



Social Learning and the Future of Work

Think about the two or three most meaningful learning experiences of your career. What did you learn? Where did you learn these lessons or skills and from whom? How did you come to realize that these would be among the most important learning experiences of your professional life? Chances are high that your top workplace education events did not take place in formal classrooms or eLearning course modules.

In study after study, corporate education experts have found that between 70 to 90 percent of all workplace learning happens informally — from knowledge sharing and mentorship among project team members to casual break-room chats.¹ Moreover, in an ongoing informal survey of thousands of participants worldwide, the Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies consistently finds that respondents value informal workplace learning experiences far more than they do corporate training and eLearning, with 87 percent identifying social knowledge sharing among team members to be “essential” and only 37 percent perceiving formal company training to be similarly vital.²

Put simply, we learn what we want to learn, and we learn best from our peers in the course of our daily experiences at work.³

QUICK STATS

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87% of employees identify social knowledge sharing as essential. Only 37% feel the same way about formal company training.

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Corporate Learning Is a Major Investment

U.S. companies spent upwards of \$70 billion on corporate learning in 2013.⁴ That translates to about \$1200 per employee per year on average.⁵ The learning management system (LMS) software market is now worth over \$2 billion annually and continues to be one of the fastest-growing segments of HR software, indicating the continued growth of eLearning and mobile learning.⁶ External low- or no-cost alternatives such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) like Coursera, edX, Udemy and iTunesU are rapidly gaining widespread popularity as well.⁷ Finally, social learning is on the rise, with companies spending 39 percent more on knowledge sharing tools in 2013 than the year before.⁸ Workplace learning is big business, and these numbers convey the importance most organizations attach to it.

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Consequently, though corporate learning expenditures vary significantly by the size of a company and the delivery model, workplace education is a significant investment for most organizations. Business leaders want to be sure the company is getting the best return on its investment in that area. They want to see learning that results in happy, empowered employees who regularly apply their knowledge and skills to their work. Empowered employees lead to increased productivity, improved morale, lower turnover, and ultimately a boost to the company's bottom line. Based on what we know about which kinds of learning experiences workers value most, it's clear why an ever-greater percentage of companies' employee education budgets are being dedicated to tools that facilitate informal social learning in the workplace.

Why Traditional Workplace Training Falls Short

So how can you get the best results from your corporate learning initiatives? Start by asking how human beings learn best. How you choose to deliver knowledge to an employee makes a difference. Most enterprises simply provide a variety of traditional offerings and give employees credit for completing courses. What we think of as traditional workplace learning comes primarily from formal training via eLearning or in-person training courses, with the scale tipping steadily more each year to eLearning for its convenience, cost effectiveness, and measurability. However, it doesn't take a research study to recognize that formal, instructor-led courses sometimes fall short in keeping employees' attention. Formal training often fails to deliver the relevant knowledge that employees need to get work done. In fact, Gallup reports that 51 percent of employees are not actively engaged, and almost 18 percent are actively disengaged.⁹ Disengaged employees are a drag on an organization's bottom line.

Parents and educators know that children learn best when they are interested and when they can apply their learning immediately in relevant and meaningful ways. Young children are given many opportunities each day to engage in stimulating, hands-on learning; to work in groups, ask questions, and discuss their lessons creatively and energetically; to share what they know with classmates, family, and friends. Regrettably, year by year, as a child moves through the education system and approaches adulthood, learning tends to become more and more formalized, abstract, and reading- or lecture-driven. This is unfortunate because adults still need to be engaged and interested in their learning, just like when they were younger.

Though there are differences between teaching children and adults, several core principles remain constant for learners of all ages¹⁰:

- Learning is fundamentally social
- Knowledge is integrated within communities
- Learning is active
- The depth of our learning depends on the depth of our engagement

But how do we move workplace learning from predominantly passive training methods to more active and engaging learning models? As Benjamin Franklin said, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

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— Benjamin Franklin

How Social Learning Fills the Gap

Social learning is the process of learning through social interaction between peers. The most common illustration of social learning in the workplace is the chance meeting by the water cooler. Two or more people run into each other, share ideas, and walk away a little more knowledgeable in the process; this is social learning.

Social learning can take place in informal one-on-one encounters, among teams in the course of real-time problem-solving, communities of practice, through social software, expertise directories, and more. The key is that the company fosters a culture of continual learning, in which employees are empowered and encouraged to share what they know with each other and to seek out colleagues' expertise to increase performance across the organization.

In order to retain more new material, it's extremely helpful to enable the learner to actively engage in the process. Human beings learn best by asking questions, discussing issues, sharing ideas, and teaching what we know.¹¹ When we are engaged — repeating information and ideas while interacting with others to explore an area of learning — it stimulates deeper critical thinking. No matter what a person's dominant learning style is — auditory, visual, or tactile — active participation is the most effective way to solidify new knowledge for the vast majority of people. This is the potential power of social learning done well.

The Benefits of Social Learning Technology

Social learning enhances traditional training methods by bridging the gap between formal and informal workplace education.

Social learning software solutions bridge this gap by offering:

- The ability to upload user-generated content, including sharing of best practices and collateral by peers
- Opportunities for self-directed learning, which foster(s) engagement through autonomy, mastery, and purpose
- A platform to develop learning communities: groups that collaborate on their shared learning experience
- Mobile learning opportunities, available anytime from anywhere for the modern, on-the-go workforce
- Metrics beyond a “grade,” including content access reports, gamification, and leaderboard-type measurements of engagement

Generational Differences in Learning Preferences

Formal learning still plays an important role in the workplace, but the impact of social learning is empowering to today's workforce, particularly to those younger workers who grew up with both social tools and mobile devices. The challenge to companies today is to empower all workers and provide them with an environment conducive to how they want to learn.¹²

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Younger workers are the least engaged employees; fewer than 30 percent of millennials feel they have the opportunity to contribute to the best of their ability at work.¹³ But the millennial generation also tends to be far more comfortable with digital, collaborative, self-directed learning than some older workers.¹⁴ Plus, as social learning expert Luis Suarez points out, younger workers' devices are almost an extension of their brains. They have integrated the device so thoroughly into how they learn, work, communicate, and function, that many would feel something close to helplessness without them. For these workers, Suarez says, "if it's not on mobile, it didn't happen."

While many older workers experience a similar dependence on devices in their daily lives, they are not as inextricably cognitively integrated with their devices as millennials and younger workers seem to be.¹⁵ To increase younger workers' engagement — and many older workers' as well — meet them where they are and empower them through continual self-directed social learning opportunities facilitated through appropriate interactive tools. Marcia Conner, author of *The New Social Learning*, agrees.

"Organizations need to provide millennials with ways to contribute and connect non-stop," Conner says. "The smart ones won't settle for anything less — and those who will be unlikely to be the leaders of your future. Older workers may be willing to work in traditional ways, but many are excited about the opportunity to share their knowledge and continue to learn that new technology offers. This is your best chance to unearth the range of their insights based on their years of experiences."¹⁶

Though he acknowledges differences in people's learning preferences by age, Suarez rejects the so-called generational "digital divide." He sees social learning as the only path to effective workplace learning for workers of every generation.

"We were born to be social learners," he says. "The social networking platform almost doesn't matter — Twitter, Facebook, blogs, communities, collaboration tools — working with human behavior instead of against it is the key. We thrive when we are in control of what we're learning, from whom we're learning it, when we're learning it, and how we're applying it. Social learning enables all of that."¹⁷

The Challenge of Implementing Social Learning

According to the results of a social learning study conducted by the Brandon Hall Group, "The challenge [of implementing social learning] is that few organizations have a complete understanding of what social technologies mean for their learning function. In fact, attitudes toward social learning technologies range from seeing them as time-wasting fads, to looking at them as something you simply buy from a vendor, to understanding that they help enable a cultural shift in learning." The study also revealed, though, that organizations with the latter attitude — that social technologies represent a cultural shift in learning — are also most likely to be the

“ We were born to be social learners. ”

— Luis Suarez
Social Learning Expert

highest-performing companies among those surveyed (with high performance being defined as companies that increased revenues and improved a majority of their key performance indicators over the previous year).¹⁸ This supports the conclusion that social learning works for organizations that embrace it throughout their culture.

David Hegarty, writing for *HC Online*, asserts: “successful social learning requires more than choosing a platform and hoping people won’t mind the extra login. Business outcomes like improved sales, productivity, engagement, and time to competence can be directly linked to successful social learning initiatives.” He then offers tips to help organizations get started:

- Set yourself up for success with an easy UX and seed it with great content
- Lead from the top with direct executive involvement and support
- Understand the pain points of your audience and communicate how they will benefit from participation
- Let the social platform become the “single source of truth” — the knowledge core of the entire organization¹⁹

It should be noted that the most effective tools for social learning require the organization to give up a little bit of control. Learner-generated content, ratings, comments, and discussions tend to scare organizations, but they are the most powerful ways to allow learners to teach each other.²⁰

QUICK STAT

Over 50% of companies are using social learning practices today. 2/3 plan to implement or increase social learning initiatives in the future.

“The evolution from social media to social learning is the direction forward-thinking companies are moving.”

— Sarah Kimmel
director of research
and advisory services
at Human Capital Media
Advisory Group

The Future of Work

So what comes next? Where is social learning in the workplace taking us? More than half of companies are already leveraging social learning practices today, and nearly two-thirds of companies are motivated to implement or increase social learning initiatives in the future.²¹

“The evolution from social media to social learning is where forward-thinking companies are moving to accelerate the development of their people and better accomplish business goals,” said Sarah Kimmel, director of research and advisory services at Human Capital Media Advisory Group. “As employees and learning leaders become more comfortable with social learning and the value it can add to an organization, the challenges with adoption will ease, allowing for even more creative and productive use.”²²

Marcia Conner predicts, “People will need to learn at work as long as there is work, yet the notion of stopping what you’re doing to learn something new has always wasted time and never will make sense. Each new technology advance that puts real-time instruction in our pockets or on our wrists, on our gloves or in our glasses — wherever we are, however we work — allows us to get better, in context. When we are able to learn anything seamlessly, in the moment of need, we can spend our discretionary time making meaningful choices and working together to create a better world.”²³

Luis Suarez predicts that we will begin screening and recruiting candidates for their curiosity and mental agility as much as for their established experience and skills. An employee’s passion for continual learning and sharing is a commodity worth investing in because the rapid flow of information and advancements in technology mean that no one can know everything there is to know about performing their job. Therefore, the ability to learn rapidly, synthesize ideas, and apply new learning immediately in

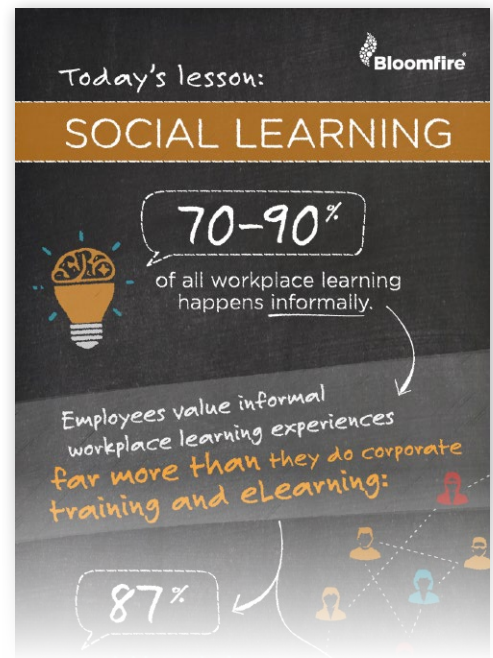
the workplace is in many ways more valuable to the company than general industry knowledge or narrow job expertise.²⁴

The new workplace is deeply integrated, collaborative, and global in nature, and it's only getting more so. A corporate culture of social learning is the key to being ready for the workplace of tomorrow.

About Bloomfire

Bloomfire exists to organize knowledge and expertise, and make it accessible and shareable with the people that need it most. Our easy-to-use, elegant software is used by thousands of employees at leading companies for social learning, customer service, and sales & marketing alignment. With Bloomfire, collaboration is easier, work gets done more efficiently, and employees and customers are more satisfied. Bloomfire is headquartered in downtown Austin, Texas.

Check out our Infographic about Social Learning



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