HOW TO EMBRACE SOCIAL LEARNING AND IMPROVE EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE
Nearly all learning is inherently social. A basic definition of learning found at Wikipedia states that **learning occurs out of stimulus from that and those around us**. Sociologists and psychologists studying the behaviors associated with learning tell us the motivation to learn comes from the culture and behavior of those around us. Social learning theory was first published in 1941 by N.E. Miller and J. Dollard. According to the Miller and Dollard, once a person is motivated to learn, the person would observe a desired behavior. The person then imitates that action after clear observation, and upon solidifying the mimicked behavior, the individual would be rewarded with positive reinforcement. It’s this cycle of motivation, observation, imitation, and reinforcement that results in a learned behavior. Human beings have been learning like this for thousands of years.

In today’s world, social learners work together, both in-person and in online networks. **Social learners use the collective experiences, resources, and knowledge of groups to understand 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 openly sharing information. 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.
WHAT IS SOCIAL LEARNING?

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 in its most basic form occurs in face-to-face communication. If social learning technology 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 in mind that 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. It’s 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.

“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.”

To download a free chapter from the book, [click here](https://www.bizlibrary.com).
WHAT IS SOCIAL LEARNING?

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 communications. These changes drive innovation and efficiency with large scale impact that was not previously possible. Social learning combines the convenience of self-paced, on-demand eLearning, 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.

According to Bersin by Deloitte, U.S. companies spent 39% more on social learning initiatives in 2012 than in 2011.

Why Social Learning is Essential:

- Employees want to learn and grow.
- Growth contributes to engagement.
- Engaged employees stick around.

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, drive engagement, and change adaption. When social learning and collaboration are a part of the training and development mix, it creates a more dynamic learning experience for the employee. It builds trust and value in the learning proposition, and overall learning environment.

Social learning may have overlaps with informal learning and eLearning, but social learning is not informal learning or eLearning. ELearning is a broad, blanket term that encompasses many types of online learning activities and functions – video, courses, references. 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.
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.
IS SOCIAL LEARNING RIGHT FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION?

The idea of handing over a social media technology platform to your employees, letting them loose, 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. 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.

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? Is your information safe and secure?
IS SOCIAL LEARNING RIGHT FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION?

To some, advocating social media technology and integrating it into the culture of their organization feels like giving the green light for distracting socialization and decreased productivity. The truth is, our employees are already distracted. Our employees already use their own devices at work, and what the data tells us is they are using these devices MOSTLY to access work related information and sites.

Immediate access to information is 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. So let’s become a part of the conversation and increase the meaningful conversation occurring within 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 learning can be extremely effective when incorporated into a more structured program, such as combining a formal course with a learner-discussion forum,” Bersin by Deloitte explains. “In addition, high-impact organizations are becoming more effective at creating employee networks, connecting novices to experts through expertise directories, and sharing knowledge through communities of practice. In this way, social learning, combined with formal programs, experiential learning, and ongoing support and reinforcement, is facilitating a shift from blended training programs to continuous learning environments.”
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.

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 an 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 21st century activity, but when we make decisions about film selection and ticket purchases today, we often engage in social networking. You have immediate access to customer reviews movies, theaters, and restaurants. This on-demand, immediate access to information from your network, helps you make informed decisions. 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.

Whatever training your employees needs, you’ll find it with BizLibrary. Content and technology all in one place. BizLibrary provides their clients with the industry’s largest and fastest growing collection of high-quality training videos and eLearning courses, covering 25+ topic areas.
HOW DO WE GET STARTED?

In a knowledge-based world, employees need immediate access to information and data to perform at their full potential. BizLibrary’s Community puts the collective knowledge of an entire organization at everyone’s fingertips.

We don’t just provide a social learning application to our clients, we use it ourselves. It’s essential for sharing knowledge, seeking information, and learning new things.

Big perk – it almost eliminates internal email and can be reviewed/absorbed at leisure! It’s a great forum for sharing articles that we think others should read, ideas for process, service, or product improvements and funny or anecdotal stories. It helps remote employees, feel and stay connected.

BizLibrary received a Brandon Hall Gold Award for Best Use of Social/Collaborative Learning in 2013.

BizLibrary’s Community puts the collective knowledge of your entire organization at everyone’s fingertips. Modeled after social networking tools your employees already use – getting started with social learning is easy and increases employee engagement.

- User-generated content.
- Search and tagging to quickly find information.
- Organize communities for departments, cross-functional teams and more.
- Safe & secure environment.
- Peer-to-peer recognition.