Creating social networks for learning and sharing ideas

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The future of learning

As we have seen in stark reality over the past two years, the future is no longer predictable (if it ever was). Organisations' ability to adapt and to learn to operate in changing circumstances are critical capabilities. And yet, when times get tough one of the first things to be cut is the learning and development budget. Why is this? Do organisations think that they no longer need to learn, or is it because they actually think that the investment isn't delivering value to the business; in which case why were they doing it in the first place? Recent estimates by a number of commentators and researchers have suggested that only between 10% and 30% of learning occurs through formal development and yet 80-90% of the L&D budget is spent on this.

In our recent work L&D 2020, we identified that learning will continue the shift from being just thought of as formal, away from the office, programmes to an on-going process where learning is continuous, social, informal and embedded in the workplace. People learn all the time, it is almost impossible not to learn on a daily basis, but many people only think of development as having happened when they have been formally trained in a particular area. As the knowledge required for many jobs changes more rapidly and becomes more dispersed, it won't be practical to help people learn all that they need to in this way.

More traditional models of classroom based or facilitated learning will still have their place, particularly for regulatory, core skill set and/or brand values-based development. It is likely though that their role will diminish for other types of development as people draw on their network of contacts or use technology to access relevant learning material on a just-in-time basis.

People are natural learners; it is almost impossible for us not to learn things. The question for the organisation and its L&D professionals is whether people are learning the most useful things to take the business forward and in an efficient way. The challenge for L&D professionals is to harness this range of informal and social learning processes to make it easy for people to learn quickly and easily in a way which supports the organisation's goals.

It is tempting to think of some of the advances in technology as just new delivery mechanisms delivering the same content in new ways. Indeed, some of it may be just that, an extension of e-learning to m-learning, podcasts, and so on. However, even these provide opportunities for people to learn at different times and in different situations than they did previously, accessing the required material on a just-in-time basis. Organisations are also getting smarter at deploying these technologies, solving real business problems rather than implementing them just because they can.

More fundamentally though, recent advances in technology have helped people connect and collaborate more easily with a wider range of colleagues. Always-on internet connections make it possible for people to interact and learn wherever and whenever they need to. This isn't just about delivering the same content in a new way but providing ways for people to seek out and find learning for themselves, be that through accessing existing knowledge or tapping into a network of contacts (or their contacts).

These networked uses of technology require a different way of thinking about learning which isn't about content

delivery necessarily, but more about providing the means for people to find and share information for themselves. Understanding the psychology of relationships and networks will be fundamental to creating effective learning environments.

How do you capture the tacit knowledge of experts in the organisation who may be retiring or who may at some point leave the organisation? Perhaps encourage them to capture their knowledge on video or in an on-line wiki. Social networking ideas allow people to connect with experts anywhere in the world to get answers to their questions, and to answer other people's questions. Often the answer emerges through discussion or debate; perhaps this used to be at the coffee machine or water cooler where some of the most useful creative ideas emerged. Now this can be on-line with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. The potential for the development of creative solutions and rapid learning are enormous. But in many organisations this requires a cultural shift for people to feel comfortable networking and sharing knowledge and experience in this way. The L&D community needs to understand the psychology of networks and how they operate and be focused on how to maximise the benefit of collaborative learning that always on connectivity allows. The key is that the solutions produced are designed to tackle real business issues and deliver real business benefit, not just sharing for sharing's sake.

IES recently carried out a piece of work for the NHS in the UK looking at what is required to establish new social networks for the sharing of ideas and knowledge across a large multi-site organisation. We reviewed the relevant literature, interviewed leaders of successful online communities and ran focus groups and a survey with staff to understand what would encourage and allow them to engage with such a community. The rest of this paper presents the key themes from the research literature and then goes on to presents hints and tips for establishing a new online community.

Key themes from the research literature

An initial literature review identified seven broad areas that need to be considered when developing online networks or communities. These were:

- Individual factors such as their confidence in using the technology and training they received, motivations and time to engage and the anticipated benefits from engaging.

- Environmental influences including their organisation's attitude to the use of such technology at work, the availability of, and access to, the technology to use the network (either at work or at home) and the availability of training, support and encouragement at work.

- Technological factors such as the range of ways that people can access the network and the power of the computers (or other device) and internet connection required (including lack of firewall blocking).

- The ease of use of the website and community areas such that staff can find what they are looking for rapidly and contribute easily in a way which is right for them.

- Psychological influences on individuals engaging with online networks and, in particular, the trust that they have in the community and its other members; and the need to proactively build this trust.

- Appropriateness of content; ensuring that users can access and are presented with information that is right for them and allowing communities to grow up around common areas of interest.

- The management activity and offline effort required to sign up members, generate activity within communities and moderate content as well as building trust of, and within, the network.

Hints and Tips

Out of the work, some clear practical messages emerged about how to establish an online network of community to allow people to share ideas and knowledge.

Encouraging initial engagement

Getting people to join and then engage in an online community is not a trivial task; it takes significant time and effort to reach a level of sustainable activity.

- Give people a **clear reason** to join the network. The most successful networks are based around a **specific topic**.

- There needs to be a **clear benefit** and **value added** for people to want to join.

- It is more effective to work with those that **want to work** with the network and who **self-select in**, rather than chasing everyone.

- If there is not already some **sense of community** offline then can be very difficult to create that online.

- The amount of effort required to create content for the site should not be underestimated.

Recruitment activity

Key to success is the clarity of strategy needed to recruit and engage people, rather than any tactical activity on the website and or within the community.

- Almost all the successful networks undertake **extensive offline activity** aimed at finding new members.

- Often, members are found (initially at least) through **personal contact**, **word of mouth** and **activity by the network champion** until a degree of critical mass is achieved.

- A **face-to-face** set-up meeting with the very first members and subsequent champions can be helpful.

- It is a good idea to **use existing networks** to expand awareness and reach of the new network.

- A **training programme for network facilitators** can be helpful.

Maintaining/increasing activity and engagement

People must feel that they are getting value from the time they spend in the community or on the website.

- They need to be **made to feel welcome**, perhaps by a **personal message** of welcome from the facilitator and **encouraged to make an initial post**.

- **Building a sense of trust** in the community is important to ensure that people feel able to contribute and comment openly.

- **Traceability** of **participants** and **content** are important factors in the development of trust.

- Equally, trust in the community **affects the credibility** of the material accessed.

Content must be kept highly relevant to the members.

- Collecting some initial data from new members can be useful to help **understand their interests.**

- Data about members can be used to **target** and **personalise** email **communications** and **network areas**/**content** appropriately – achieving the right balance of activity without overwhelming people is important.

- Developing **sub-communities with a specific focus** is a useful way to ensure content finds the right people.

- Enable users to **filter** so that they access only relevant groups/areas.

Recognise that it is impossible to engage everyone

- The primary focus needs to be on **recognising the active users** to ensure their continuing participation.

- **Reinforce the contributions** of active users (by feedback or showcasing it) so that they feel valued and continue to participate.

- **Ensure that something happens** with what is posted – otherwise people will think they are wasting their time contributing.

Ease of use

The **ease of use** of the website and community areas is fundamental to success. Individuals need to be able to **find what they are looking for rapidly** and **contribute easily.**

- **Clear navigation** and a **minimum of links** to reach the desired content are crucial.

- Conversely, **complicated navigation** and not knowing where or how to post a question or find an answer is **frustrating for users**.

- **Alerts to new content** are valued by network users, so long as they are appropriately targeted and alert the reader to relevant information.

- Conversely, **too many email alerts** 'cluttering up' an inbox can lead individuals to leave a network.

Other factors

External factors can either encourage or discourage the use of networks:

- The work environment affects **individuals' willingness to participate** in online communities and share information.

- The **attitudes of colleagues and managers** can discourage use of online resources, where these do not view online activities as 'real work'.

- Where a **culture of sharing is discouraged**, people are less likely to respond to online requests for information or guidance or to contribute examples of good practice.

- In particular, **a culture of competition** may militate against the sharing of information.

- Concerns about the **applicability of other people's experience**, and contextual factors in the work environment which may reduce the transferability of learning, inhibit the use of online sources to share good practice. **Credibility** is also a key factor here.

In conclusion

Whilst there is currently much excitement in the L&D community about the use of online social media to help with learning, two points about the human side of the equation should be remembered. First is that social learning is not new; people have been learning from each other for thousands of years. New technologies can make this easier but we should not forget the importance of facilitating face to face (or telephone and video) interactions and the importance of creating the right climate for people to want to share both online and offline. Second, as with the introduction of most new technologies, experience suggests that the biggest challenges in getting business value lie with getting people to adopt the technology and use it in productive ways. The technology bit is easy!

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