



# Advance

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## The advance of social media

By Barry Sampson

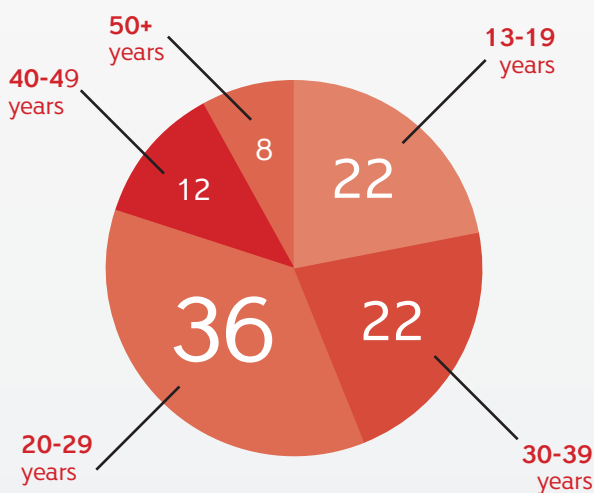
Anyone even vaguely connected with technology, in learning or otherwise, can't have helped but notice the growing interest in social media tools and technologies. In fact you don't even need to be working with technology to see this, when every day another celebrity is on TV talking about Twitter. Of course, celebrity endorsement is not a valid indicator that the technology is good or relevant to L&D, but it's a clear indication that we should be paying attention. Social media has gone mainstream, and choosing to ignore it is a risky strategy. As Jack Welch said when he was CEO at General Electric, "if the rate of change inside an institution is less than the rate of change outside, the end is in sight."

Whilst it's not without its challenges, we're actually being presented with a huge opportunity. Previous learning technology tools, such as e-learning and LMSs, required us to first educate our learners as to how they work. In this case, however, our audience is already using many of the tools and techniques available to us.

## Everything is social

There is still a perception that social media is the domain of generation y and the digital natives, or more generally that no one over the age of 25 will take these things seriously. A quick look at the statistics tells us this is not the case. In the realm of social networks Facebook is probably the best known, and between January 2008 and June 2009 UK membership nearly doubled, going from 10 million to 19 million users. The largest increase was in those aged over 30, who now account for 42% of the UK membership, and that trend shows no sign of stopping.

In June 2009 the UK membership of Facebook looked like this:



We should remember that social media is much wider than just the social networks. The social element of commercial websites such as Amazon, Ebuyer and Trip Advisor have been developing for many years now, and the features they offer have become the norm. Consumer generated reviews, ratings, recommendations and advice have become a must have feature for anyone trying to do business online. Social media isn't just about everyone writing blogs, posting YouTube videos and Tweeting about everything they do; it's about getting involved in conversations, and building communities around the subjects of interest.

Consumers are becoming much more web savvy, and are embracing social media in their relationship with sellers. Those consumers are also your employees, and their acceptance of social media is fast becoming an expectation.

## Another step in the journey

The introduction of e-learning caused a massive shift in the manner in which learning was delivered. Instead of the learner having to go to the place of learning, the learning now came to them. This wasn't something entirely new – distance learning had been around for a long time – but it was the first step in giving the learner a degree of control by making it easy for them to access the content when they needed it.

The use of social tools is the next step in that journey, with the learner being given more control not only by the ability to access learning as they need it, but by becoming actively involved in it. The old model of the learner being given knowledge is fast being replaced by one in which learners are coming together to share their knowledge. Again, this isn't a new idea; we've been going to conferences, seminars and networking events for years. But the technology allows us to open up this opportunity to share to the entire organisation, not just senior managers.

This requires a significant change in thinking on the part of trainers, away from content delivery and towards facilitating that opportunity to share. It's been said so many times that it's almost become a cliché, but the pace of change in business continues to increase and, as a result, the shelf life of knowledge will continue to decrease. Future success relies upon our ability to get information to the right place in the organisation as quickly as possible, and networks achieve that in a way that top down delivery can't.

## Platforms not products

When thinking about social media, it's critical to go beyond the products and consider the possibilities of the underlying tools and techniques. In many people's minds, Facebook and social networking are one and the same thing, and this often leads to the 'I've looked at Facebook and I don't see how we can use it for learning' argument. In crude terms this is like reading a Stephen King novel and deciding that books are not an effective learning tool. Go beyond the content and look at the delivery method and we can genuinely start to explore its effectiveness.

Instead of Facebook, think networks; instead of Twitter, think micro updates; look at the underlying techniques and consider their potential application to learning in your organisation. There are software solutions available, commercial and open source, which will let you replicate the majority of the functionality found in these products.

That's not to say that you can't engage your learners on existing social networks, but doing so requires care. Outside the organisation you have the challenge of working within the learner's own social environment, something which the learner may well resist. Each case will vary, but limiting external engagement to optional support activities rather than core activities, is likely to be most beneficial.

## Facing resistance

Like any new initiative, the introduction of social media tools may encounter resistance.

There are those that, when presented with the opportunities that social media tools offer, will simply respond with 'that won't work in my organisation.' Many of us will have heard a similar response to the proposed introduction of e-learning content, LMSs or any number of other technologies. This is more likely to be evidence of a cultural resistance to change as a whole, and the late adoption of technology in particular, than any real likelihood that social media won't be effective. Social media has become increasingly common in people's private lives, so there is little to explain why it wouldn't work in a particular organisation if it was given the chance to do so.

Many learning technology practitioners will at some point have faced resistance from their organisation's IT department. Social media is no exception to this, and there is the added complication that much of the innovation in this space is being led not by traditional IT suppliers or learning technology vendors, but by small niche developers with a limited track record. This can be difficult to manage, but the increasing number of case studies documenting the successful adoption of social media tools in areas such as marketing and customer service may provide convincing evidence that the technology is maturing. The Software as a Service (SaaS) model also provides a low risk route to introducing new platforms.

There is often a concern that using social media means that information that was previously private will suddenly become public. This is a legitimate worry, particularly where elements of employees' learning contribute to competitive advantage, but in reality there should be no more risk associated with giving employees access to social media tools than there is by giving them phones and email. These more established technologies are usually managed by policy, and there is no evidence to suggest that this approach will not be just as effective with social media. Security of content is a key factor in deciding whether to engage with people using internal or external networks. Establishing networks internally can be done either by installing the technology inside your firewall or by securely using external tools, but in either case you can restrict who has access.

## Where now?

There can be little doubt that the mainstream acceptance of social media increases the pressure for its adoption as a learning tool, but we should guard against throwing out the baby with the bath water. Social media does not replace everything we've done before, but rather extends and enhances our ability to provide effective learning when and where it's needed. In most cases, it can be viewed as an element of a blend rather than a solution in itself, often forming a wrapper around other activities.

We shouldn't ignore the significance of the change and the effect that it has on us as trainers. We're learners in this as much as anybody else, and that can be difficult to accept when we've traditionally been seen as experts. The good news is that there are plenty of opportunities for us to use social media to reach out and connect with other practitioners who can help us.



Barry is a consultant focussing on the use of web technologies to improve organisational learning, communication and performance. He has a diverse background, having been a retail manager before a move into HR and then on to training and development, where he went from stand up training delivery to training manager. Later, as learning technology manager at B&Q, he worked on a number of award winning e-learning and blended learning programmes, and championed the adoption of emerging tools such as blogs and wikis. Although he now spends much of his time watching the horizon for new and innovative developments in technology, he takes a pragmatic view of its use and his previous management experience keeps him focussed on its application to the business priorities of getting the right things done, on time and on budget.

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