

learning



# INVISIBLE LEARNING TAKES CENTRE STAGE

*With informal learning now accounting for up to 90% of learning in the workplace, and with social media now making inroads into this area of corporate life, it may be time to ensure your L&D practices are keeping up*

**EMPLOYERS CONTINUE TO INVEST** heavily in all forms of L&D in the workplace – sending employees off on short courses, pumping out vast quantities of online courses – so it’s easy to forget that a large percentage (some estimate as high as 80–90%) of learning happens informally.

Informal learning is often referred to as ‘invisible learning’. This type of learning occurs when it is not centred on a structured curriculum – for example, it might be casual gossip around the water cooler, chatting to colleagues, observing situations, and so on.

Instead of waiting to be sent off on a formal course or trawling through company intranets for answers, employees are increasingly turning to online tools like Wikipedia or posting questions to their Twitter followers. And while the standard of response might vary, the result is instant feedback.

Ruth McElhone, e-learning manager, B Online Learning Group, says it’s time employers supported this type of informal learning and appreciated the impact it has on employee performance – especially in this new age of social media.

“We focus so much of our efforts on creating formal learning but are we creating an environment where informal learning can occur?” she says.

McElhone is often queried about how employers can measure or control informal learning. She doesn’t believe it can really be fully measured or controlled; it happens spontaneously – it’s organic. It is possible, however, to facilitate it, to nurture it – and this is where social media plays an important role.

“Social media allows people to search and access all kinds of information through blogs, wikis, podcasts and

websites,” McElhone says. “We are now both consumers and producers of information. Online communities are formed where people meet like-minded people. They can communicate, share ideas and experiences. People are using these tools to collaborate, create content and work together.”

The tools themselves are certainly important in the process because it is within them that the informal learning takes place. However, by themselves, they don’t add value to an organisation. When tied to a clear vision, strategic approaches and ongoing assessment, organisations can see a strong ROI – and in this sense there are strong similarities to traditional L&D initiatives.

Through collaboration and sharing, users transfer massive amounts of expertise and information in very informal ways, offering corporate environments a tremendous opportunity to plug into that elusive repository of knowledge. Being within a Learning Management System (LMS) that offers those same sorts of interactive tools facilitates similar collaboration and sharing safely behind the firewall of the organisation.

Yet Duy Huynh, executive producer of e-learning specialists Beyondedge, believes that employers have been slow on the uptake. He notes that many organisations still insist on blocking out social media tools but he believes the opposite approach is required.

“Staff who need to get up to speed with something quickly are going to post a status or post a question, or search a web forum,” he says. “Their peer response is very important and puts them on the right track. They are immediately productive to the benefit of the organisation.”

Huynh adds that there needs to be a degree of trust that people will use the tools available for the right reasons. “The key is to establish a good working policy and also to teach staff critical thinking so they can make their own judgment about what’s a good source of information. HR and learning managers need to be looking for ways to make it work rather than blocking it out.”

## ALL THE BELLS AND WHISTLES

If employers have been slow to react, content providers and education specialists have been more attuned to what’s going on. Most education specialists are implementing some form of social media or online collaboration into their product offerings.

There are two broad categories of e-learning: synchronous communications, which include activities where all participants join in at once (eg, online chat sessions or virtual classrooms); and asynchronous communications, whereby participants may engage in exchange of ideas or information without depending on the simultaneous involvement of others (eg, blogs or discussion boards).

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– RUTH MCELHONE

To cite one example, B Online Learning uses an online collaboration platform called LearnFlex Connect. This platform includes the following: a ‘wall’ to post thoughts/messages (similar to Facebook); blogs; wikis; forums which have facilitated real-time content, comments and discussion threads; video sharing; and people and content articles.

Some tools are better for collaboration, some for sharing, some for listening to others, and some for building a community. Choosing the right tool and how you will govern and promote it is important to do early on, and the development of a matrix to show you where your knowledge lies and how it needs to move around will help you determine what the best tool is at the right time.

As B Online Learning’s course offerings are all online, the company is using these new tools to overcome the challenge of geographically dispersed students, and to keep the promise of online learning as a self-paced task. “The majority of our students are completing the courses

## Top social networks and community platforms 2011



#1 Twitter – microsharing site



#14 Facebook – social network



#21 LinkedIn – prof social network



#22 Edmodo – edu social networking site



#26 Google+ – social network



#31 Yammer – private microsharing platform



#57 Ning – private social networking platform



#90 BuddyPress – social networking software

Source: Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies

# Learning tools: Emerging trends

Jane Hart of the Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies has been compiling a list of the Top Tools for Learning since 2007. The 5th Annual Survey of Learning Tools was finalised in November 2011, compiled from the Top 10 Tools lists of 531 learning professionals worldwide – from education, training and workplace learning backgrounds. Respondents were asked to list their best learning tools. This could be a tool used to create or deliver learning content/solutions for others, or a tool used for personal learning.

The full list and more information on learning tools can be found here: <http://c4lpt.co.uk/top-100-tools-for-learning-2011/>

RANK 2011/2007	TOOL	DESCRIPTION	COST	PLATFORM
1/43=	Twitter	Microsharing site	F	O
2/22=	YouTube	Video sharing tool	F	O
3/14	Google Docs	Collaboration suite (incl Google Forms)	F	O
4/3=	Skype	Instant messaging/VoIP tool	F/P	D
5/6=	WordPress	Bloggng tool	F	O/D
6/-	Dropbox	File synching software	F/P	O/D
7/-	Prezi	Presentation software	F	O
8/12=	Moodle	Course management system	F	D
9/31	SlideShare	Presentation sharing site	F	O
10/-	Glogster EDU	Interactive poster tool	F	O
11/26=	Wikipedia	Collaborative encyclopedia	F	O
12/9	Blogger/Blogspot	Bloggng tool	F	O
13/72=	Diigo	Social annotation tool	F	O
14/17=	Facebook	Social network	F	O
15/3	Google Search	Search engine	F	O
16/7=	Google Reader	RSS reader	F	O
17/16=	Evernote	Note-taking tool	F	D
18/26=	Jing	Screen capture tool	F	D
19/5	PowerPoint	Presentation software	F	D
20/7=	Gmail	Web-based email service	F	O
21/31=	LinkedIn	Professional social network	F	O

F = free, P = paid for, D = download, O = online

in different parts of Australia and don't get a chance to meet their fellow students face-to-face," McElhone explains. "We needed a space where students could collaborate, network, get access to up-to-date information, etc. We implemented LearnFlex Connect about two years ago and we haven't looked back since!"

Other organisations are setting the benchmark for social media through creation of YouTube channels,

Yammer, etc. Pinterest and Instagram are also proving to be popular. These approaches may not suit everyone, and McElhone warns that whatever the tools, it's imperative that they cater for some form of meaningful learning experience; any good learner experience must remain learner centred.

"It reminds me of the mantra I used to hear during my days as a schoolteacher: 'put the pedagogy first, not the technology!' We can

sometimes get blinded by all the bells and whistles or even the latest technological trends but not all these trends will work for all learners. One of the things I love about e-learning is that there isn't an 'exact' approach. It's not a case of one-size-fits-all. This also applies to the use of social media," says McElhone.

## SUSTAINABLE UPTAKE

A challenge with any L&D offering is getting buy-in and continued engagement from learners. E-learning in this social media age is no different.

Indeed, research shows that only one to two per cent of users are sharing, generating and creating content daily, with 90% rarely sharing any content at all and the rest in between both poles. However, that's not to say they aren't participating passively – they do report finding value in having that information available to them, but opt not to go further than that. The inactive 99% have plenty of knowledge and expertise to share, and the challenge then is identifying ways to encourage participation.

For example, LearnFlex Connect users receive points for contributions. If a user replies to a discussion forum they receive 50 points. One of the requirements to pass the course is to reach Contributor status, which is 500 points. Point collection acts as a springboard to motivate some students who may be passive users.

Unfortunately, it's not a case of 'if you build it, they will come'. McElhone warns that many online collaboration platforms are slow to take off and some never take off at all. There are reasons for this.

"We are being bombarded with multimedia on a daily basis," she says. "So we need to examine whether we are just giving our users another website to navigate or whether it really enhances or has an impact on what they do. It really comes back to the old 'WITFM' [what's in this for me]."

When designing effective e-learning platforms, Huynh suggests that employers utilise a range of media – from text through to multimedia and interactive forums. He adds that it's not ideal when clients approach him and ask to simply copy and paste large swathes of text from a corporate handbook into an online reading environment. "The core of it is spending time on the instructional design – the way that information is presented. People are starting to realise they may need to spend a little more money but they'll get a better return because of that," he says.

McElhone's tips for implementing these new approaches include:

1. Ensuring learners are aware that your space/site exists and what its purpose is.
2. Educating users: Show people how to navigate the space; make them feel comfortable using it. A lot of users may be new to this type of approach, many others may be used to socialising in these technologies. We need to identify that they are social tools for learning.
3. Motivating users: Sometimes it may be necessary to motivate/encourage users to start using the space.
4. eModerating: For the majority of social media technologies there needs to be some form of

moderating in order to keep information current and up to date, and also to ensure that the space is being used correctly.

"One of the biggest concerns I see is that there is a lot of skepticism about social media," McElhone adds. "This can be related to security, misuse, procrastination. It can also be hard to get middle managers on board because sometimes we hear the word 'social media' and we get a few raised eyebrows."

McElhone says it can be as simple as revising the terminology used. She prefers the terms 'online collaboration space' or 'online collaboration platform' when using social media in an L&D setting.

"A lot of people also assume when you talk about social media you mean Facebook and Twitter. There is a wide world of social technologies out there with amazing capabilities."

One thing is certain: social media is not going away, and it's changing on a weekly basis. "We need to keep up with the pace but we also need to be able to critique these technologies to evaluate their educational potential. Can we see past the 'bells and whistles' and use these technologies to create a meaningful and memorable learning experience? Adapt or die – it's up to you!"

McElhone concludes. **HC**