

Learning Opportunities Embedded In Social Networking, The Future of Learning

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“There are social networking sites geared toward white-collar workers, and in addition to being great places to meet peers and competitors, they provide many opportunities for learning. How can a CLO harness the power of social networking sites to maximize learning, and is there a way to develop in-house social networking sites?” Brian Summerfield, Managing Editor, CLO Magazine.

In the past six months, the chatter about social media, social networking, wikis, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Web 2.0 has dominated the inboxes of learning professionals looking for guidance in sorting through this soup of buzzwords. There is a continuing conversation in most industries about how to address these topics and each professional conference; magazine and blog post seem to be touching on these ideas with increasing frequency.

This piece will add to that conversation and help you contemplate the benefits of embracing in-house social networking.

Social Networking as a Part of Your Learning Strategy

In the past five years, we have seen the growth of social media in the enterprise from simple email and discussion boards to full-featured, in-house social networks that are customized to suit the specific needs of an organization. The learning strategy of an organization will typically vary widely; yet at its heart, the strategy must answer the question of how to *involve* learners in the process. A primary benefit of a social network is the interactivity inherent in each system. To benefit from the network, one *has* to interact, which takes the form of creating a profile, joining groups, posting and reading threads on forums, adding content and generally being a part of a conversation. Interactivity is vital to the success of a vibrant social network and is not arrived at by chance. Creating a compelling environment with clearly articulated goals takes thought and its own strategy – one that supports the overall learning strategy of the organization.

Currently, there are many ways to add social media tools to support a learning strategy. Companies can add groups on public facing sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, and many are seeing tremendous participation here, much to the chagrin of management in many cases. Because these sites are “one size fits all” and not designed specifically for the organization, they provide an avenue for employees to meet and communicate with one another outside of the workplace but don’t support the overarching goal of involving them in the learning process. Yes, it is a positive outcome that they are meeting one another, but it seems to be more for the ‘social’ part of networking and not to find others with similar

skills or study partners, so that they can improve their knowledge about the job at hand. These sites have been excellent at raising the awareness of social networking, yet fail to help learning professionals meet their strategic goals. The need to tailor networks has led to these professionals to seek out social networking platforms that are then customized to support their learning needs.

There now exists a growing market of “white-label-social-networks” that are meeting this need. Major research organizations (Aberdeen, Bersin and Forrester) are starting to cover this growing group of companies. Surveys taken by them in just the past few months are proving that most organizations are looking to add social media tools, including social networking, to their arsenal of learning methodologies.

Where To Start When Considering A Social Network

Social networking has the ability to make important connections between employees. By considering what you want employees to learn about each other and what you want to learn about them will inform the decisions you need to make to craft the profile portion of your network – the most important component when designing your own site. Start with what *they* want to know about each other, in a professional context. It might be previous experience, usually known only by HR and covered in their (filed away) resume. It might be hard and soft skills or certifications, competencies, values, or even professional interests that span beyond their current job responsibilities. You may want to consider uncovering personal aspects like hobbies, which will add a distinct “social” flavor to the network and provide additional information that can be used to match like-minded individuals.

The information you decide to collect from your users will create the “tone-of-voice” of the site. By clearly understanding and communicating your objectives, users will understand the intent of the site quickly; and as they build their profiles, they will have a clear view of how the information will be used and how that information will provide value back to them. If this intent is unclear, experience suggests they will not participate.

In addition to the targeted keywords you present to users to create their profile, you must consider what additional expository questions you present to them to allow them to describe themselves in deeper detail. Most people are not very good at skill assessment; they either inflate their capabilities or don’t give themselves enough credit. Therefore, you must keep in mind how you ask questions and present them with opportunities to describe themselves.

How you ask a question and how you craft the list of replies (if you chose this type of question) is critically important when building an in-house social network. A high-performing question might be, “Describe a recent project that you are proud of...” This question elicits a high volume of answers for three reasons: it is personal, it is timely and it speaks to significance, an important human need. Note: The answers to this type of question will provide insight that can be used in other areas of the business.

Creating an environment of trust and integrity is paramount, as you will want your users to feel comfortable and at-ease. Attention to this subtle aspect of site design is often overlooked and sites are built that are either too corporate or too specific in their design. Remembering that you are creating a social network that is actually going to be used by real people should be a guiding principle during the design phase.

Part of the profile should also include the ability for users to link to other interests and post personally relevant content to help others learn more about them. Look at any social network today; if you only had the images that people post on their page to glean from, you would still be able to gain an understanding of what's important to the person. You may learn about their recent vacation, a hobby or two, see pictures of a newborn infant or see a team photo from a recent meeting. You learn about people from the images that they post in a manner different than reading about them. Seeing a profile of a co-worker on a recent rock-climbing trip might help you learn that they are tenacious and courageous, even though they may not have selected those two attributes explicitly when creating their profile.

Another integral aspect in designing your network is how you will connect with an existing database of some sort. This step requires working with your IT organization to craft web-services to connect an HRIS or a similar system to the network. Most vendors offer a secure and private method for doing this. Why is this important? There is a phenomenon called "profile-fatigue" that is a result of having to build profiles on all of these social networking sites. Having a pre-populated profile turns out to be an extremely effective remedy to this condition and serves to increase the chances that individuals will actually complete their profile – a necessary first step in building the network. This will allow you to pull together information that may be in disparate databases. Many sites will choose to work around existing IT or corporate databases because the line is too long to get this type of work done with existing resources. Yet experience shows that an integrated solution that combines existing databases is worth the effort. The network itself will become another source of valuable information for the organization. Creating an automated methodology for capturing that user-generated content is a critical piece of the overall strategy as well.

If you have clearly articulated your social network strategy as described above then you will be able to effectively communicate its goals and objectives to your audience when you invite them to join and begin a conversation.

Laying a Foundation for Informal Learning

If you have ever had the opportunity to work with an architect, either personally or professionally, one of the things you learned from him was "programming the space" or knowing what you want it to do for you. In the corporate environment, the architect may talk about positive and negative space. Negative space is that part of the office that is not designed for a specific activity, but is left for informal meetings, encounters and interactions. Consider that your network has an architect as well – you. And the negative space your network creates is in fact the foundation for a key aspect of your learning strategy, thus enabling informal learning.

There is much written about informal learning – from what we learn standing around the water cooler to the related concept called "non-structured learning." A serendipitous outcome of the learning community is that it is a perfect place for both types of learning to occur. Why is that? The social network provides a place for conversation and the sharing of ideas outside of the classroom. Posting on forums, reading threads, being a part of discussions that are relevant to the business at hand are valid forms of learning. A popular online social network for learning, Elliott Masie's Learning Town, is a perfect place to follow trends and understand what is going on in hundreds of different companies by reading how they respond to Elliott's frequently posted questions to the community. We all

learn from these interactions, and it is from observing these interactions that we can conclude that similar learning can happen inside the corporate firewall.

Another outcome of the social network is that it becomes a timely repository of the skills and institutional knowledge of the organization. Consider this buzzword, “just-in-time learning.” This is what is required when an employee is challenged by a project or directive to produce a result that they are unprepared for. They are what is called a *motivated learner*, as their compensation may be directly tied to the results of the project. Being able to learn enough to complete the task then becomes mission critical – for them. The social network provides them with an easily accessed fountain of information about their co-workers, no matter how far away they are. It effectively bridges a global enterprise, allowing a short message to a colleague a continent away to start a meaningful conversation. Forums and discussion boards are also valid venues to glean this just-in-time information. A new employee may find that the answer to a vexing question was discussed six months ago in an online discussion board. The employees who contributed to the initial thread may be off to other pursuits, yet the information remains stored on the network.

If informal learning for the individual is the principle outcome of the social network in the enterprise, what then of the collective intelligence that is garnered as a result of the rich interactions between the employees? Over time, the database that is behind the social network accumulates the conversation and the answers to key questions, which can give deep insight to the organization. This insight can lead to a much clearer view of the skill set of the organization at any point in time. It can also be used to plot the training and development agenda, inform HR as they do succession planning and talent management and, in many cases, highlight trends that may have otherwise gone completely unnoticed.

Having a growing database of skills and conversations may prove to be of such value that the other benefits of building a social network become secondary in nature.

Is This the Future of Learning?

If informal learning is a key component of a learning strategy and a social network is a valid method for creating an environment for that to occur, why isn't everyone doing it? While around for five years or more, social networking technology is still relatively new in the corporate environment and is challenging existing thinking and metaphors. There is not a mountain of evidence that social media has a real ROI tied to it. Yet, anecdotally, there are success stories slowly being uncovered everyday. What is certainly changing is that the workforce is demanding that tools used in their personal life have a valid role inside the firewall. As a result, management is compelled to consider implementing and embracing social media in the workplace.

Certainly anything that helps people communicate is a good thing. Providing an environment that is safe, secure and trusted will allow for those conversations to be of tremendous value to the individuals and collectively to the organization that effectively puts them to good use.

For more information on creating your own Learning Community, please contact introNetworks at 805 722 1040 or visit <http://www.intronetworks.com>