

10 Questions to Consider Before Adding Social Media Tools to Your Learning Portfolio

Training Industry Quarterly – Spring, 2011

In the world's most progressive companies, social media tools already play an important role in employee learning and development. But most companies have yet to fully embrace this purest form of “anywhere, anytime” learning. Perhaps your company falls into the latter group, content to watch and wait rather than be first to the latest technology party. If so, don't worry – you've got plenty of time. Social media tools are here to stay, and new applications for corporate learning will continue to evolve.

There are several tools you should explore, of course – from Facebook-type profiling pages to Twitter, RSS feeds, and Wikis. Micro-blogging sites such as Plurk, Tumblr and Jaiku deserve a look, as do text or voice messaging services like Train by Cell, and various video, webcasting, forum, and smart phone applications. For the purposes of this article, I won't be recommending specific tools; I'll let you do your own research to determine what's best for your company. Instead, as you build the business case for adding these tools to your learning portfolio, here are 10 “macro” questions you should be prepared to answer to ensure a successful launch.

1) *What is your purpose?* This is always a good place to start. What learning or knowledge-sharing problem are you trying to solve (poor alignment to the mission, too many silos, lack of innovation)? How will these new tools help you achieve critical business goals? What potential development have you been missing because you *didn't* have these tools? You can't just put these tools “out there” because they're cool – there has to be some widely recognized and appreciated value add.

2) *Have you clearly sold and communicated the purpose?* OK, so you've established *why* you need social media tools. Now comes the more challenging task – convincing others. Have you prepared answers to the *who, what, when, where, how*, and “*how much*” questions? Be prepared to sell your ideas to senior management (who will surely ask Question # 3, below) and then prepare detailed communications plans for the end user – your employees. You'll probably need to “bend some skeptical minds” along the way, so make your case and sell it brilliantly!

3) *Have you developed the (inevitable) compliance and governance policies?* Social media tools aren't like traditional training techniques where you control everything about the content and delivery. Social media tools are specifically *designed* to be viral – they can go places you don't want them to go if you're not careful. One of the areas you'll need to address is your plan for usage (who, when), mobility (where, how) and content (what). Be

prepared to discuss the “fence” you’ll build around these tools – there’s a good reason why senior management teams are wary of social media.

4) *How strong is your relationship with the IT Department?* It better be *really* good, because you’re going to need them. In fact, you’ll likely end up co-owning the tools, so you better get comfortable with that arrangement right now. Can IT free up the resources to work on the project? How long are the development timelines? Do they have the software, hardware and storage capacity required? Most of all, are they “bought in” on owning the hosting and maintenance of the tools? Better start building a strong partnership with the good folks over in IT!

5) *How will you get employees involved as “architects”?* The good news is that you don’t have to design these tools by yourself. Have you been listening to the savvy technology users in your company? Do you know who to go to for design ideas? They may not be on your current training staff, you know; they could be anywhere in the company. Try this – buy a few pizzas, and invite anyone who wants to help to a focus group session to collect ideas and suggestions. Ask the most passionate and knowledgeable voices to get involved at a deeper level. Not only is it good for engagement (“we listened to our employees”) but it will pay off in stronger tools, too.

6) *How will you empower employees as learning “conduits”?* The next question, one that has to be answered in the design phase, is “*how do you want employees to drive their own learning?*” Remember, you’re putting social media tools in place precisely because you want employees acting as “volunteer” trainers, educators and mentors. You *want* them writing blogs, hosting forums, building communities, sharing information, and asking questions. What has to happen (what culture change needs to occur) to truly make this a reality?

7) *Can you get senior leaders to use the tools?* The last thing you want is to create a culture of users and non-users that says “*social media tools are for employees, not for management*”. Encourage people managers at all levels to use the tools to communicate with their teams. Create specific tools for senior leaders (such as blogs or text or voice messaging) to communicate broad alignment messages or to break the latest company news. As much as possible, co-opt the CEO to be a user and a vocal supporter; as goes his or her attitude and behavior, so too will go the success of the social media revolution in your company.

8) *How do social media tools fit into your overall learning strategy?* You might think this question belongs a little higher on the list, and you’re probably right. Before you get too far down the line, stop to consider how social media tools add to, complement, or replace other learning and development techniques. Could corporate messages previously sent via email now be delivered via text message to every employee’s smart phone? Could

the CEO's speech appear as a highlight video on the intranet portal, but also as a jumping off point for a threaded Q&A on the CEO's own blog page? And what of training itself? Could you literally get out of the business of technical skills training, allowing those in need to "teach" one another in community forums? The possibilities are endless... better start brainstorming!

9) *Are you willing to be open-minded?* Are you prepared to withstand some potential criticism until the tools "catch on"? Will you be patient while the feedback starts to accumulate on usage, ease of use, and utility? Will you remain open-minded as the tools evolve? Because they most certainly will. Different "communities" will create forums that you could not have even imagined when you launched the platform. Blogs will emerge as popular or unpopular, and you won't be able to predict which "authors" will produce which (it's quite possible some obscure employee with a humorous take on the company will gain a wide following). Remain open-minded, and be prepared for just about anything.

10) *How will you evaluate the impact of social media tools?* You knew this one was coming, right? Before you even launch the tools that are right for your company, think about how you'll measure their impact. Percent of employee usage will probably be the metric that everyone focuses on, but there are other important measures to consider, such as assessments of information relevance, ratings of learning quality, and ease of use. You might want to keep your own metrics on the percentage of management that is engaged too, just to check how well you're doing on Question # 7.

Social media tools have definitely earned a place in your learning and development portfolio. Which tools you choose to implement, and how you choose to pace and sequence them to your workforce are important decisions. You don't need to be fearful of these tools, but you do need to do your homework. I hope these 10 questions help get you started!

***Back to the Future?* (First Side Bar)**

It seems we've been down this road before. Remember e-learning? Back in the 90's, e-learning was the next big thing in corporate training. E-learning was going to make classroom instruction obsolete – it was the shiny new object that every learning professional just had to have, and hundreds of vendors sprouted up to provide the infrastructure and content to meet the demand. Clearly, e-learning was going to rule the corporate learning world. Well, a funny thing happened on the way to the computer screen. While e-learning made its mark, I think it's safe to say that the demise of face-to-face learning was greatly exaggerated. In fact, the two methodologies have found a way to co-exist, and most trainers use them in tandem to produce a deeper, more meaningful learning experience. Something tells me that we'll be adding “social media tools” to this story in about 20 years – about the time that experts are pushing the latest brain implant technology. Is corporate learning a great place to be, or what?

***Keep in Mind...* (Second Side Bar)**

- Social media tools can be a powerful learning & development asset
- The company will expect you to “control” their usage
- You'll need to partner closely with IT
- Get your employees involved – as design partners
- Make sure senior leaders support and *use* the tools
- Know how these tools will complement or replace current learning techniques
- Be prepared to measure their impact

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