

Social networks in training

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There has been a lot of talk about using social networking in training and encouraging informal learning through it. Gary Flood takes a look at how much of this is already happening and how it integrates with the more traditional training methods.

Well, it had to happen, some might say; the technology that we all seem to increasingly use in our everyday lives for keeping in touch with chums, posting pictures of our newborns, telling the world our latest earth-shattering political insight or generally just wasting time - Facebook, Twitter and YouTube - has now become the latest medium for education and training.

The rapid growth in use of web 2.0 techniques like social media has had an impact in many aspects of learning and development. Jive Software for example, works with a range of firms including financial services firm Swiss Re as well as technology companies like SAP and VMware, developing what it styles as 'social business software'.

In the Swiss Re case, Jive's platform was linked to the company's existing HR and communications systems to provide a way for staff to work together. Six weeks after launch, more than 60 per cent of Swiss Re staff were using the system, over 375 groups were formed, 600 people had created content, 1,000 people replied and commented on discussions, and 2,200 people had changed their profiles or joined a group.

'This is great for really quickly connecting with like-minded people in the organisation who, in a big multinational, you might never have come across,' says Simon Lappin, Jive's UK Manager.

Onboarding

A key use of systems like this is as a convenient way to supplement induction training and get new staff plugged into their new companies as quickly as possible. Thus Sky, which of course employs many staff in its customer service and contact centre departments, seems to be one of the strongest examples at the moment of so-say 'onboarding' using web 2.0 approaches.

To quickly get Sky's expanding base of new staff up to speed with its products and services, e-learning provider Brightwave helped introduce a special learning portal. Joiners can access this portal ('Get Up To Speed') via the internet to build knowledge before their start date. This has ensured new starters are competent faster, leading to increased sales, a better customer experience and a reduction in early staff attrition, says the media giant.

'Get Up To Speed' has a variety of instructional design methods including games, social learning (for example blogs connect existing staff to new recruits), a video belt and simulated customer scenarios. It also has incentive mechanisms to encourage repeated completion through a real-time leader board. There is also a series of documentary style videos and blog entries in a social networking style offering 'A Day In The Life' experience.

All sounds good, but does it actually make a difference? Sky says it saves an average of a full week (37.5 hours) of training time for every new recruit and that every new recruit is typically competent at least one week earlier - a significant saving. Staff attrition has been substantially reduced and sales conversions have significantly improved amongst new joiners since using the onboarding portal, it claims.

'As a leading brand and as a company that prides itself on innovation in products and technology with things like HD and 3D TV, we see it as part of that to offer a really innovative service like this too,' Kenneth Henderson, Head of Talent Development Operations at the firm, adds.

What else?

But is that the limit of what a social medium can do for an organisation's training and educational needs? Or can it start developing the overall corporate IQ, as it were, to form an ongoing informal skills exchange system that everyone can take advantage of?

Some systems do indeed promise something like that, often coming at this from a traditional e-learning background, a category of software sometimes called SLMS (social learning management systems). John Amrose, SkillSoft's Senior Vice President for Strategy, Corporate Development and Emerging Business, for example, believes that 'Social media can be a very powerful way to foster learning inside the company and can mean they are no longer "just a user" looking through a catalogue, trying to find stuff - they can connect with others and share hints and tips to extend their understanding.'

Another in this space is Pebble Learning, which offers 'personal learning technologies' for the UK education sector, professional organisations and local government. It has just launched PebblePad, a personal e-space where users can allegedly discover, manage and understand their own learning journeys.

It has a definite social networking application, as users can link tools such as Twitter, Blogger and any other RSS or ATOM enabled system with their own content and e-learning material, says Moira Savage, a senior lecturer at the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester, who says her students have found that kind of approach very useful:

'For my current group of primary school teacher trainers, I've used this system as a way to do peer group appraisals and I think it's been very interesting; the students, I think, gave much deeper feedback this way than they might have done in a face to face context. As an educationalist, I see lots of possibilities in things like learner portals in the classroom and beyond.'

In a way, though, all of this isn't exactly new news to the technical community. From the earliest days of computer clubs and bulletin boards, people interested in IT have been online sharing tips, alerting each other about dangerous viruses, asking for programming advice and the like. 'That sort of thing goes all the way back to UseNet,' says the director of learning services at Brightwave, Lars Hyland.

Social learning for the IT professional

So what's new in social networking for the IT professional? A lot more than you might think, it turns out. Both suppliers and training companies are increasingly looking to this kind of informal network to extend the more formal delivery of content they are offering, turning it into a key channel for IT training.

For example, we have already touched on the use that software firm SAS Institute makes of social networking to support certification (see www.bcs.org/server.php?show=conWebDoc.32842). For its upcoming UK Professionals Convention, it is encouraging candidates for the exams leading to its qualifications to sign in to a special network, which, according to SAS, has had marked results in terms of improving student performance.

Indeed, SAS says its event last year showed a rise in on-the-day passes of 60 per cent instead of 30 per cent, which it attributes to the support attendees got in advance from such techniques as forming online groups led by SAS trainers, which were encouraged to compete with each other and develop a community feel as a way to support one another.

'Our social network has grown in 15 months to over 2,500 members,' says its director of customer services for UK and Ireland, Nick Houlton. 'We see great advantages in this kind of guided social network for certification candidates.'

Other pioneers in this space are Microsoft and most definitely networking giant Cisco, with its CLN (Cisco Learning Network), a global social learning community that enables individuals to collaborate and communicate with other students, especially those prepping for a Cisco certification, channel partners and Cisco customers (partners and customers as mentors providing advice).



Global Knowledge.

As part of Learning@Cisco (the umbrella organisation for Cisco training and certification), CLN in the two years it's been going has already gathered a wide range of social media technologies and tools such as videos, podcasts, blogs, job portal, quick learning modules, serious learning games, practice exams, wiki documents, multilingual discussion forums, white papers, online assessments, training products, exam preparation study groups and collaborative team spaces. The site has had over 17 million hits, 2.5 million unique visitors and 135,000 registered users since June 2008, the company says.

It is also convinced the thing wouldn't have grown so fast if it had attempted to control it, or drive it 'top down,' its Learning@Cisco Director of Marketing Fred Weiller says.

'We had to let go of the community from a top-down command and control approach and instead let it be fluid enough to provide feedback and influence to Cisco to help us adjust our education and certification curriculum to match evolving job roles and converging technologies, such as video and virtualisation.'

I also talked with a non-Cisco employee who says he's got a lot out of the site, Terry Slattery, the very first student ever awarded the company's major certification the CCIE (Cisco Certified Internetworking Expert) in 1993, and a principal consultant at a US IT company, Chesapeake NetCraftsmen.

'I think these groups have proven really viable in a really short period of time,' he thinks. 'It's almost got to the stage where if you don't have access to this kind of website, I wonder how some of your questions as a candidate could ever get answered - which means it would be that much more difficult to pass.'

'In terms of training or preparing for an exam, social networking can be very helpful,' agrees Jane Hart, a social learning specialist who runs a consultancy called the Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies. 'It provides an instant support group that offers informal additions to the more formal content you are expected to master. This is especially welcome to the digital natives or Generation Y-ers, who are coming into the workplace expecting to share and collaborate a lot more than older employees and who frankly will want to chat about the presentation online as much as just watch you present the PPT.'

You don't have to be a massive software giant developing a bit professional workforce to take advantage of social networking. Take Eleco, a supplier of computer aided design software for homebuilders, self builders, town planners, renovators and architects. It says it always complements its end-user training with online and social networking support in the form of Twitter and YouTube content (see links below for examples).

The end of classroom training - and e-learning?

So what is the impact of all these developments, lastly, on the IT training supplier community? Are they dumping classroom or even e-learning to do it all via Twitter?

Not quite - but at the same time, they do acknowledge that these trends can't be ignored. 'I think you need as many channels as possible to help customers,' says Matt Lea, Customer Contact Manager at Eleco, who set up the firm's social media channels. 'It doesn't replace traditional product training, but serves to really extend and magnify it.'

Allan Pettman, UK Managing Director at Global Knowledge agrees: 'While IT training is often a necessity, we've seen that it can be turned into a far richer experience with flexible delivery mechanisms, tools and appropriate support.'

Global Knowledge, as a matter of fact, has taken up the challenge and is looking to fold social media into its approaches. In February the company's work in using social media to bolster more traditional IT training so impressed judges at the Institute of IT Training that its so-called Collaborative Learning Programme was presented the 2010 Innovation in Training Services Award.

'This is all great for skills transfer, but to build real competence this form of "training" has to happen in some kind of organisational context,' he warns. 'You would be very unlikely to pass an exam just by hanging out on a network. It really comes into its own as a catalyst, as a way to develop learning outside the classroom or self-study session.'

But don't necessarily expect a company like Global Knowledge to start offering a supported learning network as a product tomorrow. While the company has had great success in building networks for big corporates, that's as part of



Global Knowledge.

six month or permanently rolling training schemes - he wouldn't bother doing it to support one five day course, Pettman told us.

Integrating social media

So what is the intelligent way to think about social media in training? There is a lot of debate on how structured these things should be: there is an argument, after all, that people may want to use this network the same way they use the others in their lives – to chat, find new mates and generally goof off. But best practice (e.g. Cisco) seems to suggest that too much control from the centre can be stifling. It may well be that loose control is better, here, but there must be some control, experts say; for example, groups must clearly be set up to follow a specific learning goal.

If we ignore social networking as a communication and training tool, we could well be shutting some very open stable doors here. 'This isn't just a new set of tools,' warns Jane Hart. 'It's a completely different mind and skill set. CPD and training organisations need to integrate this as soon as they can into what they do, if for no other reason than the people entering the workforce are just wired up to learn this way and will expect it.'