

Social Networking and Corporate Learning

The writing is on the wall • BY JOSH BERSIN



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With the advent of MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Digg and YouTube, as well as the proliferation of blogging and its associated interactions, it's clear online social networking is here. At Bersin & Associates, we started researching this market in late 2007 and identified 85 software vendors that are building special tools and systems for corporate social networking.

Already, there's impact on learning systems. Young and Internet-savvy employees expect learning systems to be as interactive and collaborative as the external Web sites they use every day. They prefer role-based knowledge portals to find information, collaborate with others and enroll in formal learning courses. In a recent Bersin & Associates survey, we found that only 56 percent of employees use their companies' LMSs.

Although deployed in 70 percent of large organizations and important for learning management functions, LMSs are increasingly taking a back seat to other applications and being viewed as back-office systems. Once the lynchpin of learning, they are now one of many services and systems that facilitate learning. LMS vendors have several big challenges ahead: to implement new solutions for social networking (competing with the 85-plus start-ups out there), adapt to the spectrum of needs related to corporate talent management and stay ahead of ever-increasing and increasingly sophisticated learning administration needs.

We already are seeing many practical applications of social networking. Social networking tools make it easy for employees to contact one another (expert directories); provide suggestions and information rapidly (e.g., Dell IdeaStorm and My Starbucks Idea); rate and categorize information through ratings and tagging (features commonly used in blogs) and upload their own expert content (communities of practice).

IBM uses social networking to find expertise throughout the organization and for learning on demand by its global consultants. The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland relies on it to share technical and business information. 3M uses it for the sharing of ideas and research information among experts.

Additionally, RWD employs a social networking platform to enhance its on-boarding program. New employees continue learning in a blended program that combines e-learning with wikis, blogs, simulations and social networking pages. This is especially

useful in addressing RWD's virtual culture, since many employees rarely visit the company's headquarters after on-boarding sessions.

Social networking helps employees make and maintain vital connections with their peers and teaches them to use corporate resources, business-specific approaches and proprietary methodologies, and project management processes.

For learning organizations looking to bring social networking tools to the enterprise, the best course of action is to start slowly but start now. Develop a clear purpose for how the particular network application you launch will integrate with daily business processes. In addition to selecting a social networking platform, you will need to develop a governance model that likely includes HR and IT. Some best practices include:

- Identify leaders and SMEs to serve as community moderators, instigators and stewards. Don't forget to provide training to these people.
- Give users room to discuss new ideas. Don't over-moderate conversations.
- Place thoughtful limits on content authoring, sourcing and rating.
- Do not allow anonymity. The social network system must integrate with your employee systems.
- Encourage freshness and frequency with regular content updates by community leaders.
- Promote adoption and ongoing use by celebrating the findings, activity and results of your network.

While governance is essential to ensure alignment with the business, be careful not to rob these applications of their bottom-up energy. If you make the purpose of the network clear, you can avoid misuse. Document what constitutes misuse and make it visible, so the network becomes self-governing.

Remember that these tools are user-driven by nature, so the measure of success is participation. Choose a platform that is easy to use, proven and intuitive. Employees must be able to participate as part of their normal workday experience.

Social networking is an exciting new world for learning professionals. It offers an opportunity to improve organizational learning and deliver high-impact learning solutions in today's challenging budget environments. **CLO**