

What apple pies can teach you about social learning

*The new L&D revolution isn't just
about technology or Twitter – and
you're probably already doing it*

WORDS ROBERT JEFFERY



If you want to guarantee ticket sales, blog visits or retweets in the HR world, here's a piece of tried and tested advice: stick the phrase 'social learning' in there somewhere and let the magic happen. Social is 2015's answer to neuroscience, a neologism that virtually guarantees interest among HR practitioners but somehow escapes precise definition.

Except social isn't new at all: it draws on the building blocks of human nature, and behaviours that have been encouraged by learning professionals for decades. And it's the timely confluence of tailored technology, employee demand and wider understanding that is spawning a quiet revolution with profound implications for learners, and for L&D itself.

The recent CIPD research report – *L&D: Evolving roles, enhancing skills* – perfectly distils the direction of travel. Its survey of professionals found 53 per cent planned to focus more on collaborative learning facilitation in the year ahead, putting social ahead of technology, data and coaching as L&D's pre-eminent concern. Meanwhile, using social media effectively and supporting learners online were among the most pressing skills gaps identified among L&D departments.

What is social? In essence, it means enabling employees to learn from and

collaborate with each other, and plug into or create internal and external knowledge networks that ideally become self-sustaining rather than centrally mandated. It can be about technology, or just the simple expedient of bringing people together.

Jane Hart, social learning blogger and author of *The Social Learning Handbook*, says: "Social learning is about people connecting, conversing, collaborating and learning from, and with, one another on a daily basis at work. Of course, social tools do have an important part to play in this, as they can help to underpin and enhance the way that teams and groups interact with one another, but it's not just about the technology."

This taps into a shift from a didactic, instructional method of learning to a crowdsourced one. If you wanted to make an apple pie as recently as a decade ago, a recipe book from an acknowledged expert would have been the only feasible starting point. Today, the internet is awash with enthusiastic amateur cooking blogs, many



Busy A&E staff at Southampton University NHS Trust couldn't take time away from the front line to top up learning



Regular 30-minute huddles were an opportunity to discuss tricky cases or unusual diagnoses



The effects of the initiative are already being demonstrated in patient outcomes – and there's more to come



Bringing staff together to chat proved revelatory in a Southampton A&E ward

supplemented by instructional videos and improved by users' own comments and experiences. In the same way, an automotive engineer trying to solve a design challenge would be better advised to ask their peers than reach for a Haynes manual.

Needless to say, the notion of 'training' isn't included in the definition. "It's about helping teams learn as they work, rather than taking them out and forcing them to endure a learning 'experience'," says Hart. L&D's role in that new world, she adds, is going to be "very different".

What social learning actually looks like depends on who you are and what you want from it. Hart's website hosts a litany of user-contributed examples, from

blogging and podcasting to the more esoteric 'collaborative mindmapping'. Social can take in 'lunch and learn' sessions for the time-poor, chat facilities within MOOCs or other online courses, and 'communities of practice' sharing knowledge among professionals beyond organisational boundaries. ►





Tesco Bank has been setting up learning networks online

Social learning can be housed within a specifically constructed platform, but most experts agree this is significantly less effective than having a social mindset pervade existing platforms and processes. Social enterprise networks, of which Yammer and Jive are the two most prominent examples, can be crucial: by providing ways for people to chat and share details of their work across an organisation, they allow learning to take place where employees increasingly naturally congregate.

Hart suggests such networks should be an integral part of induction and onboarding for new employees. Mike Collins, head of learning solutions at consultancy DPG, says they now include tools such as the ability to 'vote up' posts, two-way discussion facilities or elements of gamification to encourage interaction.

While specific social learning platforms can offer functional flexibility, Collins cautions: "Vendors get hold of an idea and all of a sudden every training company says they're doing social learning. People think it's something they can be 'sold'.

Technology is just an enabler – sometimes L&D can be like magpies chasing the shiny, new thing."

The most effective aspects of social learning are often the

simplest. Andy Lancaster, the CIPD's head of learning and development, says communities of practice are well established in medicine or education, enabling doctors or teachers to swap ideas and find out what works. They are no more than discussion groups among experts, increasingly enabled by social media, but Lancaster says they have become invaluable: "Such is the speed of change that it's a challenge to stay at the cutting edge without being part of something wider."

L&D professionals can get a head start simply by using Twitter, he says, to source the experts in their industry, and the communities where they congregate both online and offline. Meanwhile, for Dr Mark Loon, senior lecturer in organisational behaviour and HRM at the University of Worcester, the old-fashioned notions of secondments and job swaps represent fundamentally social ways of learning that shouldn't be overlooked.

Anita Esser, head of wider healthcare teams education at Southampton University Hospitals NHS Trust, is already seeing such principles in action. One of her A&E consultants has begun convening regular 30-minute 'huddles' involving the entire clinical team, in which difficult or unusual cases are discussed in an open environment. What went well and what could have been done better are both on the agenda, with

the aim of ensuring learning is captured for the future rather than locked in the brains of a small number of experts. But while Esser says the idea is catching

on, and having an effect on patient outcomes, there is still further to go: "Culturally, we're not there yet. People still see learning as something that takes place in a classroom." In dedicated e-learning, she says, "people don't understand they have knowledge to share... they're waiting for someone else to get them started."

What Esser's example illustrates is that the behavioural shifts that allow simple social learning to occur needn't be huge, because the propensity to learn socially is hardwired into us. In *Social*, the neuroscientist Matt Lieberman argues for a 'social encoding advantage' that sees those who uncover information with peers through a process of discovery outperform those who simply memorise intensely.

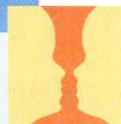
Social scientist Adam Grant demonstrates in his work that our desire to be altruistic and

share knowledge is linked to our notions of self-worth and personal growth.

As Lancaster says: "Interaction has always been part of the learning process. Cavemen and women learned to make fire through social interaction and children learn largely through social processes."

For Hart, social has another evolutionary advantage: it overcomes the lag between learning and application. While classroom learning is sometimes appropriate, she says: "As soon as you take people out of their work role and into a different place, they no longer see the relationship between work and learning. The whole idea is to not isolate learning."

This mirrors societal trends. While the differing learning requirements of millennials may have been overstated in some quarters, there is no doubt they are more likely to share and less likely to hoard knowledge. The concept of "working out loud" describes this more narrative way of operating, in which



Tesco Bank's leadership development was mostly face-to-face and paper-based, which had limitations



Using an online platform means staff can coach each other virtually and better influence their own learning



The communities that are set up online carry on beyond the formal development programme – creating ongoing learning

"We'll need a different type of L&D person, who taps into and connects communities"



A new way of looking at learning banished the blues at HC-One

work is visible and communal. Futurist Jacob Morgan predicts the most sought-after employee of tomorrow will be a “learning worker” rather than a knowledge worker: “What is far more valuable than knowledge is the ability to learn new things and apply those learnings to new scenarios and environments.”

Big Tech recognises this. Twitter is at heart a learning platform, and with exquisite timing last year topped Hart’s authoritative annual survey of top learning tools. In April, LinkedIn announced it was paying \$1.5bn for the huge online tutorial and training portal Lynda.com and would integrate it closely with its core network. In these ways, social is supplanting e-learning, which Lancaster says often becomes too “individualistic” and merely replicates a sterile classroom experience.

But while the case for social is overwhelming, it’s a massive shift both for individual learners and for L&D departments. Nigel Paine, consultant and former head of training and development at the BBC, says: “It’s like jumping on



a train that’s already moving. You can’t stop it, you can’t control it and you don’t own it. But you can create substance and steer it in certain directions.”

Inevitably, it will mean a different size and structure for L&D departments, and the capability gaps in the CIPD survey suggest new roles are coming too. Right now, community managers and social learning coordinators, alongside learning

archivists, are becoming more common. Not all will come from a traditional L&D background or even sit within L&D, but learning leaders are beginning to understand the implications: Esser points out that L&D has often been tardy in attending to its own CPD, but needs to arm learning managers with the ability to stay on top of social.

At its heart, L&D is moving from a controller of learning to a facilitator, helping people make connections and find information rather than holding all the answers. It must curate knowledge but also know when to let learning take place of its own accord.

“Part of our role will be to act as a connector, finding communities and plugging into them,” says Lancaster. “We will need a different type of L&D professional who understands how learning works, how it gets put together and how content gets contextualised.” L&D will locate people inside organisations with something to share, and help them move from observation of internal or external networks to active participation.

This will take courage, adds Hart: “When I talk to L&D professionals about social learning, they say they haven’t got time because they’re so busy writing the next version of their induction course.” They will have to let go, she suggests, because “trust is cheaper than control... though that’s easier said than done in some organisations.”

Some may hold the valid fear that an organisation full of self-sustaining knowledge networks wouldn’t require L&D at all. But Paine says: “Social learning actually enables you to increase the amount of learning taking place, and make it richer and more interesting. And just because people can do this stuff on their own doesn’t mean you don’t need L&D – though some financial directors might think that...”

Collins agrees there will always be a need for professional trainers with deep expertise, but asks: “If L&D’s role is reduced but business is more effective as a result, is that a bad thing?”

It would be easy to believe that social is already commonplace, given the enthusiasm of its exponents. But rates of maturity vary greatly between both individuals and organisations. “Most people don’t take accountability for their own learning,” says Collins. “They think ‘I’m going for training, so that’s that taken care of’. If things don’t go to plan afterwards, they blame the training.”

Ultimately, adds Loon, any social learning initiative is likely to have a positive net effect on an organisation, if only because it will force people to work across functions as teams. But workplace culture matters. “You need an environment where it’s ok to have opinions that diverge from the mainstream, and a hierarchy of people who listen and don’t prejudge,” says Paine. Leading learning for the BBC was a dream come true, he says, because it was an organisation that was “good at listening and having conversations... even if it wasn’t necessarily good at writing things down.”

In the future, the aspects of social that today seem abstract will become natural. The advent of ‘Web 3.0’, says Lancaster, will be characterised by greater intuition on the part of networks: the internet, in essence, will know what you want to learn and who you ought to be connected to. And though more individualistic technologies such as virtual reality will add to the learning mix, the social mindset is unlikely to prove a fad.

That has multiple implications but the real loser, says Hart, is the office know-it-all: “The person who sits there and says ‘I’ve learned all this stuff but I won’t share it because knowledge is power’ just won’t be as valuable any more.” **PM**

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