The Future of Learning in the Workplace

The Transformative Power of Collaborative Social Learning
In an era of unprecedented change – in how we live, learn and work – your organisation must adapt and evolve the way it develops its people.

Nurturing talent and culture is now recognised as critical to organisational success and sustainability. Your investment in learning and development must deliver more benefit to more people than ever before.

Organisations that deliver effective learning and development:

- Recruit and retain the right people – by meeting the changing expectations of employees
- Address skills gaps – by understanding needs and responding with customised programmes
- Increase productivity – by continuously building competency and capacity
- Improve knowledge sharing – by creating spaces for collaborative learning and innovation

So what does effective learning and development look like in the 21st century? I am convinced that the answer lies in the provision of high quality, collaborative learning delivered at scale. At FutureLearn, we call this social learning. I believe that social learning represents the future of professional development in the workplace. This paper sets out why.

I recognise that we don’t have all the answers but I believe conversation and debate can spark innovation and progress, so please share your thoughts with me and my colleagues at FutureLearn.

Simon Nelson
CEO
FutureLearn
The Skills Gap

Learning and development professionals face increasing demands from organisations and individuals
Organisations – across business, public and third sectors – need to work harder than ever to attract and retain talent, to create cultures of collaboration and innovation, to increase productivity and competitiveness and to address skills gaps as they arise.

The question for training and development professionals is how to meet these challenges whilst maintaining quality and consistency across multiple locations, within ever-tighter budgets.

To compound this, the expectations and demands of employees are radically different today from those of previous generations. Smart, ambitious individuals see themselves as professional nomads, gathering knowledge, skills and experiences as they move from job to job. Learning and development professionals must recognise and embrace the social dynamics that, driven by technology, are shaping modern life and, by extension, the modern employee. Ubiquitous access to information and resources is driving a trend towards self-directed learning. Digital natives expect their education and training experiences to be just as digitally connected as the rest of their lives.

Our research indicates a general shift from 5 years ago. 42% of people say they receive less face-to-face and more online training than they did 5 years ago.

Furthermore, the top three reasons that people like training are:

1. It makes them more effective at their jobs (50%)
2. Enjoy learning new things (48%)
3. Enjoy staying on top of their skillset (43%)
74% of people think training at work is essential to their development.

FutureLearn Survey 2016
The mobility of today’s workforce is a reality and is reflected in the attitudes that learners have towards their own learning and professional development.

Outside of their working lives, employees are flocking towards online social learning opportunities. In some cases, they are leaving their employers – and their outmoded learning management systems – behind. How should employers respond to this?

More than half of 18-24-year-olds say that access to training through MOOCs would positively affect their decision to apply to a company. 58% of 18-24 year-olds say access to MOOCs would impact their decision to stay with a company.

*New Talent Times survey 2014*

91% of millennials change jobs in less than 3 years.

*Coursera data 2015*

FutureLearn data shows that a fifth (21%) of all 18-24yr olds are familiar with MOOCs.

*FutureLearn Survey 2016*
The Need for Change

The design, organisation, planning, funding and delivery of learning and development must evolve
By designing learning experiences that mirror the way in which learners use technology on a daily basis – collaborative, on demand, in bite-size pieces, wherever they are and at their convenience – we significantly increase the impact of that learning.

This is not about dumbing down – it is about creating a compelling, engaging, learner-centred experience.

Corporates are in a period of transition: the learning management systems that have served large organisations for a decade or more are no longer fit for purpose as they lack the features, dynamism and interactivity of today’s freely available social learning tools.

Collaborative and social learning will be the number 1 key trend in learning and development this year.

L&D Global Sentiment Survey 2016
The three trends that will have the most impact on learning and development of the next 5 years are mobile learning, virtual classrooms and social media.

CIPD Learning and Development Survey 2015

The concept of the "student" now extends to anyone with a computer, an Internet connection, and a desire to learn.

We no longer look to the teacher or trainer as the sole distributor of knowledge. Rather teachers are the curators or guides of our learning experience. This means that it is the learner who governs their own learning pathways.

Social learning addresses these challenges.
Social Evolution

Social learning is an evolution of eLearning
When the social aspect of eLearning is genuinely harnessed, the experience becomes compelling.

Learners are empowered to engage in knowledge transfer and peer learning and a collaborative learning dynamic is created across an organisation. Social learning enables learners to form online cohorts and communities of practice that support and enrich their learning. More than this, social learning creates myriad opportunities for interaction with instructors, facilitators and coaches. This multi-faceted dynamic is unique to social learning environments.

80% of managers in a recent survey stated that their company is failing to use digital learning well for leadership topics. 60% want the experience of digital learning to be more social and collaborative. CMI and Oxford Strategic Consulting report

We live in an age of sharing and feedback – from where we buy our books to where we eat out, social technologies have exposed many parts of our daily experience to the power of the crowd – and learning is no different. Social learning creates continuous opportunities to feed back to peers, to content creators, to employers, to tutors, so that we can constantly improve and adjust our learning experience.

Social learning is transforming our notion of what ‘training’ is – today, training happens constantly, in many different ways and throughout entire organisations. Social learning gives the learner the power to initiate, manage and progress their own learning – on their own terms, whilst simultaneously benefiting from other learners.

59% of people would like more flexibility with how and when they receive training.

FutureLearn Survey 2016

Our research tells us that when thinking about training, the three most important factors for employees are:

1 Flexibility – being able to train at times that suits me – (62%)
2 Personalisation – having training tailored to their specific needs – (59%)
3 Expertise – Being able to bring in outside expertise – (52%)
While we talk about 'social learning', others might refer to 'MOOCs'. However, when we think about learning in the workplace, the use of the term 'MOOC' might be misleading. Within a workplace context, are these social learning opportunities really 'massive' or 'open' and, in fact, are they always 'courses'?

The specific needs of workplace learning and development is driving the development of smaller, private training courses that still retain the benefits of open social learning, with an increasing number of businesses commissioning their own bespoke courses or running invite-only training via online learning providers to cater to internal audiences. Courses retain the benefits of open or social learning, whilst navigating issues around commercial confidentiality issues thrown up by open (publically accessible) courses and cost a fraction of those delivered by traditional means.

In this way, large, multi-national companies are seeing the benefits of using MOOC platforms and approaches to content as thousands of learners in different places coming together at the same time. That's social learning.

Learning technologies should help people to connect and collaborate. Technology should reduce barriers and bring people together and effective social learning tools have that potential.

At its most basic level, new social learning can result in people becoming more informed, gaining a wider perspective, and being able to make better decisions by engaging with others. It acknowledges that learning happens with and through other people, as a matter of participating in a community, not just by acquiring knowledge.

The New Social Learning, Marcia Conner and Tony Bingham
The New Learner

Social learning is transforming the experience of learning for those who embrace it.
For learners, social learning offers accessibility (and, by extension, convenience), flexibility and, of course, interaction with others.

Social learning rewrites the rules around how, when and where we learn, and, more pertinently, who we learn from. Social learning is changing the context for learning – we can now access our learning experiences on any device and at any time of the day or night. Just as our social lives are not inhibited by proximity, so our learning can now escape the boundaries of the traditional learning context.

This is an essential and defining point about social media; it has turned the concept of "learning" on its head. It's no longer about waiting to be taught or trained, but about individuals having the power in their own hands to deal with their own learning problems much more quickly and efficiently than before.

From The Social Learning Handbook, Jane Hart
Social learning is both expanding the possibilities of learning – in terms of the amount of content that is now accessible – and also creating a much more granular, on-demand experience. Learner-driven micro-learning is enabling learners to create individualised learning moments that support their specific and immediate learning objectives.

We are now able to learn from our peers in real time. By connecting us to learners who share our interests and who are at the same point in their learning journey, social learning facilitates an exchange of views, ideas, opinions and experiences that, in some cases, renders the role of the trainer obsolete. Collaboration between learners often outlives the course itself with students continuing to interact after the training is complete. In this way, social learning can be a catalyst for lasting professional communities of practice that can be a powerful way of supporting continuous learning.
Many of today’s employees see social learning as a means of improving their chances of promotion at work or giving them greater opportunities to find a new job. This should not inhibit employers from supporting staff in this way. It will happen with or without them – if it happens with them, their chances of retention are much greater.

What’s more, social learning specifically helps develop the attitudes and behaviours that are most valued by employers and colleagues – collaboration, multi-disciplinary skills, pan-organisational working, cultural awareness, innovation. Those who embrace social learning can see an increase in their professional mobility. They have the freedom to pursue self-improvement at their own pace, in their own way and in a safe environment. They are empowered.

Most of what we learn at work and elsewhere comes from engaging in networks where people co-create, collaborate and share knowledge, fully participating and actively engaging, driving and guiding their learning through whatever topics will help them improve.

The New Social Learning, Marcia Conner and Tony Bingham
The Changing Workplace

For organisations, it is time to come on board
Social learning is powerful for organisations looking to increase the level of skills and knowledge within their workforce.

Much of the content currently available is free of charge and access is via any internet-enabled device. For organisations looking to develop their people, the cost alone is a key selling point.

This is partly about competitive advantage – organisations will attract and retain talent by recognising the value of social technologies within a business context and embracing this for the benefit of their employees. It’s also about building smarter organisations.

Some have criticised completion rates for online learning which have, until now, been low. However, the use of online social learning tools within the workplace is bucking this trend – learners are motivated by the opportunity to further their career or improve their performance. They are much more likely to finish what they started.

**Educators need to be aware of the advanced skills their students will need to flourish in more knowledge-intensive labour markets, without neglecting the development of other important competencies. These include 21st century skills such as global languages, advanced digital skills, as well as social and emotional learning.**

*Trends Shaping Education 2016, OECD*
Social learning tools also connect to a wider cultural aspect of every organisation. By creating a context for collaboration and knowledge sharing, organisations can provide their employees with a space where they can co-create new knowledge and explore novel ideas. In this way, social learning is not simply about professional development but is also about stimulating and nurturing innovation.

By embracing social learning, organisations generate opportunities for employees to practice and learn through experience. Social learning assignments and projects enable learners to collaborate, to think, to lead, to manage, to explore and to fail. Furthermore, learners are then able to receive feedback on their performance from peers, trainers and superiors, thereby maximising the learning. This feedback and reflection loop – allied to experiential learning – is a powerful facet of the social learning paradigm.

Working smarter is the key to sustainability and continuous improvement. Knowledge work and learning to work smarter are becoming indistinguishable. The accelerating rate of change in business forces everyone in every organization to make a choice: learn while you work or become obsolete. By helping individuals work smarter, organizations can reap huge rewards, for it is in social (workflow) learning where the "real" learning in the organization takes place.

*The Working Smarter Fieldbook*, Jay Cross

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**Nearly half of all organisations surveyed are interested in creating and curating their own online social learning programmes.**

*FutureWorkplace Survey 2015*
The Challenges

The future of social learning is bright but there are challenges for learning and development teams
96% of learning and development professionals see supporting learners online as important, but just 36% have the capabilities to offer these services.

CIPD Learning and Development Survey 2015
Education and training are being disrupted in a similar way to the travel, transport and media sectors; control is increasingly de-centralised as learners connect with each other to get what they want and need.

Embracing social learning may involve 'letting go' somewhat – or, at least, supporting employees in their personal quest around professional development. The new democracy of workplace learning will require learning and development staff to have an open mind.

Our research indicates that there remains a lack of understanding around online learning options amongst L&D managers and staff alike. Part of this can be attributed to the ever-growing list of new terminology, acronyms and platforms in the industry, and it is clear that there is an opportunity to communicate these options more clearly in order to bring the benefits of online learning to as many businesses and employees as possible.

The technology at the fingertips of today’s employees is often more sophisticated and better suited to working and learning than that which an employer can offer – this requires organisations to be adaptable and open to change (and to shed any controlling instincts they may have about the professional development of their staff).

49% of people hadn't heard of any of the types* of online learning

* Mobile learning, Personalised learning, MOOCs, Social Collaborative Learning, Gamification
The amount or availability of content is not the problem. It’s the opposite. In 2010, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt estimated that every two days we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilisation up until 2003. And that figure has now increased beyond even Google's predictions as internet adoption and the growth of photo, video and social and messaging platforms continues unabated. There's still a long way to go until search evolves into discovery and is able to organise vast amounts of data into something meaningful and usable for learners. The challenge is how to marshal, organise (curate), sign-post and evaluate the content that is out there. The need for content curators – and the imperative for collective feedback loops woven into social learning technologies – is clear.

It is clear that knowledge workers crave the tools to help them to do their job more effectively. They readily use their own devices, including mobile phones, tablets, and laptops in order to connect with work whilst working from home or outside working hours. Legacy file sharing systems that don’t allow access to smart technology is potentially the biggest barrier to collaboration in the modern office.

The Information Age
We must further educate those responsible for learning and development to ensure that they understand how to fully capitalise on the burgeoning opportunities that social learning offers their business. Right now there remains a lack of clarity as to how large organisations can effectively integrate online social learning into their existing systems and internal culture. In some cases, this may precipitate the complete redesign of those systems (which may be a difficult pill for some to swallow). Larger organisations also have the option to consider SPOCS – small private open courses where confidentiality is a concern. This approach allows the organisation to retain the benefits of open social learning, whilst mitigating any intellectual property risks associated with discussing commercial activities in an open or unrestricted online environment.

While many managers may be happy to encourage employees to explore open social learning platforms (many of which are free or low cost), some may also be a bit more wary, and may feel unsure about the impact of such culture shifts. Provided there are systems and processes for proving employee engagement and progress, incorporating these concepts into existing learning and development strategies will challenge the human resource and corporate learning departments to rethink and re-imagine their strategies and deployment models.
The future for social learning will be bigger, better and more social
Social learning is evolving fast. There are still those who believe this approach – which had its genesis within the academic world – is not fit for purpose within a modern organisational environment.

The key challenges that organisations face right now – in relation to social learning – are readiness (of learning and development professionals), relevance (of available content to a corporate environment), integration (with existing enterprise learning infrastructure) and engagement (of the learner to overly long/academic content). Social learning providers recognise the demands and requirements of the business market and are developing content and tools that are relevant, coherent and aligned with the needs of both learners and the organisations for which they work.
The concept of ‘blended learning’ has been commonplace for many years. Now, as social learning gathers momentum, learners are increasingly switched on to a mix of face to face interaction, digital content and online social communication. Designing learning experiences around this blended approach will be critical for organisations as they embrace the new dynamics of professional development.

The growth in social learning is pinned, in part, to the evolution of social media technologies. As such, the future for social learning will likely see greater implementation of features from mainstream social networking tools. This might include building links between community members by following other learners, rating discussion comments and competing with others to take on learning challenges.

Social learning is intertwined with the pervasive nature of mobile devices. Social learning is inherently mobile and this is driving its growth, an area of professional development that many commentators believe will be the single biggest trend in learning and development over the next year.

The concept of gamification has become a popular topic of discussion amongst learning and development experts and practitioners. By connecting game dynamics with the realities of social learning, the training experience becomes genuinely compelling and, as a consequence, significantly more impactful.

The application of social learning has not only broken through the boundaries of the classroom, but has gone beyond learning and development altogether. These technologies are creating a new type of social media.

Organisations are now exploring how they can use social learning tools to build relationships with current and prospective employees, customers and business partners.
Conclusion

Social learning is coming of age
It seems that social learning is coming of age as platforms, content and connectivity converge in a way that meets today's learners' needs and expectations.

This has huge potential for learning and development in the workplace because social learning can:

- Enhance innovation through knowledge sharing and cross cultural learning experiences
- Integrate high value external expertise across the organisation
- Break down organisational silos and hierarchies to provide fresh insights and new ways of thinking/doing

FutureLearn is committed to providing a platform to capture and support the evolution of social learning in the workplace and we'd like to invite you to become a part of our community of social and workplace learning practitioners and experts.

Please contact us at social.learning@futurelearn.com to find out more or sign up to events and updates on our website: futurelearn.com.
Credits

Produced by FutureLearn.

Research and writing by Jim Playfoot and Ross Hall.

Editing by Claremont Communications.

Design by Arch Creative.

Research methodology:
Statistics are taken from a survey conducted in January 2016 by Bilendi. The survey was conducted online among a nationally representative sample of 1,000 British adults who are Maximiles UK panellists and currently working for corporate employers.

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