

## How to build a social learning culture

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*Harness the power of social media technology and challenge traditional barriers to learning.*

*Lars Hyland explains how:*

- The learning experience has got personal and it has technology beating at its heart
- There are benefits but cultural and perceived technological barriers remain
- Technology choices must follow the business objective
- It takes time to nurture social learning

Resisting the rush to social media feels a bit like trying to push water back up a waterfall doesn't it? A fairly futile exercise. Why is it so popular? Well, homo sapiens are a particularly social, pack-like species whose success on this planet has been predicated on our unique ability to communicate. This is why we have gone to many lengths to build complex organisational structures. We've invented the telephone, television, and now the internet to the point where we can be in constant touch with anyone, anywhere, anytime.



*'The learning experience has finally got personal and it has done so with technology beating at its heart.'*

We have always learned through conversation, self-directed reading, and interacting with the world and people around us. It's strange really that we now refer to this as 'informal learning' as if somehow inferior. The internet and the mobile phone provide us with all the information we could possibly want when we want it. Our main challenge now is finding the right information to use at the appropriate time. Equally, we can now practice new skills in virtual settings that are increasingly realistic and applicable.

The learning experience has finally got personal and it has done so with technology beating at its heart. In that context it makes sense that social tools, which give us real-time access to the activities and experiences of others, tap right into our innate desire to share and belong.

But we are still in transition. Most organisations have yet to catch up. In a recent survey of organisations with 5,000+ staff, conducted by Brightwave, almost two thirds of those surveyed confirmed they do not plan to facilitate social learning in the next 18 months. Indeed the majority of UK workers in large organisations don't have any access at work to leading social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube.

Data security reportedly is the key reason why most businesses do not actively encourage participation in social networks. Whilst a concern most organisations will already have processes in place to manage responsible participation. If not, any worries can be addressed by developing and communicating an effective information security policy.

So there are benefits but cultural and perceived technological barriers remain. What's the best way, then, to navigate around these and begin nurturing a social learning culture in your own organisation? Don't be daunted. It's easy to get started.

## 1. Don't wait for permission

Most successful social learning implementations to date have started at the grass roots level. So that's you providing the necessary jolt of enthusiasm and energy to get a pilot off the ground. Clearly this doesn't mean being irresponsible, instead identifying a community that you feel can benefit and deliver real business benefits.

## 2. Focus on the frontline

Managers will typically put up the most resistance as they perceive they have the most to lose. In many ways they are right. An effective social learning environment changes the model of management considerably. Frontline staff have the most to gain from sharing their knowledge and cutting across traditional divisional silos in the interests of serving their customer or solving their problem. Less time wasted hunting for information and knowledge to do their jobs improves customer service, and reduces their own levels of frustration and dissatisfaction. In many cases, your chosen community will already be active social users of Facebook, Twitter and the like, so you'll find a burgeoning demand. That said, provision of some training (elearning would be my recommendation) on how to get the best out of the tools you make available will be valuable.

### 3. Technology is the enabler not the driver

Don't get caught up in which platform to use. Start with the business objective you want to impact. Do you want to reduce customer complaint resolution times? Reduce the number of return visits made by engineers to fix a problem? Whatever it is try and add to the existing systems in place where possible. Your only option may be the corporate intranet. It may be a free software platform such as Elgg, Ning or harnessing the available (but often underused) functionality of Microsoft Sharepoint. You may need to think more creatively, such as setting up group texting facilities on your engineers' mobile phones with a private Twitter-like service such as Yammer. Whatever it is, technology choices must follow the business objective.

### 4. Guide rather than control

Social-learning communities are self policing so do not feel obliged to over-moderate the communication flow. In fact, encourage open debate but with some simple ground rules on etiquette and professionalism that you would expect employees to observe in other forms of day-to-day communication. One tip - insist that all community members retain their professional work identity. Anonymous posting may quickly degenerate into unhelpful, damaging messages. So don't allow it.

### 5. Be patient

It takes time to nurture social learning, especially when your organisation's existing culture may be far removed from the concept of knowledge sharing and cross-functional collaboration. Based on published case studies this seems to average three to five years. By starting small, with a focused community that can reap early benefits, you can use this success to persuade others to get involved. The network effect will take hold and growth can be exponential once a solid foundation has been laid. Note that it is normal for only a small percentage (5-10%) of your community to be active contributors while the remainder remain grateful consumers of the content made available.

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