

Applying Social Networking in the Workplace

Lars Hyland argues that beyond the hype there are valuable applications of social networking tools to support learning and performance.

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We are social animals by nature, so any technology that allows us to connect more efficiently and effectively with others will flourish. Mobile phones and the internet itself are testament to this fact. Social networking tools have been around since the internet started such as Usenet and the abundance of discussion forums available. What we have now allows us to extend our immediate network of friends to include the friends of our friends, and the friends of our friends of our friends. The principles of social networking rely on a new level of openness and sharing of information, personal and professional.

How many friends have you got?

Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, mySpace, Bebo, Xing – no doubt you've come across some if not all of these social networking tools by now. Indeed, you may be one of the 50+ million people across the world intently engaged with their Facebook home page, swimming in a sea of "pokes", invitations to play Scrabulous and solving the world's political ills through collective virtual action. HSBC in the UK recently felt the power of its bite when they tried to change the terms of their student bank accounts (in the favour of HSBC naturally). A revolt lead by users of Facebook forced a U-turn. David Cameron's recent endorsement at the Conservative Party conference showed how mainstream these tools have now become – although this could also mark its card amongst the trendsetters who having already abandoned mySpace, will look for the next cool community in which to hang out on the internet.

But underlying the hype are some powerful behaviours such as sharing knowledge, experience and information which the learning and development community ignores at its peril. However, the corporate reaction appears to be heading in the opposite direction. In September 2007 it was reported that a third of employers have banned their staff from using social networks such as Facebook over fears that it saps productivity and risks security. Several people have indeed lost their jobs through posting defamatory comments online while others have caused themselves professional embarrassment as their once private antics become easily searchable.

It seems that rather than work invading our private lives the opposite is in fact happening.

At the same time a YouGov poll found that half of all broadband users log onto social networking sites more than three hours a week, with a higher percentage of women active than men. This is a tidal wave of a trend that may be fruitless for corporate policy makers to battle against. Instead we should be looking for positive ways to harness this naturally enthusiastic behaviour.

Indeed, to this end, networks such as Facebook have developed business focused tools that allow the customisation and integration of company information. There are other organisations that offer business networking tools that are closed and focused, allowing a more private level of information exchange between employees of the same company. Motorola have already benefited from this approach describing improvements to the quality and cycle time of collaboration within the firm. Microsoft and IBM have also embraced social networking encouraging staff to publish their profiles and professional interests, to write blogs, and to engage in cross functional collaboration.

Divergence or Convergence?

When discussing new technology it's always good to keep a close eye on any underlying research as this tends to provide a clearer picture of the real value it holds.

The Economist (2007) reported that Swisscom, Switzerland's largest telecoms operator, has a User Adoption Lab run by anthropologist Stefana Broadbent and their research has looked at usage patterns associated with different communications technologies. Based on observation, interviews, and user logs conducted across several European countries they found that despite the opportunity to keep in regular touch with a wide circle of friends through their mobile phones, the typical user spends 80% of their time communicating with just four other people.

Another interesting observation was how people used different communications technology in quite different ways. The fixed line phone was found to be the "collective channel", where calls are made "in public" because they are relevant to others around them. The mobile phone was predominantly used for last minute planning and to coordinate travel and meetings. Texting was used for "intimacy, emotions and efficiency", email for administration and to exchange documents and other media. While instant messaging and internet voice calls are "continuous channels" open in the background while people do other things. One of Broadbent's conclusions was that "each communication channel is performing an increasingly different function".

A remarkable discovery was that despite increased availability of essentially free voice communication, there has been little observed growth. Instead the increase has been in written channels. Broadbent observed, "Users are showing a growing preference for semi-synchronous writing over synchronous voice". We appear to be increasingly happy to multi-task and interleave our communication on a constant basis, irrespective of whether we are at work or at home.

Always connected

Tools such as Twitter (www.twitter.com) build on this trend to keep in constant touch by offering "micro-blogging". This enables you to send constant short messages to your community of what you are doing each step of the way. This can be done at your PC while you work (for example your message might be, "now working on XYZ project and calling Joe for an update") or out and about on using your mobile (for example, texting "heading towards Oxford Street, London"). This constant communication of your activity, its proponents tell me, leads to some useful interjections (such as "Joe's sick, call Amy instead") and chance meetings ("I'm at the top of Regent Street – want to meet for a coffee?"), that would not have happened without this channel being "always on".

This may not be your own idea of fun, but it is to a growing number of people who use it socially and are bringing it into work, expecting to be able to keep these channels always open. As HR and learning professionals, we need to be able to see the value of this type of behaviour for creating many more learning opportunities for individuals, and for accelerating and enhancing performance at work.

Applications in the workplace

Let's bring this back to a more traditional situation. We have a group of staff attending an off-site training event. This could be visiting a newly fitted shopping outlet that will eventually roll out across the network, or perhaps a product launch event. Or you could be a travel company, wishing to send a team to experience some new resort hotels. Logistically (and economically) not everyone can go. However, it is now possible for everyone to share in that experience.

Those attending could maintain a daily blog, posting their thoughts, photos/video taken on their phones. They could even use a micro-blogging tool on their phone to send back regular streams of where they are and what they doing. The wider community could get a lot closer to experiencing the event than they would otherwise; they can also participate. Sending back comments and responses means that those attending can ask questions on their behalf, can be reminded to complete certain tasks and generally support and share in the learning experience of their colleagues. This dialogue can continue after the event and when everyone is back in their normal roles, continuing to add helpful reinforcement.

These streams of communication can also work well for distributed teams, teleworkers (who are growing fast in number with the availability of broadband), job-sharers and any other community of people with a shared interest in keeping in the loop with each other.

Indeed, this can challenge the very design of traditional training experiences aligning activities more around "experiences" that are shared at the time they happen rather than the too often ineffective cascade once back in the office. An obvious place to start is in onboarding and induction of new employees. It's crucial to ensure new staff feel integrated into their new work environment and a company social network can accelerate that enormously. Indeed with profiles filled in during that "pre-joining" period, new staff can connect with staff of similar interests and job roles irrespective of geography. What a welcome that would be - and especially at a time of intense focus on employee engagement and board level fretting around finding and holding onto talent.

Elsewhere in the organisation, how about using wiki technology (go to www.wikipedia.org to see this in action) to build product knowledge and customer service know-how? The solution to a specific customer problem can be recorded directly by an employee and made available to everyone for comment, amendment and addition. Over a relatively short period of time you end up with a definitive solution that has benefited from substantial peer review.

The virtual world

Virtual worlds also offer a further dimension to collaboration, allowing users to interact with the environment around them as well as with each other. This has powerful learning potential by serving up experiences that accurately simulate situations that may occur in the real world. Tools such as Second Life are being joined by new, more flexible environments that can be adapted to specific applications. Indeed, one organisation is launching a service which will allow mini-virtual spaces within your own website enabling visitors to collaborate visually and instantly. What does this mean for learning design? Well, it emphasises how important simulation and immersion is to providing learners

with much needed practice and safe opportunities to demonstrate new behaviours and skills.

If you think online collaborative environments are niche, consider these statistics from the book, Digital Korea by Tomi Ahonen and Jim O'Reilly. In South Korea 43% of the population have a personal profile in the virtual world Cyworld. Lineage, an online game, has 14 million users worldwide, which is twice as many as the often cited World of Warcraft.

What are you waiting for?

Embrace social networking and the prize is yours because it can accelerate innovation, problem solving and overall productivity with only the lightest of touches from traditional management hierarchies. Indeed, networks are already spawning co-operative working amongst individuals and small groups that can match (if not beat) the larger, traditionally structured corporate entities. All this is built on trust – without it these networks will quickly dissolve.

Learning has always been about content, context and collaboration. The network connects all these elements so it is accessible when, where and how you need it. With the new applications arriving as part of the Web 2.0 wave of innovation we can start to see how learning can be dramatically accelerated and made immediately actionable.

That old maxim "Knowledge is Power" appears to be waning. Maybe the new mantra should be "Your Network is Power". So beware. Build your network. It may be your only economic lifeline in the not too distant future.

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