



Now is the time for learning professionals to embrace social learning as an emerging and engaging way to enhance an organization's learning strategy.

LEARNING WITH AND FROM OTHERS

RESTRUCTURING BUDGETS FOR SOCIAL LEARNING

By Dan Pontefract

A confluence of issues, both mitigated and unmitigated, has arisen over the past several quarters. Budget cuts, staff reductions, travel embargos, and facility consolidation have left many chief learning officers and learning professionals clamoring for the emergency brake. Add to this the rising inferno (and demand) of social media, informal learning, and anything to do with a 2.0 moniker—including social learning—and you have yourself a full-blown learning crisis for the learning profession.

Given this pending calamity, it's time for learning leaders to rethink their strategy to make social learning an important piece of the learning spectrum. Leaders should be embracing it, but it does require new approaches in leadership and budget planning to successfully execute.

More with less

Despite recent and modest gains in the economy, training budgets continue to decrease, and doing “more with less” is a repeated utterance throughout the profession. No matter the study, training budgets have been and continue to reduce or run flat. In a 2009 IDC report, training budgets decreased on average by 19.5 percent. Bersin & Associates



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indicates that overall training budgets have shrunk by 21 percent since 2008. ASTD research also suggests that corporate learning investment, as a percentage of company payroll, has decreased from 2.24 percent in 2008 to 2.14 percent in 2009. Clearly, a fiscal pattern is emerging and corporate learning budgets are running flat or, worse, dramatically shrinking.

With less corporate learning investment often comes the causal effect of fewer people to actually do the work. According to IDC, the ratio of company employees to learning professionals has increased. In 2008, each learning professional supported 197 employees whereas in 2009, this number increased to 260. It's no different with research surfaced by Bersin & Associates which found that the median learning and development professional ratio fell from 7.0 staff members per 1,000 company employees in 2008 to 6.2 in 2009. ASTD reports staffing in learning-related roles dropped 8 percent in 2009. With fewer staff in learning-related roles, there are observably fewer learning professionals supporting the overarching learning strategy and execution plans.

Enter social learning

Given the meteoric rise of social media in the consumer space, it was only a matter of time before various 2.0 technologies surfaced within the organization. The trend may have started with Facebook and Twitter being used inside company firewalls as a toe in the water, but it quickly shifted to specific social media tools being developed for specific corporate uses. Unlike other technologies, practices, or processes, social media inside the organization, for many companies, doesn't belong in one single business unit; it lazily shifts among interested parties regardless of function or title. Further exacerbating the issue is that the use of social media inside a company, to many, seems to come across as a negative time waster. Andrew McAfee of MIT recognized this dilemma and argued there was a place for it inside a company and coined it Enterprise 2.0, specifically "the use of

emergent social software platforms within companies."

But where things have really gotten interesting of late is that many social media and thus Enterprise 2.0 opportunities inside of a company have translated into a new term: social learning.

Social learning can be thought of as the use of Enterprise 2.0 opportunities and technologies to help facilitate the learning experience of employees. Blogs, wikis, microblogging, YouTube-like video sharing, tagging, ranking, virtual worlds, discussion forums, and generally any other form of user-generated content (for learning, communication, and marketing) are both practical and engaging ways to complement the learning strategy of any organization.

Ultimately, learning organizations will effectively evolve if they consider including new social learning strategies. Formal learning will always remain a very important piece of the modality puzzle; however, social learning is fast becoming a true partner in the learning continuum. In fact, Gartner predicts that by 2014, social learning-like services will actually replace email as the primary communications vehicle for at least 20 percent of the workforce. Clearly, change is upon us all. Therefore, if planned correctly, social learning can not only help with the points of practicality and engagement, it can also assist those aforementioned budget problems.

Social learning needs learning leadership

Prior to solving the budget issue, learning leaders first must embrace social learning and become the company's leading voice for adopting it.

In a survey conducted by Accenture in 2002, 31 percent of all CLOs felt that "technology implementation" was the greatest challenge of the day. On the other hand, 51 percent felt budget constraints were the larger worry. It may be 2011 and nine years since that survey, but those same worries are still top of mind for CLOs and learning leaders of today. Social learning commencement and execution may be viewed as

both a technology implementation and budget hindrance, but it's the learning leader of 2011 who is going to mitigate these concerns (even some nine years later) and address them head-on.

Learning leaders are well served if they

- reformulate their learning strategy to become a combination of formal, informal, and social in nature
- demonstrate by example that social learning can work and is important to the entire learning cycle
- rally the organization around social learning as a way to improve employee connections and engagement.

The learning leader, in layman's terms, must take the social learning "bull by the horns" and lead the organization into new pastures through demonstrated leadership as well as by example.

Social learning needs a budget

If the revised learning function is going to begin including social learning as part of the compendium of learning offerings that enables employee development and increased productivity, there is an obvious requirement not only for social learning leadership, but for budget investment. Social software such as video servers, collaboration platforms, and microblogging tools do in fact require an investment to reap benefit thereafter.

The question asked by many at this point is "How can I invest any budget or resource time into the adoption of a social learning strategy if my training budget is decreasing, my headcount is shrinking, and I don't know where to start?" There are several avenues to explore that effectively answer that question.

IT department. In the past, the learning function may have liaised with the IT department solely to address learning management system issues or opportunities. Nowadays, if learning leaders want to actually lead and implement social learning strategies, they are well advised to increase their connection into the IT department. They

should become collaborative partners and work on strategic ways in which to jointly invest in social learning or social media tools for the organization. If doing so in a joint effort, it doesn't cost either party as much capital to achieve the mission. Thus, it's a shared investment opportunity, and it won't affect the learning budget as much if they were to go it alone. As an added benefit, IT and the learning team may become more collaborative and address other unforeseen issues.

Vendors. The learning function is renowned for using external vendors in the development and delivery of learning content. Whether the learning model is completely or partially outsourced, a creative way to invest in social learning is to rethink the vendor model. One example, of course, is to analyze the amount of dollars spent with external vendors and find ways to reduce the costs. Learning leaders would be well served to take a hard look at their existing rates with external vendors when it comes to development and delivery costs. If those rates could be reduced through strategic renegotiation, even by a fractional amount, the resulting differential could be applied to the purchase and implementation of various social learning tools and technologies.

Formal instructor-led training. The default method in which organizations address corporate learning requirements continues to be formal instructor-led training. Evidence is found in the ASTD 2010 *State of the Industry Report* where more than two-thirds of the 32 learning hours that employees consumed are in formal ILT mode. There is (and always will be) a need for formal ILT delivery, however, it behooves the learning function to analyze just how much formal ILT delivery is taking place and determine whether or not it can be scaled back. Whether delivered by internal faculty or external vendors, ILT has an associated cost. If an organization were to reduce the total number of hours of delivery (or classes to make things simpler) by even a mere 10 percent, the resulting savings could be applied to the

Social Media and the Learning Journey

"Social learning is what it sounds like—learning with and from others. It has been around for a long time and naturally occurs at conferences, in groups, and among old friends in a café as easily as it does in classroom exercises or among colleagues online who have never met in person. We experience it when we go down the hall to ask a question and when we post that same question on Twitter in anticipation that someone will respond. While social media is technology used to engage three or more people and social learning is participating with others to make sense of new ideas, what's new is how powerfully they work together. Social tools leave a digital audit trail, documenting our learning journey—often an unfolding story—and leaving a path for others to follow."

—Tony Bingham and Marcia Conner in *The New Social Learning: A Guide to Transforming Your Organization Through Social Media* (ASTD/Berrett-Koehler, 2010)

purchase and implementation of various social learning tools and technologies. Those savings could come in the form of training and education, headcount, vendor costs, facilities, and so on.

Stealth pilot. Another way in which a social learning strategy could come to fruition is through the use of stealth pilots. Teams may not have a budget at this point in time, and leaders may feel uncomfortable with the suggestions outlined above to carve out room in the budget, but a stealth pilot strategy will afford a learning team some advancement. Undoubtedly, there are individuals within the learning function as well as across the organization itself with a passion for social media, and if you're lucky, some experience to go along with it. Embrace these individuals and sanction the piloting of various social media software in beta or trial versions. One need not make this an enterprise-wide initiative or rollout. By simply putting together a group of passionate people, you would be surprised to see what they come up with, mitigating the need for any budget at all. The stealth pilot mode also lends itself to the premise of social learning: "learning with and from others."

But where is the ROI?

There are plenty of individuals within the learning space who are not yet on the social learning train. Before hopping on, as is customary to the learning vertical itself, leaders need to prove its worth. Babson Education, in the

report *Social Software in Business*, estimate that 84 percent of organizations do not measure return-on-investment when it comes to the use or implementation of social technologies such as wikis, blogs, user-generated content and videos, discussion boards, microblogs, ratings, chat, and others. Quite simply, those organizations already investing in social learning aren't yet interested in return-on-investment; they are interested in connecting employees, improving engagement, and allowing the learning and knowledge sharing to naturally occur in more effective and efficient ways.

Did the learning team wait for an ROI calculation before offering induction and onboarding programs to new employees? No, it just made sense. Social learning, in this case, is analogous to induction and onboarding. It's time to evade those budget cuts and begin investing in an area that will only show growth for years to come.

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