The New Social Learning

A Guide to Transforming Organizations Through Social Media

Tony Bingham and Marcia Conner

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INTRODUCTION

In The New Social Learning, Tony Bingham and Marcia Conner make the case that the deepest, most enduring impact of social media might be on workforce learning. From circle time in kindergarten, to study groups in college, to team projects in the workplace, sociability has greased the gears of learning. Now wikis, multiplayer games, and social networking have taken that basic truth and vaulted it to new heights. These innovations, Bingham and Conner argue, “enable a new kind of knowledge-building ecosystem with people at its core.” The New Social Learning shows how social media can improve the way companies recruit talent, engage employees, and build workforce capabilities.

While social learning is not a replacement for training and employee development, it can accomplish what traditional approaches often cannot. It can supplement instruction with collaboration and co-creation, and enhance the experience overall. It can reenergize conferences and retreats by providing a backchannel of feedback and questions, and bring far-flung employees together into new communities in which they can not only learn from one another but also co-create products and solutions. Networks of knowledgeable people, working across time and space, can make informed decisions and solve complex problems in ways they could not have dreamed of years ago. Social media has the potential to transform the workplace into an environment where learning is as natural as it is powerful.

THE 36,000-FOOT VIEW

People in the workplace are already learning with social media, reaching out and connecting in new and powerful ways. Effective workplace learning is a competitive advantage for every company where people
need to learn fast, as part of the ebb and flow of their jobs, not just on the rare occasions when they are in a class. Senior leaders urgently want to provide their people with vibrant, effective, and cutting-edge tools to support their nonstop learning, thus ensuring that competitive edge. As organizations search for ways to increase profits, save money, and compete, lighter and friendlier tools have become available to help them excel. These social media tools are changing the way people work.

Social media is a set of Internet-based technologies designed to be used by three or more people. Most interaction supported by technology falls in one of the following categories:

- **Narrowcast.** One-to-one, as in a telephone or e-mail message
- **Niche-cast.** One-to-small groups, as in email distribution lists or small-circulation newsletters
- **Broadcast.** One-to-many, as in online magazines or a radio show

Social learning is simply learning with and from others, and naturally occurs at conferences, in groups, and among friends as easily as it does in classroom exercises.

While social media is technology used to engage three or more people and social learning is participating with others to make sense of new ideas, what is new is how powerfully they work together. Tools are now available to facilitate social learning that is unconstrained by geographic or time-zone differences among team members. The new social learning reframes social media from a marketing strategy to a strategy that encourages knowledge transfer and connects people. This can result in people becoming more informed, gaining a wider perspective, and being able to make better decisions by engaging with others. The authors propose that learning happens with and through other people, as a matter of participating in a community, not just by acquiring knowledge.

Social learning is augmented by commercial tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and wikis, and with enterprise applications such as Socialtext, Socialcast, Newsgator, and Lotus Connections. It is enabled by easy-to-use, socially focused software that moves services, assets, intelligence, and guidance

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**Key Concepts**

- Social media can improve the way businesses recruit talent, engage employees, and build workforce capacities.
- More so than any other technology, social media allows business to embrace the needs of changing workforce demographics.
- Social media has the potential to transform the workplace into an environment where learning is as natural as it is powerful.
- Tools are now available to facilitate social learning that is unconstrained by geographic or time-zone differences among team members.
- To succeed in today’s world, people must understand new concepts that are often more complicated than one person can figure out alone.
- Media sharing can be an effective way to eliminate boundaries, connect with others, engage and influence, cultivate culture, build trust, establish a common identity, reinforce values, and recruit talent.
- The next generation of workers is coming into the workforce with networking, problem solving, and multiprocessing skills.
- The cultural shift that occurs when social learning is designed into the work process can literally change the way the whole company learns, works, and succeeds.

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closer to where they are needed—to people seeking answers, solving problems, overcoming uncertainty, and improving how they work. These new social tools augment training, knowledge management, and communications practices, and they are powerful building blocks that can transform the way organizations enable learning and development.

The authors suggest that one way to think about the new social learning is to compare it with what it is not:

- It is not just for knowledge workers; it can empower people at all levels.
- It is not at odds with formal education.
- It is not a replacement for training or employee development.
- It is not synonymous with informal learning.
- It is not a new interface for online search.
- It is not the same thing as e-learning.
- It is not constantly social in a party sense.

Prior to the Internet, the last technology that had any real effect on the way people sat down and talked together was the table.

The early focus of social learning theory was learning socially appropriate behavior by imitating others, which is only a small aspect of how social learning is used in practice today. People are active participants in their learning. They interpret what is around them based on their unique current understanding of the world, and then continually modify their understanding as they encounter new information. This is the basis for the concept and practice of discovery learning for children and the use of role-play and simulation for adults. Active participation is key in both cases.

In a world of rapid change, people need to garner as much useful information as possible, sort through it in a way that meets the unique circumstances, calibrate it with what is already known, and re-circulate it with others who share similar goals. The new social learning leverages online communities, media sharing, Microsharing, content collaboration, and immersive environments to introduce people to ideas in quick bursts, when it suits their workflow, and in a way that more closely mirrors how groups interact in person. To succeed in today’s world, people must understand new information and complex concepts that are often more complicated than one person can figure out alone.

The convergence of three key trends accelerates the need for social learning:

1. **Expanding opportunities for personal connection.** People have always been driven to communicate, converse, and share with one another. This is both a survival mechanism and a natural preference. Societies created and sustained social capital – the stock of social trust, norms, and networks developed through a flow of information and reciproc-
ity drawn upon to solve common problems. Opportunities to develop social capital increased with the advent of transportation, telephones, satellites, and cellular computer networks. These connections represent more than an expanding volume of conversations. They represent a dramatic increase in collective thinking, collaboration, and capacity to grow.

2. **Emerging expectations from shifting workplace demographics.** Organizations of all types and sizes have a lot to learn and do differently if they are to attract and keep the talent they need to succeed. New social technologies allow people to work in ways they never imagined. Companies should aspire to create a workplace that uses the talents of everyone, connecting them in meaningful ways, regardless of differences in generation, gender, and consumer outlook.

3. **Increasing reach of customized technology.** Consumers have grown to expect manufacturers and retailers to customize all sorts of things: personal computers, jeans, sneakers, credit card billing cycles, and so on. A new breed of technology and new forms of distribution replace a long history of mass production with mass customization. This trend is moving to the workplace in mashups, assembling unique items to create something new. Producing new results from pre-existing bits and pieces can result in new songs, new software, new courses, and new job roles. Social media changes the level of participation from being recipients to being creators and innovators. Mashups change work’s traditional linear and separate roles into a culture of co-production, co-design, and co-development, mixing responsibilities among everyone involved in a new cyclical process. This is a new iterative and inclusive model where anyone is able to create, use, publish, remix, repurpose, and learn.

Learning is defined as the transformative process of taking in information that, when internalized and mixed with experience, changes what is known and builds on capabilities. It is based on input, process, and reflection. Learning is what makes people vibrant participants in a world seeking fresh perspectives, novel insights, and first-hand experiences. When shared, what one person learns mixes with what others have learned, then ripples out, transforming organizations, enterprises, ecosystems, and society.

The traditional model of corporate training, where experts disseminate knowledge in one-time training events is being modernized to take full advantage of the larger opportunity for incidental learning, learning from interacting with others, and learning along the way in the course of work. Organizations and individuals will not be sufficiently served by formal training alone. Diverse backgrounds and learning styles, and especially the complexity of people’s jobs, determine what and how they learn. Traditional training methods may be useful for teaching highly specific tasks or safety procedures, but evolving practices require more. Ad hoc and self-directed learning becomes a key strategy when people need to move fast. The new social learning, which centers on information sharing, collaboration, and co-creation—not instruction—implies that the notion of training needs to expand. New developments such as life-like simulations, immersive environments, and ever more intelligent searches hold the promise of a new way to connect and gain context-rich information that can transform people and thereby affect organizations and societies.

**Paving Online Community Roads**

The terms online community and social network are used in this book to define something similar. Technically speaking, online communities allow anyone within the space access to anyone else in the space. A social network requires a connection (someone in the network) who can pave the way for one person to meet another person. A core capability of any online community is its member profiles. Viewing a person’s profile in a corporate social network should provide the same feeling as visiting their office—complete with pictures of the kids on the desk and certificates and awards on the wall. Information the organization already has is mashed up with
employee-generated content. Individuals can introduce colleagues to one another, list external social network memberships, and write blogs. New hires can easily find people who went to the same college they did or grew up in the same town. With the ability to make these kinds of connections, cold and impersonal quickly turns warm and welcoming. Because online communities are not constrained by the need for anyone’s physical presence, there is greater flexibility to join, learn, and congregate with people who have similar interests no matter their location.

What people crave is the opportunity to learn from one another, side by side, gaining both hard facts and in-context wisdom. They value the opportunity to see that they are not alone; there are people they can lean on, learn from, interact with, and rely on for help. A landmark study conducted by Richard J. Light, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, discovered that one of the strongest determinants of students’ success in higher education—more important than their instructors’ teaching styles—was their ability to form or participate in small study groups. People who studied in groups, even once a week, were more engaged in their studies, were better prepared for class, and learned significantly more than students who worked on their own. In the workplace, people who can look to others online for support felt more connected, stayed with their employer longer, and produced stronger results.

A common measure of employee satisfaction is the extent to which people feel they know what is going on in the company. This is partly a measure of how well leadership communicates. It is also representative of how much information is shared among employees. This is where online communities play a growing role. Microsharing, blogs, and profiles can provide quick ways to update others and be updated in real time, giving these communities a sense of immediacy. Online exchanges give employees an opportunity to increase their visibility in the company and allow management to identify talent they might not be aware of. Online communities prompt real-time dialogue between employees and management, adding a degree of transparency to an organization that could not have existed before.

Although the public visibility of an online community can be unsettling, there is a very positive result of incessant updating: a culture of people who know much more about themselves. Having an online audience for self-reflection can prompt people to work harder at it and describe it more accurately in more interesting ways.

Good decisions are the heart and soul of any successful, fast-moving enterprise, and the more informed the decision, the better it is likely to be. Although most people say they want input from co-workers prior to making a decision, gathering it is often difficult to do in a timely manner. Real-time input on decisions is another way online communities facilitate what people learn. The ability to access tacit knowledge from a wide range of people in the enterprise facilitates soliciting opinions, asking questions, and reviewing referrals, testimonials, and updates that relate to the decision at hand. The community becomes a hub for viral learning.

Knowledge acquired but never put to use is usually forgotten.

Research into experiential learning shows there is no better way to learn how to do something than by doing it. If employees need to be proficient in working online and collaborating in virtual ways, the authors suggest they learn by experimentation. People have to try different approaches, see what feels comfortable to them, and get a return that encourages them to continue. Many employees have already integrated technology into their lives. Their ability to connect serves them and their employers well. While their colleagues waste time in meetings or engage in long phone conversations, they sum things up in quick messages over their microsharing system.

The authors recommend these strategies for deploying social media in an organization:

- **Look inward.** Create an internal community where employees can understand and become comfortable with social media among friends and colleagues.
- **Differentiate benefits.** Tell people how social media benefits them.
- **Welcome everyone.** Everyone in an organization, re-
People-powered content provides buzz and insight. As more people walk around with camera-enabled Smartphones and install webcams and microphones, employee-generated content will offer great insights to companies.

- **Share the love.** A community with open-minded and welcoming members will make others feel comfortable jumping in and contributing.
- **Encourage champions.** Welcome social media advocates and make it easy for them to contribute.
- **Foster teamwork.** Social media success requires a team of diverse and committed people to serve the interests of not only the individuals who use it, but also the organization as a whole.

**Share Stories Around, Up, and Out**
Sharing stories using visuals is not new. Pictures on rocks and cave walls date as far back as 40,000 years. Even before early man congregated in communities, they drew pictures to tell narratives that conveyed movement and meaning and passed on wisdom across space and time. These stories allowed humans to evolve by communicating key details and messages.

With quality video cameras dropping in price and video capabilities now built into more mobile devices, the ability to share still and moving images has expanded around the world. Storytelling, which has always been central to the human condition, now travels across new forms of media to help people learn from one another and connect. Anything that can be digitized can be accessed and distributed on the Internet or intranet. Video, audio files, podcasts, slideshows, and digital pictures can all be used to improve business processes and collaboration. More powerful, compact, and mobile access devices make it easier to find and learn from relevant content whenever and wherever it is needed.

Media sharing is more than a tool or a broadcast medium. It is a way to foster interaction and sociability, and cultivate a community that extends to co-workers, partners, suppliers, customers, and other people interacting in the workplace. Media sharing opens new opportunities to interact, share, produce, and collaborate.

In an age of too much digital noise and not enough value, getting and holding attention is pivotal for the learning process. Old-school ways of communicating with employees and customers are often ignored altogether in the engaging and entertaining social media world. Media sharing encourages and enables a community where people can see and learn from one another and get contributions from everyone. Video messages that allow for comments help bridge the gap between leaders and the larger ecosystem, and videos are especially good at presenting things sequentially (i.e. this happened, then that) and showing causality (i.e. this happened because of that). Media sharing can provide a captivating way to convey a human voice, rich with emotion and expression that people trust instinctively more than words on paper or still photos alone.

As organizations switch to a decentralized or distributed model, transparency from company leaders is a refreshing approach that builds trust and imparts critical insights. When employees are geographically dispersed and “walking the floor” is not an option, companies can use video to reach out in authentic ways. The more authentic and unfiltered the message, the more credible it generally is.

Media sharing can be an effective way to eliminate boundaries, connect with others, engage and influence, cultivate culture, build trust, establish a common identity, reinforce values, and recruit talent.

**Microsharing for a Healthy Culture**
Microsharing is the class of social software tools that enables people to update one another with short
bursts of text, links, and multimedia either through stand-alone applications or as part of larger online communities or social networks. Messages sent this way, which usually cannot exceed 140 characters, can be used to ask questions, post feedback, highlight news stories, and link to items on the Internet. Microsharing is eclipsing email (which is too slow) and texting (which is too restricted an audience), and is a powerful way to connect people for personal, professional, or corporate benefit. Microbursts of information are easy to read and write, there is nothing to delete, people can communicate one to one or one to many, and replies are optional. Microsharing does not require any special technical knowledge or use any complex technology to deploy. The software can route messages to people's desktops, laptops, and devices that are already in pockets and purses without depending on local email servers or phone trees. Messages and images can be quickly conveyed to an extended enterprise, a decentralized workforce, a dispersed campus, a small group of friends, or just one person who needs to know.

Enterprise Microsharing can help address a dueling dilemma for organizations needing to move knowledge where people need it now and keeping information from leaking out of the organization. Most Microsharing tools allow message writers to control how messages are shared and who sees them. Although some organizations formally ban these tools, doing so leaves them out of an important loop encompassing customers, partner networks, and even families. As the boundaries between personal and work life dissolve, organizations see more productivity and loyalty from people who are allowed to maintain contact with family and friends. People at all levels can share what they are working on and have conversations on topics they feel passionate about. This gives everyone an opportunity to learn from those who are willing to share their expertise.

Companies are using updating tools such as Twitter to make regular checks on what people are learning and how they are progressing toward their objectives. Sending regular updates encourages people to reflect on what they are doing and learning and makes them mindful of sharing with people they work with or serve. People are using microsharing networks to find subject matter experts, grow their professional networks, or to let others know what they are working on, reading, and thinking about. By sharing their interests, people plant seeds that might lead to a connection with someone who could reveal new insights, point to new resources, help with a project, or maximize a learning experience. Microsharing systems offer unified access to information relevant to each person, one at a time and all at the same time.

A few years ago, it would have been hard to imagine teaching anything 140 characters at a time. But as training events and courses give way to more immediate forms of instruction, Microsharing plays a role in training. Informal information exchanges in real time supplement structured learning events. Microsharing gives students a way to toss insights and questions to other students without taking time away from the instructor, and it can provide links to articles, webinars, and other resources. It can also be used to reinforce and sustain learning.

Because online communities are not constrained by the need for anyone’s physical presence, we have greater flexibility with our ability to join, learn, and congregate with people who have similar interests no matter what their location.

**Growing Collective Intelligence**

The authors provide several detailed examples of how the CIA is using the new social media to gather and exchange intelligence. What the U.S. needed after September 11 was something that could handle rapidly changing, complicated threats. Intelligence organizations needed to become adaptive and driven to judgments by bottom-up collaboration, similar to financial markets or ant colonies – or Wikipedia. Early adapters within the CIA believed a wiki model could capture and integrate stories and define issues in a way that also showed contributors and readers what had been written, added, and edited previously and that was not academic in its approach. It could also give people in the future contextualized insights and a way to reference other people’s work without repeating the same peripheral details. The vision
was to break down barriers to information sharing and capturing knowledge, demonstrating that intelligence knows no geographic boundaries. The CIA site, called Intellipedia, has proven pivotal in the unfolding of several major events. It captures current conditions by giving broad access and updating rights to 16 agencies of the U.S. intelligence community and in 2008 expanded to give access to state and local law enforcement officials so they could benefit from relevant, up-to-date intelligence.

**Collaboration is something we have known how to do our entire lives. Working together to produce something more significant than one person can do alone is timeless.**

Intellipedia encompasses a constantly changing world that can never be complete but can provide lessons at any time, and shows that people who are connected are more powerful than any number working alone. It has become a shining light of possibility for a better way to work thanks to countless contributions from individuals who post blogs, edit content, tag pages, and persuade others to try these tools. It allows federal agents to share information, intelligence, evidence, tips, and background information across agency boundaries and serves as a hub where people can quickly glean details that matter in their work. Intellipedia begins to peel away the old need-to-know mentality and enables a need-to-share culture.

Living content tools (those in the general wiki category or specific tools such as Google docs) can be thought of as a malleable publishing platform that can fulfill many different objectives for collaborating, teaching, recording, and learning. Their value grows from their ability to embody content that seems alive, morphing over time to represent the current state of what is known and the status of a network’s capability to identify and act on what is relevant. The success of any size organization or team is based on its collective IQ, a measure of how well people work collectively on important problems and challenges. It becomes a measure of how effective the organization is at tackling complex, urgent problems and opportunities and how effectively a group can concurrently develop, integrate, and apply its knowledge toward its mission.

Immersive Environments

Refine Learning

New technology can enable dramatic improvements in outcome. That is especially true of immersive environments because they can provide far more dimensions than real environments. Real-time sensor information fed into a model creates a constantly updated 3D learning environment. With this intelligent model, experts from around the world using avatars can interact as if they were working in the same room. Every industry can find benefits in digital models; especially high-dollar manufacturing, infrastructure, and energy industries where working together in a real environment can be dangerous or impractical. It is as if a new planet is being constructed, where people can immediately begin to learn.

The next generation of workers is coming into the workforce with networking and multiprocessing skills and global mindedness their elders never would have imagined. Their constant experience in the networked world has had a profound impact on their approach to problem solving and collaboration.

Virtual immersive environments are a category of emerging technologies that encompass virtual worlds, gaming, and simulations that have a social component and closely mirror working with someone in the same physical space. The degree of immersion is important because the more people feel like they are in the environment the more likely they are to feel engaged. What makes virtual immersive environments unique is that people emerge from them with real-life experiences they have actually participated in, not just imagined. Virtual worlds enable a physical sense of being together, working together, interacting in real time, seeing one another, and sharing space. In that sense, virtual worlds are similar to other new social learning approaches that provide a means for transferring knowledge among people in organizations, allowing them to understand a situation, and even constructing an idea or a structure together.

Researchers have long known that learning by doing is the most effective means of learning certain kinds of things; yet it is often hard to create a safe environment
for people to learn new roles on the job. Some scenarios are simply too expensive, dangerous, infrequent, or impractical to do in real life. In virtual environments, people can fail safely and create memories that improve performance when recalled later. Virtual environments, especially simulations and games, have already become an important part of training for emergency responders. Experts agree that these simulations can never replace the experience of being in a real fire or massive emergency, but they are valuable supplements.

**Connecting The Dots At In-Person Events**

Coming together to talk, visit, and learn is as old as time. Social learning approaches can be applied to conferences, classes, and small and informal gatherings to increase their value, making them remarkable and invigorating.

Audiences no longer sit quietly absorbing the speaker's words and images, waiting to make a comment or ask a question. The new social learning, with its emphasis on people learning from one another, plays up the fact that both speakers and attendees have something valuable to share. Real-time text communication among audience members using something like Twitter or a local chat room during a live event is often referred to as the backchannel. The backchannel represents attendees who are connected in real time, learning with each other and the world. This changes the game for presenters, the audience, and the rest of the world outside the room. The backchannel blurs the line between the presenter and the audience and even between those physically in attendance and those participating from afar. Now everyone can participate and share information.

Even the best presentations have limited value if the attendee cannot revisit and reflect on the experience. New digital tools can support such access through takeaways. These include:

- **Just-in-time book publishing.** Event organizers can compile books from content created by presenters and attendees.
- **Tweetbooks.** Made up of tweets from the event, these create a narrative of what people noticed, attended to, commented on, and shared.
- **Live blogging.** Live bloggers create commentary about an event as it unfolds and encourage real-time input from readers.
- **Live video blogging.** This enables bloggers to send live, real-time video streams to the Web during events, allowing thousands of people across the world to see the event as it happens.

**Conclusion**

Social media has arrived. Harnessing it to facilitate the new social learning in the workplace has only just begun. It takes focused intent to create a culture where learning is part of the fabric, core values, and infrastructure. The cultural shift that occurs when social learning is designed into the work process can be life changing. It literally changes the way the whole company learns, works, and succeeds.
addresses how to respond to critics of that particular category of action. These chapters can be read in any order. Because the specific tools in use continue to change dramatically, the authors do not address technology in this book. Instead, they refer the reader to a complementary website where information on technology advancements is updated regularly. The site also offers step-by-step guides to getting started in the world of social media.

**Contents**

Foreword by Daniel H. Pink

Introduction

Acknowledgements

The New Social Learning Playground Rules

1. **The 36,000-Foot View**
   - The Workplace Has Changed
   - What Is The New Social Learning?
   - Moving Theory Into Practice
   - Why Is This Happening Now?
   - Is This Learning?
   - How to Respond to Critics
   - The Next Level
   - Informing Decisions

2. **Paving Online Community Roads**
   - Community Capabilities
   - Communities Face Forward
   - Make a Case for Online Communities
   - Respond to Critics
   - Recommendations

3. **Share Stories Around, Up, and Out**
   - Pictures Make Progress
   - Social Media is Compelling
   - Make a Case for Media Sharing
   - Respond to Critics
   - Recommendations

4. **Microsharing for a Healthy Culture**
   - Burst Forward

5. **Growing Collective Intelligence**
   - Increase Collective IQ
   - Share for Our Time
   - Break with the Past
   - Respond to Critics
   - Recommendations

6. **Immersive Environments Refine Learning**
   - Get Together Virtually
   - Out-of-This-World Experiences
   - Respond to Critics
   - Recommendations

7. **Connecting the Dots at In-Person Events**
   - Growing Together
   - Speaker, Teacher, Audience, Student
   - Takeaway
   - Respond to Critics
   - Recommendations

Afterword

Appendix: Governance

Notes and Resources

About the Authors

About ASTD

About Berrett-Koehler

Index
A Note to Our Readers

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