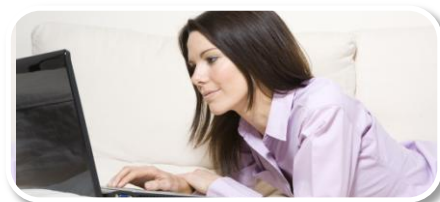


# Social Learning: Today's Workplace Reality

**WHITE PAPER**



**BizLibrary**  
ONLINE TRAINING FOR  
SMALL & MID-SIZED COMPANIES

July 2011

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Social learning really isn't new. Social learning theory and a wide recognition of the value and power of social learning has been around for decades. In fact, social learning is as old as human beings. We've always learned from our colleagues, classmates, family, social situations and each other. We learn by observing, communicating and imitating. What's new in "social learning" is the blending of social media tools and employee training, learning and engagement.

Social and collaborative learning gives employees the initiative to seek out the best, most appropriate solution for the challenge at hand. And when social learning is company-directed, the communication that your employees are engaging in to address their challenges – and the challenges of your organization – are facilitated, directed by, provided by and within your organization.

# BizLibrary White Paper: Social Learning: Today's Workplace Reality

## What is Social Learning?

Perhaps we should first look at the definition of learning itself; because learning is inherently social. In its most basic definition of learning, Wikipedia states that learning occurs out of stimulus from that and those around us, and that we start learning this way at around 32 weeks gestation [prior to birth!]. Sociologists and psychologists studying the behaviors associated with learning have found that the motivation to learn comes from the culture, behavior and impact of those around us. We are motivated to learn by those around us. Social learning theory was first published in 1941 by N.E. Miller and J. Dollard. They proposed that if one was motivated to learn, they would observe a desired behavior, and then imitate that action after clear observation, and upon solidifying the mimicked behavior, they would be rewarded with positive reinforcement; thus becoming a learned behavior.

With social learning, learners work together, both in in-person, face-to-face scenarios and in online networks, using the collective experiences, resources and knowledge of the group to gain understanding of the information they are seeking. In most social organizational learning scenarios, this information is then used to create and deploy appropriate business solutions. Organizations adopting a social learning style create an accessible network for their employees to interact with each other in an open exchange of information sharing. This communal exchange of information and personal experience becomes the organization's accumulative intellect ... a forum where best practices and information-rich content can be shared among all employees.

If training and development is on your radar (or in your job title), you know the importance of just-in-time training resources. The resources your organization goes to in order to 'stop the bleeding.' Social learning occurs at the point-of-need, and in real-time. Typically social learning is employee directed. The good news here is that the solution may be sought before the 'bleeding' actually begins. Social and collaborative learning gives employees the initiative to seek out the best, most appropriate solution for the challenge at hand. And when social learning is company-directed, the communication that your employees are engaging in to address their challenges – and the challenges of your organization – are facilitated, directed by, provided by and within your organization.

To really learn something – for knowledge transfer, comprehension, and behavior change to occur, you need to actively participate in the learning process. Learning is an experience – of information gathering and problem-solving. Social learning is just that, a collaborative, social experience. Not to say that one cannot learn independently, that isn't true. You can read a book or take an online course to learn new information. Studies have shown that with role play and simulation, the retention of self-learned concepts is much greater. Recall is often triggered by an emotion or memory, and personal and social experience provides learners an association and an experience that they can draw upon. For organizational learning, recall is critical. What good is it to teach your employees new methods if they'll never be used in practice?



**Social learning combines the convenience of self-paced, on-demand e-learning, with the communal benefits of classroom learning – interaction, feedback and collaboration.**



Social learning in its most basic form occurs in face-to-face communication. If the technology piece is scary for your organization, your organization's senior executives, some of your organization's baby boomers, or perhaps it simply involves a huge cultural shift ... keep that in mind. It's just organizational communication. Social learning isn't a new concept at all. In fact, your employees are already learning that way. The majority of learning occurring right now in your organization – regardless of whether there is a social learning platform in place – is happening naturally and socially, embedded in our everyday workflow as we collaborate with our co-workers and colleagues. Advances in social media technology have just changed the experience.

In their book, "The New Social Learning: A Guide to Transforming Organizations Through Social Media," Tony Bingham and Marcia Conner use the analogy of "loading the boat" to describe the collaborative, social learning style. They suggest that in forming our collaborative working network, we surround ourselves with the experts at our fingertips. Call on the best resources available – the people and connections you can "load the boat" with to engage with and learn from. Social learning allows us to build our own dream team to disseminate our toughest organizational challenges and navigate today's fast-paced, global business environment.

Training and development experts agree that learning occurs best in a social arena – where thoughts are shared and learners receive immediate feedback and input from others. Social media can be used as a vehicle for driving new paths of communication and collaboration throughout the talent management cycle – recruitment, engagement, knowledge development, performance management, succession planning and retention. When we see the value that social media can bring to the way our organizations work, we can leverage it to provoke changes in our organizational culture and communication that will drive innovation and efficiency with large scale impact that was not previously possible. Social learning combines the convenience of self-paced, on-demand e-learning, with the communal benefits of classroom learning – interaction, feedback and collaboration. Our employees are able to learn and share information more effectively, with speed, reach, adaptability and function not possible before social networking came into play.

### **What Social Learning is NOT**

Now that we've talked about what social learning is, let's look at what it is not. Social learning is not exclusive. With social learning, there are no closed doors. In fact, doors are opened. Social learning evens the playing field for learners and opens organizations up to new and often untapped resources and perspectives.

Social learning is not a replacement for existing training. Social learning enhances existing training, connecting it to the resources that provide learner community, and drive engagement and change adaptation. When social learning and collaboration are a part of the training and development mix, it creates a more dynamic learning experience for the employee, and builds trust and value in the learning proposition, and overall learning environment.

Social learning may have overlaps with informal learning and e-learning, but social learning is not informal learning or e-learning. They are three



**"Social learning isn't a replacement for training and employee development. But it can accomplish what traditional approaches often cannot. For instance, this new, technology-enabled approach can supplement instruction with collaboration and co-creation and, in so doing, blur the boundary between the instructor and the instructed and enhance the experience of all."** Daniel Pink, Foreword, "The New Social Learning: A Guide to Transforming Organizations through Social Media," Tony Bingham and Marcia Conner

different styles or types of learning. E-Learning includes activities such as online courses, e-books, online reference, etc. Of course that's not all that e-learning is. E-Learning is a broad, blanket term that encompasses many types of online learning activities and functions. The term "informal learning" also covers an array of learning activities ... essentially any type of learning that happens informally, outside of a formal class or traditional learning environment. Most social learning is informal in style, but not all informal learning is social learning.

## Most social learning is informal in style, but not all informal learning is social learning.

### Evolving Role of the Trainer

In social learning, the trainer becomes the facilitator. The trainer and learner are typically in an interdependent relationship in a social learning environment, particularly when social media supports traditional training methods like classroom or e-courses. Employees rely on the trainer for traditional class material (i.e. curriculum, lecture, assignments), however the exchange of information and knowledge via discussion groups and threads, online postings, roundtable discussions, etc. invites learners to step up to a much more active role.

With social learning the learning is participant-driven. Trainers and facilitators move from lecture-based learning to experience-based learning, where participants must engage with each other and the trainer in order for the learning process to occur. Participants in social learning become both learner and coach. Therefore, the emphasis is on the collective intellect of the team. Without active, engaged participants, social learning cannot exist.

Thought leaders and experts are identified in a social learning environment. Common practices are shared and feedback is provided, yielding best practice processes. Individuals with ideas that improve organizational processes will be identified and recognized, regardless of department or rank. This provides a platform for identifying under-rated and/or up-and-coming talent. A-players are given the opportunity to be heard, and everyone benefits from the open sharing of best practices.

The learning process is diversified with social learning. Learners receive the input of multiple parties, versus the traditional teacher-centered learning models, where the facilitator's perspective is often the only voice heard. As the popular acronym for "team" states, together everyone achieves more. Social media technologies connect people – without the boundaries and limitations of location, time, and undocumented face-to-face conversation. Social learning is a multi-dimensional learning experience occurring in community and with the support of others. With the open exchange of information and access to an array of perspectives, social learning opens the door for all employees – regardless of ranking or geographic location – to join in the conversation.



### Leveraging Social Learning:

- New employee onboarding
- Share and harness informal knowledge
- Accelerate and increase performance
- Prepare for succession
- Nurture employee networks

## Is Social Learning Right for Your Organization?

The idea of handing over a social media technology platform to your employees, letting them loose, so to say on the information highway, with your blessing, can be as frightening as a parent giving his or her child the keys for the first time. What information will they share and with whom? What if the information they find and pass along to others is inaccurate – or worse – inappropriate? First, we need to have a little faith. Just as a parent with a new driver, a little faith and trust is critical – not only for your sanity, but also the empowerment of your employees. Your employees; consistent and comfortable users of other social media technology, realize that not all things are for sharing. They know that the information sought and shared via a social network is public, and that they are as accountable for that information as if they presented it in a meeting.

You may be surprised to see that ownership and accountability are commonplace in social learning – after all, your name is tied to and associated with your input and inquiry – it's documented. In that regard, you may find that employees put more thought into the communication that occurs via a social media platform, because all eyes are on them, so to say. Peer policing is also a factor. Employees and learners are not just accountable to their superiors, but also to each other. If your organization is concerned that meaningful and applicable information will be lost in the clutter of information exchange, you also may be pleasantly surprised with social learning. The most valuable information that's contributed within your organization's social learning platform will rise to the top, because your organization's users will have rated it as useful.

So rather than ban the use of social tools, educate employees on how to use them effectively for work. The future success of your organization's collaborative learning is in the hands of your employees. The more you prepare your organization for how to use the tools respectfully and how to apply good social practices, the better success you'll have, with fewer roadblocks along the way. Also remember that the people determined to harm your organization already have and always will find a way, with or without the use of social learning technology.

To some, advocating social media technology and integrating it into the culture of your organization feels like giving the green light for distracting socialization and decreased productivity. The truth is, our employees are already distracted. Our employees already have PDA's, iPads, engage in social networking, instant messaging, blogging, etc. Constant contact is a social norm and a way of life for today's multi-tasking professionals. If we ignore this reality, our employees will still continue to engage in the constant conversation around them, and it's more likely to be of the personal variety. If our organizations become a part of the conversation, however, we can increase the meaningful conversation occurring within



As you consider investing in social learning tools or collaboration tools, here's a quick set of questions you might ask as you evaluate options:

1. How will users find useful information using the social learning platform? Can users search for keywords, tags or experts?
2. Is the platform connected to or a part of our LMS (learning management system)? If not, can we connect the social learning platform to our LMS?
3. Can the platform be accessed broadly from the Internet, or can the platform be limited carefully to employees only? In other words, are you sure your intellectual property, processes and confidential information can't be easily hacked by the outside world?

the confines of the workday – and as we’ve found – outside of the traditional work schedule as well.

Measurement is another common concern we hear in regards to social learning. Social learning tools are actually very transparent in terms of data, reporting and measurement. Communication and learning activities are all documented and tracked, and therefore measurable. Information on individual and group usage, participation, engagement and activity are all readily accessible with social learning technology. Social learning provides measures in learning efficiencies – including the amount of time it takes to provide information to users, the number of times popular content is accessed and disseminated, identifying the needs of learners, identifying top content, and shortening the life cycle of idea to deployment. Social learning can also be measured against job satisfaction and employee retention, as well as performance improvement. The cost of employee training and efficiencies created in talent and knowledge management cycles are other measures used in social learning metrics, such as the cost and timeline for acclimating new employees. Identifying meaningful metrics that measure the *impact* of social learning is not easy, but it can be done!

## Social Media Tools Appear Poised to See Much Greater Use in the Future

*In terms of supporting the learning function, at what stage of development are the following tools/approaches within your organization?*

	No Plans to Use	Considering	In Development	Currently Using
Online simulations	19.3%	31.7%	12.0%	36.5%
Mobile learning	34.0%	40.7%	10.1%	15.0%
Social networks	26.8%	37.1%	15.6%	20.2%
Podcasts	29.6%	35.7%	11.6%	22.6%
Wikis	31.2%	33.0%	12.7%	22.6%
Virtual worlds	59.0%	30.2%	5.3%	5.3%

*Note: Rows do not add up to 100% due to the omission of no longer used responses*

Source: Instructional Systems Design: Today and in the Future, ASTD Report and Study, February 2010

## How Do We Get Started?

Start small. Learn from others. Focus on improving communications and creating efficiencies. 100% adaption isn't required. Social learning will be a process; an evolution in the way your organization communicates, shares knowledge, seeks information, and grows.

## Start small. Learn from others. Focus on improving communications and creating efficiencies.

Without making any changes to your organizational structure or its communication practices, social learning has made its way into your employees' day-to-day workflow. It's happening quite organically, within the everyday processes in which your employees are engaging with one another and seeking information. Do you know how and where your employees go for the best information and resources available within your organization? It's there that you'll find social learning already at work. Get involved in the process, and help support the flow of organizational information and knowledge, in a forum where it can be documented, managed and disseminated.

Social media is already deeply embedded in our day-to-day world. Just as quickly as social media can take a thought or idea – and make it viral, it has grown to occupy a space in our everyday lives that didn't exist before. Yet, how many times have you asked yourself, 'how did I get this information before Google?' Or, 'how did I stay connected with my friends before Facebook?' Social media and information technology have completely changed the way we go about seeking and sharing information every day. Going to a theatre to see a movie is certainly not a 21<sup>st</sup> century activity, but when we make decisions about film selection and ticket purchases today, we often engage in social networking. Chances are you buy tickets online – after reading customer reviews on the best theatres to visit and which films contributing reviewers see as pay-per-view material, or should be avoided if you're headed to the theatre with your in-laws. We look to social networks for input in so many every day and seemingly insignificant decisions. And we make these decisions in collaboration with others – people we'll likely never meet face-to-face, but are connected to virtually by common interests.

Why should our organizations' outlook on training and development remain rooted in the past, when our world moves to the beat of a search engine? As my father has always told me, you can't do the same thing time and time again, and expect different results. And that's what we're after with the integration of and shift towards social and collaborative learning ... results.

### About BizLibrary

BizLibrary provides online training and technology solutions for small and mid-sized organizations nationwide. BizLibrary's total training solution includes content, technology and service. BizLibrary's online content includes streaming videos, interactive e-learning courses, custom developed courses, reference materials and e-books. BizLibrary's fully-hosted Learning Management system tracks and manages all training activities including online courses, instructor-led-events, virtual events and online collaboration. BizLibrary's client services include technical support, implementation and marketing support, as well as custom content and reporting.

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