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Social Learning on a shoestring

By Hanif Sazen

Earlier this year, many of you may have seen David Carroll's humorous tirade against United Airlines. Carroll, a Canadian musician, had his guitar damaged by United and although this was upsetting, the customer service he received in the following nine months drove him to distraction - United just refused to accept any liability. So he wrote a song, made a video and put it on YouTube. Following over three million hits on YouTube and Mr Carroll's appearance on all the major news networks, United scrambled to compensate the musician - but it was too late, the damage had been done.

There's obviously a message here for the big corporate machine: the customer now has the power to expose poor customer service and shoddy business practice. There is also a message here for us L&D professionals. Our customers, the learners, are being exposed to a multitude of technologies at a frightening pace. They get a customer service message from Mr Carroll's YouTube video, they get information and help on their BlackBerry or iPhone, they network using LinkedIn and they participate in online seminars from home and in the office. We have a great opportunity to embrace the changes and make sure that these technologies are embedded in our learning strategies. We need to break away from the traditional one hour course and leverage the power and the resources that are all around us.

I'm not saying that we use technology just because it's there. However, think about the environment in which most of us work. Competition is becoming increasingly fierce. Competitors gain visibility to our business models the minute they appear on the web. We are all being forced to do more but with much less. Training budgets are under constant scrutiny. Yet, often, the skills and agility of our people are the only route to prosperity and, indeed, for survival. So, the challenge is how we ensure that each training intervention is targeted at the most critical areas of development and how we ensure that our team members are versatile, creating the agility that we need to compete.

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We could try to make our classroom training more effective or our e-learning more efficient but with 70% of learning coming from informal interventions, this is surely an area that we should turn our attention to.

Informal learning has been around forever. We have all learnt with Nellie. We use this type of learning to acquire wisdom and judgement and to become experts (Sutton).

The problem with informal learning has been that it has been restricted, often to our immediate peer group. We have no problem asking Nellie who sits next to us to help but our firms employ Nellies all over the world and accessing them and their expertise is a little more tricky. This is where social learning comes in. Technologies like private YouTube sites, Facebook, Wikis and Twitter all help to extend the reach of Nellie. Everyone in our organisation can be a Nellie.

In real life...

A recent example is a client of ours who wanted help with a product that their sales people were reluctant to sell.

The common view was that the product was too difficult to sell and it was too disruptive for the client. Our customers asked us to build a one hour course that taught the benefits of the product.

After some analysis, we realised that the sales people already understood the benefits but were not motivated to take the risk of trying to sell a product which was perceived to be 'difficult'. We knew that if we designed a course, it would have no impact. So we suggested a competition. We asked sales teams around the globe to video their best and worst experiences of selling the product in question. The teams were told that there would be a prize for the winning team and that the best videos would be shown at the global sales conference. We were inundated with videos - some shaky productions created on mobile phones and others that looked like a professional video crew was involved. The videos were made available on a YouTube style website, on various intranet sites and via mobile phones. The result was a learning intervention that was genuine and added real value to the learners. Not a course but a Resource that the sales teams could relate to. Furthermore, as the learners could comment on how effective a particular clip was, the most useful advice floated to the top.

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The above site generated an increase in revenue within three months, creating a return of almost £250,000 in that period. There was no difference to the knowledge held by the organisation, only now it was accessible to everyone.

Effectively the social learning environment we built met needs that we all face. Firstly, we reduced the training costs by using team members to create and deliver personalised learning content which was both relevant and timely. Secondly, we improved the return-on-learning investment by compressing the time to competence for the sales team. Thirdly, the sales team is more agile. They are aware of opportunities and objections that their peers have faced around the world and they are better able to respond to these challenges.

Finally, many of the learners preferred this approach over classroom and online learning – watching videos in their own time on their phones (criteria from Davidove and Butler).

Okay, okay...but where does the shoestring bit come in?

With budgets being tight many people may see social learning as a luxury – which it is not. We could keep arguing about the hard, cash benefits that social learning can bring to an organisation but sometimes the budget is simply the budget. In today's open source world however, this should not stop you. There are a number of tools that you can use to:

Elgg: Elgg is a powerful, open source platform that provides you with the components that you need to build your own social learning environment. Basically it's a toolkit that you can use to create an internal site that gives you facilities similar to LinkedIn or Facebook. The beauty of open source is that there are no licence fees to pay. The software is effectively free and all you pay for is hosting and any branding or tailoring that you need.

A branded Elgg site can be built and hosted for around £5,000. Examples of Elgg sites include:

- **Courseware:** a course management system started at Stanford that promotes collaboration amongst Universities.
- **Hedge Fund Community:** a community for hedge fund managers.
- **Eduspaces:** a site dedicated to promoting the importance of education worldwide

Yammer : Yammer is based on the Twitter model. It's a free tool that you can use to collaborate with your colleagues internally. Like Twitter, Yammer can help you to get information around your business at lightning speed. Recently a client told us about how Yammer had helped raise awareness of a security issue that had been discovered in the IT department only minutes after it had been identified. Normally, the dissemination of this information would have taken days.

LinkedIn: You probably already know about this one. If you don't, you really should join up. Remember, however,

the challenge that you face when implementing social learning is a people challenge and has very little to do with any technology barriers that you may come up against.

Where to start?

The key is to start small with one clearly defined objective. Use your first project as a proof of concept and prove the business case – currently, there is a lot of low hanging fruit out there. Promote your success, get your team energised and excited. Take your outcomes to your senior management team, and show them the tangible benefits. This of course means you have to be careful with your first project, ensuring that the return is clear and will arouse interest. To get organisations started, Eric Davidove and Charles Jennings have developed a diagnostic tool to help organisations to assess and improve the 'health' of their learning communities and networks – look them up!

I love...

- **Our internal Wiki site**, for new employees to find out how we do things at Saffron and the veterans to be reminded of it
- **Twitter**, to find out what people are thinking, (and to be amazed by Stephen Fry)
- **Hootsuite**, to keep Twitter organised and to make the tweets less random
- **YouTube**, when I want to hear it from the horse's mouth
- **Mindlever**, helping our clients to create internal "Youtubelike" sites
- **Yammer**, for keeping everyone in the know

Finally, thanks to Brian Sutton, Eric Davidove, Barry Sampson, Charles Jennings and Jane Hart for their great thought leadership in this area



Hanif has a unique background in technology and learning with over 10 years' experience in the training industry.

He is one of the early proponents of a blended or integrated approach to learning and has been involved with designing and delivering learning initiatives for Microsoft, IBM, the BBC, KPMG, O2, Hilton Hotels and Deutsche Bank.

Prior to co-founding Saffron Interactive, Hanif held management positions at Deutsche Bank, Rite Aid, LBMS Inc and Stehle Associates where he held the post of CEO. During Hanif's involvement, Stehle Associates became one of the few organisations in the UK to gain the Institute of IT Training's Gold Standard and won three awards for training excellence.

Currently Hanif is working a number of mobile learning and social learning projects for a range of FTSE 100 clients.

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