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—Jay Cross, author of *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways That Inspire Innovation and Performance*

## Your co-worker, your teacher: Collaborative technology speeds peer-peer learning

In today's fast-paced business world, workers need to be able to quickly swap knowledge without waiting for a structured training initiative. That doesn't mean traditional e-learning is dead, however.

By Ed Fraumenheim • Infographic by Bryon Thompson

THE LATEST TREND in corporate training technology can be summed up simply: Water Cooler 2.0.

Organizations are trying to encourage the kind of informal learning that has long come from sometimes-chance encounters with colleagues and industry peers. These days, however, corporations are tapping into collaborative technologies such as blogs, wikis and podcasts to allow their workers to pick up crucial information whenever and wherever they need it.

That's not to say traditional training is dead. Thanks in part to the need to comply with a multitude of regulations, demand is growing for structured learning—whether it be instructor-led classes or online courses. That means healthy business for vendors of learning management software systems that track employee course work and certifications.

But some of those vendors are upgrading their products in ways that accommodate peer-to-peer learning. Essentially, the training field is realizing that the most valuable learning moments often occur when employees exercise their curiosity on the spot, says Jay Cross, a consultant and author of a new book, *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural*

*Pathways That Inspire Innovation and Performance.*

Cross says today's accelerating pace of business all but requires letting workers quickly swap their knowledge on topics like new products without waiting for a corporate training program from on high. The traditional approach to new-product training could take months to complete, given such elements as a needs analysis, a description of the product and the creation of an interactive CD-ROM for its sales force. It was too slow, he says.

“To keep employees current, information must be transferred in weeks or days or even hours, not in months,” he says.

### RISE OF E-LEARNING

The first generation of e-learning, launched about a decade ago, is often regarded as a misguided experiment, where too much content was crammed online and many dollars were wasted. Several years ago, organizations sought to restore a balance by blending instructor-led activities with online activities. Today, blended learning is coming to mean mixing formal learning—which can include in-person instruction and e-learning—with informal employee epiphanies.

Those “Aha!” moments are much more likely with the advent of the new

### INFORMAL LEARNING TECH

Some companies are using social networking technologies to promote the sharing of knowledge and expertise among their employees. Some of the tools being used are blogs, wikis and podcasts.



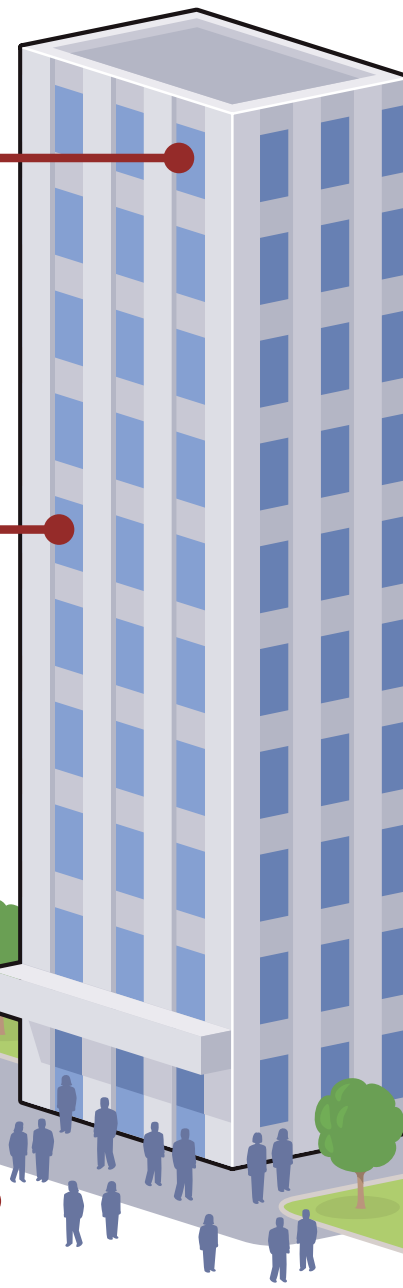
**BLOGS:** Web logs, or blogs, are Web sites where someone can post content including messages and images. Readers can respond to postings in the form of a threaded discussion.



**WIKIS:** These are Web sites that allow multiple users to author the same content. Like blogs, they can be kept within a company's internal computer system or located on the public Internet. Changes made to the site can be tracked.



**PODCASTS:** These are audio or video files that can be downloaded onto portable digital media players, such as iPods.



Source: Workforce Management research

social networking technologies, says Colleen Carmean, director of research at the Applied Learning Technologies Institute at Arizona State University. Blogs, wikis and other content that remains online and is searchable mean that employees can tap into colleagues' knowledge no matter when the entries were made. And given the way search engines rank pages by their popularity, smart ideas can rise over time, she says.

"The strength of an organization can be based on how well complex information moves up" through the ranks, she says. "These new learning technologies can really allow us to do that."



**Companies typically have their priorities backward. "Only 20 percent [of learning] comes in the formal way. But what do we do? We spend a lot of money on the 20 percent."**

—Claire Schooley, Forrester Research

In 2006, employers budgeted \$55.8 billion for formal training in the U.S., according to research conducted by advisory firm Bersin & Associates for *Training* magazine. That figure was up 7 percent from 2005, the report said, thanks partly to a new focus on talent management and employee development to address "talent gaps in the global workforce." The percentage of online learning increased as well. The Bersin study found that online self-study and virtual classrooms accounted for 29 percent of formal training delivery in 2006, up from 23 percent in 2005.

E-learning is particularly prevalent for training done to comply with company or government regulations, such as worker safety courses and sexual harassment prevention tutorials. Fully 35 percent of mandatory or compliance training is conducted mostly or completely online, the Bersin study found.

Given the rise of e-learning, technology has become a vital part of training operations, according to the Bersin research. Learning technology and infrastructure ranked as the top priority among organizations surveyed, and 75 percent of organizations with more than 10,000 employees now have a learning management system.

Health insurance provider Health Net is in the process of implementing a learning management system from Sum-Total Systems. Suzanne Rumsey, Health Net's director of workforce planning, says the system will help her 10,000-person company meet compliance requirements as well as make sure workers get credit for the many courses they take. Another reason Health Net signed up for the software is to signal that it is willing to invest in people. In an era where lifelong employment is no longer expected and retirement benefits have been declining, a sound employee development program can play a key role in keeping workers engaged with the business, Rumsey says. "Learning is sort of that untapped retention tool," she says.

## THE RIGHT BALANCE

It's hard to quantify in dollar figures the growing interest in technologies for informal learning, because vendors for such products are scattered across multiple categories.

Whatever the precise figure, it's probably not enough, says Claire Schooley, senior industry analyst with Forrester Research. She says companies typically have their priorities backward by focusing on structured courses as opposed to the sorts of educational experiences that happen on the job, just as an employee needs them. "Only 20 percent [of learning] comes in the formal way," Schooley says. "But what do we do? We spend a lot of money on the 20 percent."

Research company Quintiles Transnational is trying to strike the right balance in terms of learning methods. The 16,000-person company, which manages clinical trials on behalf of pharmaceutical firms, offers a range of in-person and electronic courses. Topics include project management and clinical practice training, and many of the classes are mandated by government regulation, says Tim Toterhi, Quintiles' director of learning and development strategy. To help keep track of all the structured training, Quintiles is installing a new learning management system.

But Quintiles chose the new software partly because it facilitates informal learning activities. Toterhi declined to name the vendor of the system but said it may eventually help with an experiment in podcasting. Quintiles wants to create audio tutorials on various topics that employees can download into portable devices and learn "on the fly," Toterhi says. A Quintiles sales representative about to meet with a client might get a podcast from a more seasoned sales official that contains insights into that particular company and tips for closing deals. "The walk from the car to the customer becomes a classroom of your own design," Toterhi says.

Consultant Cross says formal learning activities typically neglect an organization's veteran key contributors. "After you've got a basic grounding, you don't want courses. Courses are for novices," he says. "Advanced people need to fill in holes in their knowledge, not be dragged through what they already know."

New software products are making it ever easier for average employees to fashion multimedia demonstrations or mini-lessons. These include Microsoft's PowerPoint, software firm Articulate's Presenter application and Adobe's Captivate 2 product, which is designed to help people create things including software demonstrations and interactive simulations.

Such products have reduced the time it takes to create tutorials by a factor of three or more in just the past few years, says Glenn Greenberg, e-learning specialist at utility company Southern Co. "These tools have become rapid e-learning development tools," he says. What's more, he says, they typically don't require great technical skill, allowing subject-matter experts throughout a company to generate learning content.

## VARIETY OF TOOLS

One vendor betting on informal learning is Proton-Media. The Lansdale, Pennsylvania-based software firm allows clients to establish a three-dimensional "virtual world" where employees interact and can pose questions. The sys-

tem matches a person's need with other users logged on, relevant courses, and blogs and wikis. Clients, who include pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson, also have noticed employees deciding to hold impromptu meetings in the virtual world, says ProtonMedia president Ron Burns. "It's as if we've extended the water cooler out over a large, distributed workforce," he says.

Other, much simpler collaboration technologies can be harnessed for informal learning. Web log software enables workers to create blogs in order to share their insights or expertise, while other employees can post comments in response. Wikis are Web sites that allow visitors to add or change information.

Also helpful for peer-to-peer exchanges are corporate search engines that scour the various types of data contained in a company's computer system. IBM and Yahoo recently announced a free product designed to find information stored within an organization and across the Web.

Applications that establish intranet "portals" also can be effective. Microsoft's SharePoint software is a popular choice, says Jason Averbok, chief executive of consulting firm Knowledge Infusion. He says organizations often use SharePoint to let workers post content such as presentations. "We see it being used as a very, very significant content repository," he says.

Overall, Averbok notices corporations in a phase of assessing what they want workers to learn. In the wake of investing heavily in e-learning courses several years ago, firms

want to make sure they are directing their training dollars wisely, he says. "There's a lot of money spent monitoring what your workforce needs, versus buying content," he says.

Just as companies are keen to tie their training efforts to their overall corporate strategies, niche vendors of learning management systems have been branching out to add other talent management tools to their lineup. The heavyweights of the HR software world, Oracle and SAP, already offer a broad set of applications in addition to learning management systems.

#### TRACKING LEARNING

Vendors in the training tech arena are taking note of the informal learning trend. Oracle, for example, touts the way its learning products are inherently interactive and ready for employees to share ideas. "Collaborative tools have been a large part of Oracle's offerings from the beginning," says Gretchen Alarcon, Oracle vice president for human capital management product strategy. "For example, we provide built-in instant messaging capabilities, forums, chat, learner ratings and reviews."

Learning management software from SAP has similar features, including instant messaging, chat and document sharing. When it comes to informal learning, one of SAP's priorities is to make it easier for organizations to capture what employees do outside of structured courses. Lacking that information, companies are hamstrung in their ability to make smart talent decisions such as which employees are

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## LEARNING VENDORS BRANCHING OUT IN TALENT MANAGEMENT

THE MARCH of the learning management companies is under way.

Vendors that specialize in learning management software systems have been expanding in recent years into other fields of talent management, such as performance management. The idea is to offer customers more complete products, ones that can enhance the ways companies develop particular individuals and shape their overall workforce.

The most recent example of boundary pushing by learning management players came in November. Learning specialist

SumTotal Systems said it acquired performance management software firm MindSolve Technologies. And it isn't done growing in terms of talent management, says Karen Hickey, senior director of marketing for SumTotal. "We will continue to fill out the functionality," she says.

SumTotal, which now offers products in the fields of learning, performance and compensation management, still lacks a recruiting product to encompass what many consider the four pillars of talent management. Talent management applications are among the fastest-growing categories of human resources software. Companies are buying these tools as they recognize the

value generated by employees and focus on adapting to demographic changes on the horizon, such as the graying of the baby boomer generation.

Jason Averbook, CEO of consulting firm Knowledge Infusion, says corporations are seeing learning activities as directly tied to their efforts to prepare critical succession moves and plan what their workforce will look like in the future.

"Learning is playing a bigger role in the 'people chain' than it ever has before," Averbook says, drawing an analogy between workforce planning



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—Jason Averbook, Knowledge Infusion

and the supply-chain planning companies do to optimize the creation of products and services.

Learning management systems refer to software applications for keeping track of the courses employees take and certifications they earn. Major vendors also offer applications for creating online training content.

In addition to SumTotal, learning management vendors Plateau Technologies and Saba have broadened their product offerings. Each now offers performance management and succession management products.

These three vendors are competing in a crowded market for talent management applica-

tions overall. A number of companies, including Vurv Technology and Authoria, sell multiple talent management products but not learning management. HR tech's biggest players, Oracle and SAP, offer all four of the primary talent management products, in addition to HR information systems that track essential employee data.

Both giants tout the benefits of an integrated set of talent management products with ties back to the core HR system. SAP's learning management product may not have all the features that the smaller specialists have, concedes David Ludlow, the company's vice president in charge of global product strategy for HR applications. But Ludlow argues that buying SAP's array of talent management products makes more sense than going with multiple niche products, because all the SAP applications are based on a single set of data that makes for smooth integra-

tion between the tools and the core HR system. "I think that adds more value than a long list of features and functionality," he says.

His point is at the center of a long-standing debate between the big, comprehensive vendors and smaller specialists. But the companies that have historically focused on learning management are looking more like soup-to-nuts providers. Plateau, for example, hasn't ruled out moving into other talent management areas such as compensation and recruiting, says Ed Cohen, Plateau's chief technology officer. "It's something we've looked at," he says.

—E.F.

indispensable and who may be ready for advancement, says David Ludlow, the SAP vice president in charge of global product strategy for HR applications.

Among the tactics under review at SAP is looking at an employee's Microsoft Outlook calendar to see if any appointments amount to a "learning event." Meetings such as mentoring sessions would be recorded in their learning history, Ludlow says.

Learning management vendor Plateau Systems also aims to help companies track on-the-job learning moments. It recently launched iContent, which includes a Web portal allowing companies to post content including traditional courses and internal presentations as well as link to external blogs or podcasts. When employees log on to the site, they can conduct searches and any information they access can be documented in a customer's learning management system. "It's Amazon.com-type functionality designed to work with a learning management system," says Ed Cohen, chief technology officer at Plateau.

SumTotal has discussed a software upgrade that would

let organizations create wikis. Last year, it teamed up with Google to let Google's corporate search product peer into SumTotal's learning management system to find such things as courses, class materials and presentations.

SumTotal also offers a portal where employees can post documents and carry out threaded discussions. And for several years, SumTotal's system has allowed employees to download audio broadcasts. This feature can be used by managers to deliver podcasts to employees, says Karen Hickey, senior director of marketing at SumTotal.

### CHALLENGES

Creating a vigorous and valuable climate of informal learning may not be easy. Employees themselves may hesitate to share their gems of wisdom because of the time it takes to do so and the risk they may be wrong, says Arizona State's Carmean. "The missing factor is how we get workers to shift into a cultural engagement with these tools," she says. "You have to do more than seek information; you have to contribute."

The contributions can pose their own challenges. Worker blogs can result in content that is offensive, embarrassing or highly sensitive—as a number of fired bloggers can attest.

Consultant Cross says corporate distrust of workers also can impede informal learning. “Top-down organizations are accustomed to controlling the flow of information and are not comfortable with learning that comes from the bottom up,” he says.

But he and other proponents say smart companies will persevere to encourage unstructured education. According to Cross, the tactics can be as low-tech as the water cooler,

version 1.0. A major Silicon Valley company once asked him for advice on how to generate more conversations among its knowledge workers. Cross recommended replacing a third of the cubicles at its headquarters with leather sofas and espresso machines.

“Informal learning will happen if you just get out of its way,” he says.

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