t overlook the importance of discovery

Building on the idea that your organization is a network of experts, the issue quickly shifts to the ability to search for these experts and find them quickly. The knowledge captured within your system will be of little value if it can’t be pinpointed when a need arises. A social learning platform with the right set of features for capturing information and then discovering it later at the point of need is turning out to be a very effective way to achieve the goal of expert location.

For this to work, the platform needs:

- A way for experts to self-identify,
- A way for community members to recognize others for their expertise,
- And a search function that identifies experts as learning resources.

Achieving these goals starts with a user-created profile. The profile often captures interests and skills that are not at all evident based on job title and the profile may be a more accurate portrayal than the organizational view. Also, in some cases these profiles may contain some level of personal

interest (“I breed Golden Retrievers”), and these personal facts can become the basis for a human connection between far-flung employees. Again, the function of social learning as the “virtual water cooler” should not be undervalued.

In addition to the profile that a person creates for himself, the ability of others to recognize expertise is also very important. Having the ability to recognize others as experts, or for an individual to build a reputation over time based on participation in various discussions, helps bring the most knowledgeable members of the organization to the fore. The ability to rate experts can also be used to inform search, pushing these individuals to the top of the results. So—a search for “six sigma certification” may produce a list of courses, books and your own internal experts. The contributions (comments, notes, discussions) should also be searchable, so that valuable nuggets of information can be recalled as needed.

6. Make sure your social initiatives have cross-generational appeal

Organizations need to appeal to the entirety of the work force if they want to achieve maximum benefits. It’s not a stretch to think that Millennials will gravitate to social learning tools—they grew up with these technologies and experienced them as an integral part of their formal education during high school and college, not to mention that they are a huge part of their lives outside of work. But social learning tools should also appeal to your Gen-Xers, Boomers, and even Traditionalists. This is especially true because capturing tacit knowledge (Truth #7) is such an important part of the rationale for implementing social learning to begin with.

Today we are living in a time when there are more

grandparents than grandchildren in the workplace, a situation that hasn’t occurred since 1948.² So it’s vitally important that we create an environment that is welcoming to the entire enterprise. Ease of use is one key, but as part of the roll-out, you may also want to look for ways to develop “reverse mentoring.” Millennials can be your best spokespeople in marketing the program internally. So consider creating a team of internal champions who can talk up the benefits of the system and also act as personal guides to employees who are less comfortable using online social systems. The value of these relationships goes both ways—the experienced employee gains benefit and often the younger employee comes away with new appreciation for a part of the job they may have not fully understood.

7. Capture tacit knowledge (before it walks out the door)

The impending retirement of the baby boomers has long been a source of hand-wringing by managers, HR professionals, and executives concerned about losing the decades of institutional knowledge that’s in the heads of these key employees. An Aberdeen study of Web 2.0 technology found the most common use was “capturing and transferring knowledge.”³ Social learning can be a strategic tool in capturing tacit knowledge, especially when social learning can be intertwined with the daily flow of work.

Often the most important pieces of information that can be captured have to do with seemingly mundane institutional know-how: processes, people and systems that are unique to the organization. Managers have long known that the ability to tap this organizational knowledge is one of the most important factors in the success of individual employees. David

²Meister, Jeanne C. and Karie Willyerd. *How to Prepare for a Multi-Generational Workplace*. Soundview Executive Book Summaries. © 2010. Online Audio File, Books24x7. http://common.books24x7.com/book/id_40301/book.asp

³Martin, Kevin. *Workforce Collaboration and Web 2.0: Improving Productivity by Facilitating Knowledge Transfer, Benchmark Study*, AberdeenGroup © 2008 <http://www.aberdeen.com/Aberdeen-Library/4882/RA-workforce-collaboration.aspx>

Mallon, a lead analyst for Bersin & Associates, has noted a tendency for knowledge systems to become bloated over time, obscuring the ability to find that nugget of information that makes a person more productive.⁴ So rather than focusing on capturing brilliant insights, think about the value of nitty-gritty details that contribute to daily productivity.

8. Make it simple and secure

Consumer-oriented social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have set the bar high in terms of ease-of-use.

Learners in organizations will expect a similarly intuitive experience from organizational social learning technologies. If your social learning tool mimics the basic elements of already-accepted social systems, this will simplify and speed the process of getting people started. Also, keeping the initial requirements of setting up a user profile to fairly basic elements will encourage users to jump in. They can always add more color to their profiles in the future.

Time-strapped learning professionals don't have the bandwidth to support a new program that requires hand-holding or a lot of encouragement. So your social learning initiative needs to provide obvious value, be easy to find and also be relevant to employees. This is also the beauty of building a social learning platform on top of existing learning and information resources—you're leveraging existing content and behavior to drive adoption.

There are also some important ways you want to differentiate your social system from social networks like Facebook. HR managers across the globe lose sleep over the private company and employee data that can (deliberately or inadvertently) leak out to the Web. Social learning initiatives need to allow for free collaboration between colleagues, without risking leakage to the wider Web. So make sure that the system you are using has appropriate safeguards for security, and also make sure that your employees understand that this is a system focused on serious business information. Consider

publishing a "Do's and Don'ts" for participation in workplace forums (Andrew McAfee, author of *Enterprise 2.0*, has provided some excellent tips in a recent blog post on Harvard Business Review.)⁵

You should also consider the privacy of the individuals participating in the system, which can be a bit tricky. The participants should be able to choose what information is included in their profile and they should also make the decision on whether their participation becomes public. Be aware that some social systems are designed to automatically infer expertise based on usage. So, for instance, if a participant searched frequently for

information on a particular topic, this could show up as an area of expertise while the user may not want to be identified with this particular area. Allowing employees to search the system and keep information private is an important feature. At the same time, employees should also understand that information that is contributed also becomes the intellectual



⁴Mallon, David and Clarey, Janet. *The Problem of Content Part 2 – I Want It Now*. Blog post dated August 31, 2009. <http://www.bersin.com/Blog/post/The-Problem-of-Content---Part-2---I-Want-it-Now!.aspx>

⁵McAfee, Andrew. *Do's and Don'ts for your Work's Social Platform*, blog post dated September 28, 2010. <http://blogs.hbr.org/hbr/mcafee/2010/09/dos-and-donts-for-your-works-s.html#>

property of the organization.

Finally, it is important to carefully review the background of the company that is providing your social system. With new companies and applications popping up daily, it is important to understand whether you are building your program on a durable system that will be supported over the long term. Your social learning platform will increase in value over time, as more and more information is added, so you absolutely want to make sure your partner has a track record of customer support and a viable future.

In Closing

Are you ready to get started with social learning? There is no time like the present. The sooner you begin the more you will learn and the greater the benefit to your organization. Be sure to check out SkillSoft's social learning layer, inGenius, and visit the SkillSoft Learning Re-Imagined blog on a regular basis to stay current on this emerging area.