

Tech Potpourri

Stirring Up Something Good

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Implementing a Social Learning Community

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When the beta of Office 2010 went public in the fall of 2009, Microsoft did something very different — they blogged. They explained what they were doing, and why. For the first time, those of us trying to learn about the new product and technology didn't have to wait for reviews by a select few in the form of articles and white papers, or wait for a book to be written about how to use the technology. Through their beta program (which was huge!), we could learn directly from the experts.

Most of the Microsoft blogs included screen shots, pictures and video. The video typically was not high-end, studio-quality; it was simply a developer sharing insights while a colleague held the video camera. The videos were quick, short, informal and to-the-point. Think about it — with a Flip or other inexpensive digital video camera, everyone can capture and share their experiences, insights and best practices.

Once the Microsoft blogs were posted, the learning community had direct access to the developer. This allowed us to consume learning and get comfortable with the technology faster than ever. Taking part in this journey made me think, if I learn better and faster via social media tools, couldn't law firm users benefit from "social learning" as well?

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media have had a huge impact on our society — some say causing the biggest shift since the industrial revolution. Consider these facts from Socialnomics.net:

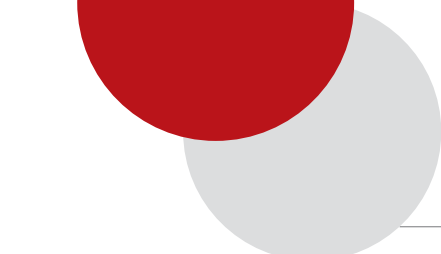
- Over 50 percent of the world's population is under the age of 30.
- 96 percent of millennials have joined a social network.
- One out of every eight couples have met and married using social media.
- Facebook added over 200 million users in one year.
- Gen Y and Z consider email passé.
- Some universities have stopped giving out email accounts; instead, they are distributing iPads.
- YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world.

Social media bring together peers, co-workers, friends and followers, even those we rarely see or perhaps have never met. If we are able to form these communities of like-minded people using Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, why can't we connect learners using the same types of social media tools?

LEARNING FORMATS

There are various formats used to drive learning in law firms.

Formal Learning: This format is structured, controlled and planned by an expert instructor and often delivered in the classroom by a trainer. It has set objectives and measured



results (e.g., in this module you will learn “xyz”). It is sometimes considered an “event.”

Informal Learning: Controlled by the learner and done in real-time, informal learning often occurs with input from subject-matter experts and in the context of actual work being done. It is less generic and more relevant to what the learner needs at the moment. It is a continuous, collaborative process (not an event). According to the study “Tapping the Potential of Informal Learning,” “Informal learning improves performance of individuals and organizations.”

Social Learning: This employs the use of Web 2.0 technologies, such as microblogging (Twitter), blogging (both written and video blogs), RSS feeds, podcasting (both audio and video), instant messaging, chat and discussion groups. With these technologies, learners can seek and find experts; cull through and harvest community advice; and capture and share knowledge, ideas and real-world experiences around improved processes and best practices.

CURRENT LEARNING IN LAW FIRMS

In most law firm training departments today, the majority of the time, money and energy is focused on training events such as ongoing, new-hire and rollout technology training classes. These formal learning events are instructor-designed, instructor-led and content-driven.

There is also an increasing amount of time and money spent on content that can be consumed by learners on their own time. E-learning, podcasts and video training fall into this category. The content is still instructor-designed and content-driven.

The legal industry leads many other industries in the quantity and quality of technology learning activities it provides. Yet frustrated and discouraged law firm trainers frequently express that users do not participate in learning events. Making the training events mandatory is often the way that firms guarantee any level of participation. Here’s a question to consider, however: If people are not attending classes or consuming e-learning, does that mean they are not learning?

WHEN LEARNING HAPPENS

Most learning happens when people are applying what they know to the real work. Think about the five instances in which learning is needed, as outlined in ILTA’s June 2011 edition of *Peer to Peer* in the article, “When Knowledge Is the Differentiator.” These include:

- **When something is new;**
- **When something has changed;**

- **When you are trying to apply what you have learned and you forget;**
- **When you are trying to apply what you have learned and it doesn’t work, or something goes wrong; and**
- **When you need to learn more.**

When there is a learning need, do you call a co-worker or the helpdesk, or do you open up a browser and perform a search to find the answer? Do you crowd-source the question to ILTA peers, a LinkedIn group or the Twitterverse?

“The best learning happens in real life with real problems and real people and not in classrooms.”

—Charles Handy

The point is people are learning all the time. I’ve heard lawyers say, “I love to learn, but I hate to be trained.” Lawyers are great learners, but how do we get learners committed to learning the right things? One way is to connect learners through learning communities.

QUALITIES OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY

According to Wikipedia, a learning community is a group of people who share common values and beliefs, actively engaged in learning together and from each other.

Like any community, a learning community provides its members with the following:

- **A sense of belonging**
- **A shared sense of purpose**
- **A place to influence the behavior of others**
- **An environment where individual needs can be fulfilled**
- **A way to feel emotionally connected**

A good learning community should be a safe zone for people to:

- **Share stories and experiences**
- **Express personal opinions and findings**
- **Ask for help**

SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS FOR LEARNING

Pairing social media tools with learning provides yet another opportunity for the creation of learning communities, for improved facilitation of learning and for increased user adoption of technology.

There are many options for firms when considering the adoption of a social learning community. In this quickly

changing field, we suggest beginning by researching the following tools:

Elgg: Elgg is a free and open-source application that includes a social networking engine and publishing platform for running your own social networking site. It brings many social media technologies to its one platform and includes the ability to build and display profile information, blog, create and join groups, connect with co-workers and microblog. People can also share content by adding pages, tagging pages and uploading presentations, documents and multimedia files.

Yammer: Yammer brings together all of a company's employees inside a private and secure enterprise social network. It has both a free and subscription model. Key features include enterprise microblogging, profiles, groups, private messaging, the ability to share files, links and images, a company directory, fully searchable tagged content, and you can connect anywhere with the Yammer mobile app. Yammer can also be configured to link into SharePoint 2010. "The Total Economic Impact of Yammer" states that Yammer is used in 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies.

SocialText 5.0: SocialText is an enterprise social networking platform designed for collaboration with a location to create, share and manage content. It includes capabilities to generate and edit content such as blogs and wikis. Add-on modules, Socialtext People and SocialRadar, allow for user profiles and help learners find the relevant people with whom they need to connect and collaborate within their network.

Microsoft SharePoint 2010: Although it requires significant development work to design and implement a social learning platform with SharePoint, many will head this direction...and for good reason. SharePoint 2010 is much improved over the limited MySite and discussion boards available in SharePoint 2007. When SharePoint 2010 is combined with Office Lync Server and Microsoft Office Communicator, the "presence" tool allows learners to see if someone is online, in a meeting or offline, allowing for better connections and collaboration. Features include the note board (which functions like a "wall" for various postings), a colleague Web part and a Web part that shows your commonalities with other users. Because SharePoint is content-rich, users can see recently touched documents and blog posts and tag and post notes on other pages.

TAKE ACTION!

In our research of companies using social media for learning, we've discovered that there is plenty of talk, but not a whole lot of action. We can certainly understand that. It is often easier to keep things *status quo*. Plus it feels like a huge undertaking. But it doesn't have to be. Don't be afraid to try something new. Keep it simple and experiment. Start small, but start.

If you aren't ready to go to your SharePoint development team and build a new learning portal, consider using one of the available free social media tools.

Within your own training group start with these activities:

- **Practice adding status updates (two per day for 30 days).**
- **Send links to articles you find interesting (like this one!).**
- **Use polls to get consensus on how the group might use the social technology for learning.**
- **Send a picture of your remote office (working from a bus, plane or at home).**
- **Use hashtags to tag information for easy searching later (e.g., #SocLearn, #Off2010 or #Win7). Create tags that will make sense, and share them with others so everyone is using the same tags.**
- **Praise colleagues for their daily contributions.**

Once you have worked with a social media tool within your training group, it's time to get your learners on board and start building that social learning community.

BUILD A COMMUNITY

A great starting place is to create a group within your social learning site of learners for your next training class. Add the learners to the group, and then introduce the learning objectives for the class. Ask them to reply back with a "like" or a comment. Encourage the group to share their experiences with the topic prior to the class. Send a link to any handouts or other relevant materials that will be helpful to them.

During the class, thank the learners for their participation in the discussion group. Explain how they will be able to continue to connect with you and the other learners after the class. Take time to show the learners how to work with the social networking tool. Be sure to include instructions on how to create groups, share links and documents and upload pictures. The goal is to get them comfortable with the tool. Also, during the class, you should have the learners complete an action plan on how they will apply what they learned from the classroom topic in their work. Committing learners to learn more and use what they've learned is an important step in user adoption of technology.

After the class, send an update to the group with a link to e-learning content that they can use to reinforce the skill. Once you know that someone has completed the e-learning, reinforce the behavior by providing praise. Others in the group will see that positive feedback, which could serve as a reminder that they need to review the e-learning as well.

Consider sending the group extra practice exercises on the classroom topic. Challenge them to practice the exercise every day for a week. Give praise when they complete it. Ask the learners where they are on the action plans they committed to in class. You'll find that the participants will start to hold each other accountable. This peer mentoring is an important part of community learning.

After about 30 days, it's time to invite the group to the next learning opportunity and get feedback from them on how successful they were with the last class.

SHARE AND IMPROVE

Once you have a few groups using the social networking tool for classroom pre-learning and follow-up, start encouraging collaboration on how people are using technology in their

work. Have them share their best practices. When they forget how to do something, have them ask the group for help.

When you see people who have been successful, talk to them and share their stories. Use a video camera to record testimonials and stories and post the links to these videos. YouTube is free, and you can easily set up a private channel to store your firm's video content. Make your videos fun and informational. Your goal is to get these to go viral within your firm.

DEVELOP EXPERTS

In many firms, it is the responsibility of the training department to learn every type of technology-related software and tool, become an expert, design learning and provide classes and support. But changes are happening so fast that it is impossible

Classroom Learning in Law Firms ... Fading Fast?

Formal learning and classroom training is fading fast. Informal learning is accelerating due to our fast pace (lack of time), information overload, demand for instant access to information and the habits of the next generation who want to control their learning.

According to the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD), "Classroom use could drop to 50 percent in the next five years."

During our recent ILTA-sponsored, 15-city roadshow, we took our ideas about social learning and ran them by the attendees. We assured them that the classroom format of learning is not dead; the goal of building a social learning community is not to take away classrooms, but to redefine what we do in the classroom and extend what is learned beyond the classroom.

"Learning things in advance 'just in case' is a losing game. Until the 'case' arrives, the subject matter won't be relevant. And when it does arrive, the knowledge is gone."

—Jay Cross

During our roadshow, we surveyed participants to get their predictions on when firms will begin to consider or implement specific social learning technologies. We also combined predictions to forecast what the legal training environment might look like in two years. The results below are from our first 10 shows, which included 63 law firms/legal departments. **ILTA**

Learning Theory	Today	Forecast (Two Years Out)	Comments
Learning Portal	42 percent	73 percent	Waiting for SharePoint
Learning or Tech Blogs	16 percent	53 percent	
Learning or KM Wikis	18 percent	49 percent	One firm tried, but it was not successful
Peer Experts as Tech SMEs	16 percent	43 percent	

to keep up with the pace of new technology updates and changes. Why should the training department be the only ones providing expertise?

We believe that process and best practice advice is best provided by the people who live those processes and best practices every day. People who learn from their peers learn more and often come back for more.

“Most of what we learn, we learn from other people.”

—Jay Cross

Often when we travel, we will see examples of peer learning in action. Just a couple of weeks ago, I saw a group of people huddled together around a laptop while one in the group shared their insight on how best to use the company’s new portal. She was sharing her experience, expertise and knowledge. The others were highly engaged, asking questions and wanting more information.

Think about when the first few iPads hit your firm. When a lawyer found an application that was useful, he would share what he found, how he used it and what the advantages were for other iPad users. This is the type of information-sharing that should be encouraged in firms.

“When I need to learn something, I ask somebody. It is important to cultivate the right people to ask.”

—Marc Rosenberg

In your firm, do you know who the resident expert is on building presentations for trial, who can best assist others with electronic filing, or who is a master of pivot tables? Your social media solution should allow for the building of profiles to assist with this type of identification.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We encourage you to get started with social learning by using informal learning and social medial tools to reinforce formal learning. Visit your learners, and encourage and facilitate storytelling. Support peer-to-peer coaching and voluntary informal mentoring. Be intentional, meaningful and connect emotionally. Think big, but start small. And remember that learning never ends! **ILTA**

“Learning is a process not an event.”

—Elliott Masie

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