



Book The New Social Learning

A Guide to Transforming Organizations Through Social Media

Marcia Conner and Tony Bingham
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Recommendation

In the afterword of this social media primer for the business set, authors Tony Bingham and Marcia Conner explain that they tried to walk a “fine line...between being alarmist and simply expressing excitement about the radical changes occurring” due to the array of social media tools available to businesses. The authors exude a quiet, knowing confidence that entices the reader. Here you will find instructive stories, ideas to reinvigorate a workforce from the ground up and talking points to address doubters’ concerns. The book simplifies some of the startup costs, both tangible and intangible, of implementing corporate change through social media, but it also details such initiatives undertaken by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and IBM. Bingham and Conner recommend their book to senior executives and managers because social media shouldn’t be separate from the inner workings of business itself. *BooksInShort* particularly recommends it to human resources professionals and corporate learning specialists who might help provide social media on-ramps for their organizations.

Take-Aways

- Social media can transform your business and spread its story
- Social media becomes social learning when it helps employees process information or share in innovative ways.
- Allowing workers to share profiles listing their positions, their interests and their specialties binds a company together.
- Online communities provide real-time answers to employees’ work-related queries, spaces for reflection and nonhierarchal participation in the firm’s life.
- Sharing media within a company helps leaders lead and staffers learn.
- “Microsharing” extends your influence, builds relationships, answers questions and explores topics through new links – in 140 characters or fewer.
- Tune in to Twitter when you can, graze for good ideas and follow a select group of people.
- Google Docs and similar tools help you collaborate and make your team smarter.
- “Immersive environments” allow people to practice skills in virtual worlds.
- “Backchanneling” can augment in-person experience.

Summary

How Social Media Leads to Social Learning and Organizational Change

To leverage social media as a learning tool in your organization, you have to overcome two initial assumptions: 1) that social media exists to connect with friends you haven’t seen since high school, and 2) that training and the distribution of new ideas only happens through conventional education programs. People need to learn in new ways; there’s too much information and it piles up quickly. Your employees learn best in ways that suit their learning styles, lifestyles and locations. Social media

answers both the former need and the latter desire.

“We should aspire to create a workplace that uses the talents of everyone, connecting them in meaningful ways.”

Social media’s use of the Internet offers the perfect engine for natural and timeless “social learning.” Whether people are in a classroom or a coffee shop, they learn from one another. Social media promotes new social learning, providing a platform for exchanges unhindered by time or geography. “Exchanges” is the crucial word here. Don’t think of social media as a way to “deliver” an educational end. Rather, it allows a broad mixing of ideas that helps you make decisions, build a team, solve problems and articulate your vision; social media teaches you about the context in which your work happens.

“Online Community” – Connecting People and Ideas

A community that hopes to interact online should start by encouraging its participants to build robust profiles. These profiles should reflect real people and include a photograph, a work location and the length of time staffers have been part of the organization. Allowing people to blog within the online community extends their influence.

“Emerging technologies enable a new...knowledge-building ecosystem with people at its core.”

Online communities, properly designed, quickly demonstrate their value. They give new hires a foothold by helping them establish connections with employees who share similar backgrounds. They offer all participants a chance to share their expertise and to identify quickly the expertise of others. Have a task that requires someone who speaks a language you don’t know? Check the profiles in your online community. Have a problem or hit a roadblock? Ask a question and watch it travel through your online community, forging new connections as it moves.

“Learn as you do. Engage instead of escape. Thrive instead of survive. This is social learning at its best.”

SabreTown, the online community of Sabre Holdings, uses “predictive modeling software” to connect in-house questions to the people most likely to be able to answer them. This online network saved its company more than \$500,000 in its initial year. Best Buy runs a version of SabreTown that it calls BlueShirt Nation. Employees from all over the company develop ideas together via the online community. In 2000, Nokia created Jazz Café, a “discussion forum” where all workers were welcome to ask questions of the human resources department. “The site became one of the most popular online destinations in the company, and remains live and active today.”

“When you engage with people, you build your own insight into what’s being discussed.”

Online communities help you discover the range of knowledge already residing in your organization, and let you identify and utilize it. Less tangible side effects of joining or sustaining online communities include:

1. **Carving out room for reflection** – To update your online community about your actions, you must stop and conceptualize what you are doing. Sharing helps form your ideas.
2. **Establishing foundations for relationships** – Meeting someone online before you meet in actuality helps build a history. When meeting in person for the first time, you can simply pick up where you left off online.
3. **Gaining valuable experience with new technology** – When you participate in an online community, you gain expertise in certain tools that can help you interact with your customers.

“Social learning is augmented by...Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and wikis, and with ...applications including Socialtext, Socialcast, Newgator and Lotus Connections.”

You might think that participating in an online community will lead people to be distracted or unproductive. The fact is that people who are easily distracted online are also easily distracted offline. And those staffers who use social media productively, to seek new contacts or ideas, are the same staffers who used the previous generations of tools (email or phones) to do the same. Instead of looking at social media with a critical eye, turn that critical eye to your employees’ work product.

“Media Sharing” – Stories, Stories, Everywhere

If you work at TELUS – a telecom company based in Vancouver – and run into a problem on the job, you might take advantage of your company’s “media sharing” exchange. Why? Because if you send a quick video of the problem through the network, you will receive input from colleagues who can add new perspectives. The company might also tag and archive such a video for later use, perhaps to serve a training function.

“If something needs to be done in person, don’t try to accomplish it virtually.”

Media sharing can break down hierarchy. If anyone can post a video, then anyone can help improve the company. If, as in the TELUS example, any employee’s video can help others to learn, then anyone also can be a trainer. Media sharing can help those in charge convey their vision. Leaders can use videos to address a workforce spread across a country or countries.

“Storytelling...now travels across new forms of media to help us learn from one another and connect.”

When you talk about informal video sharing among colleagues, a few red flags emerge. What will happen if something inappropriate surfaces? Fortunately, online communities contain rich, fast feedback loops. Post something offensive, and you will hear about it. For measurement, review the back-end analytics of a media-sharing platform. You can observe the behavior of each visitor to understand the impact videos have or do not have.

“Microsharing” – Minimizing Characters, Maximizing Benefit

Twitter, Socialcast or Yammer all offer microsharing. Microsharing allows people to communicate in “short bursts.” Within 140-character (usually) exchanges, people share their ideas and link to others’ questions, answers, and even pictures and videos.

“Social constructivism has become timely because work has for so long focused on what’s known. To triumph today, we must now understand new information and complex concepts – which hasn’t been known before and is often more complicated than one person can figure out alone.”

Easy-to-use microsharing tools provide a steady stream of benefits. They help employees connect with and learn about one another. Sure, workers might occasionally glean some information about a fellow worker’s personal life, but they also stay current with their colleagues’ projects. When a majority of a firm participates, microsharing tools can serve as a kind of institutional “digest.”

“The Network Roundtable led by Rob Cross at University of Virginia and Bill Kahn of Boston University, consistently found that better-connected people enjoy substantial performance, learning, and decision-making benefits.”

Generally, the way in which you update on microsharing sites reveals the kind of value you derive from this process. If you ask for help on a robust site, you will receive quick assistance “on the fly.” If you talk about what you learn, you contribute to a larger conversation. If you ask for feedback or share your work, you might hear worthy suggestions. When you tell people what you are doing, you might build a connection. Microsharing serves as a teaching platform, too. Kelly Forrister, vice president of interactive learning at the David Allen Company, instructs her Twitter followers from David Allen’s book *Getting Things Done*; this allows her to coach them through the learning process.

“What people crave is the opportunity to learn from one another, side by side, gaining both hard facts and in-context wisdom.”

Though it might take precious time or threaten to add to your already overwhelming stream of messages, microsharing can become a useful work tool to share insights or extend influence. And if you’re on the receiving end of a massive amount of micromessages, don’t feel the need to keep up with every single one. Use tools like Twitter for what they are – “serendipity engine[s]” that can spark new ideas or build new relationships.

“Growing Collective Intelligence”

Humans collaborate naturally; “collaborative tools” like Google Docs or DimDim can help you nurture this process in the work environment. Also, these tools can ensure that the work you produce doesn’t die on the vine. Posting a document in a wiki, for example, allows it to exist as “living content” that others can continually update.

“Social tools... foster a new culture of sharing, one in which content is contributed and distributed with few restrictions or costs.”

As a result of such interaction, your knowledge base will grow “broader, deeper or more innovative” than it would have been if you had kept to yourself, worked by yourself and tried to figure out every problem all by your lonesome. Organizations, too, benefit from enhanced collaborative opportunities. As leaders learn to make group intelligence available to all more quickly, the entire company benefits.

“Is your organization too habit-focused?”

As you wade into collective intelligence, you will surely stumble upon the argument pitting “finished content” against the unfinished content produced in wikis and blogs. The latter aids in synthesis, debate and learning – all-important components of the work process. The former benefits from the latter. Ultimately, both kinds of work are meaningful and deserve a place at the company table.

“Immersive Environments”

“Virtual” immersive environments connect people by allowing them to interact in the same space, even when they are far away from each other geographically. Since the experiences within these spaces qualify as real – you actually live through them – an organization can use them for a variety of purposes. Virtual immersive environments usually contain one or all of the following elements:

- **“Virtual worlds”** – You move through a virtual world as you move in the physical world. You can be present with your colleagues and work with them in real time. When you leave (that is, log out), the virtual world continues without you.
- **“Games”** – Many people can play at once. You develop skills for leading your organization, making plans for your firm or solving problems.
- **“Simulations”** – When you work within a simulation, you practice making decisions about situations you might encounter in real life. Groups that hope to learn from your decisions can track and study them. You can also discuss your choices afterward – gleaning knowledge without increasing risk.

“By augmenting the natural reaction to share interesting information, improve the work of others, and help organizations succeed, we create systems as alive as they are useful.”

Virtual immersive environments have an advantage over reality – you can attend to details, scenarios or learning environments that, in the never-ceasing movement of time in the real world, remain out of reach. Perhaps your colleagues are too far away. Perhaps the learning would be too expensive or risky. Some practical applications include: practicing salesmanship or a complicated skill, or actually seeing through the eyes of someone very different from you (perhaps someone of a different race or gender, or perhaps someone with a mental illness).

“What makes virtual immersive environments unique is that we emerge from them with real-life experiences we’ve actually participated in, not just imagined.”

L’Oréal uses a virtual environment to recruit potential employees and prepare them for the interview process. The US Army uses virtual environments for recruiting and training. IBM involves thousands of employees in different kinds of “Second Life” scenarios, where workers collaborate on projects or learn about the virtual world.

Technology Meets the In-Person Event

Many of the tools of new social learning are relevant for face-to-face meetings. In fact, they can augment such meetings. If you've attended or presented at a conference, you've probably noticed some audience members engaging more intensely with their laptops or their smart phones than with the speaker. While some may be distracted, others are "backchanneling"—audience members communicating among themselves or with people not even present at the conference. "Many people use secondary tasks to keep them engaged and focused." They communicate via applications like Twitter to discuss the presentation as it happens. This might distract the speaker, but can be revelatory for the audience. In the backchannel, participants share related links and new ideas. Additionally, such practices can ease in-person introductions.

About the Authors

Tony Bingham is the president and CEO of the American Society for Training & Development. **Marcia Conner** is a partner at Altimeter Group, a fellow at the Darden School of Business and a columnist for *Fast Company*.
