

The New **Social Learning**
Connect. Collaborate. Work. **2nd** EDITION

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FOREWORD BY DANIEL H. PINK

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Back Cover: “Social learning thrives in a culture of service and wonder. It is inspired by leaders, enabled by technology, and ignited by opportunities that have only recently unfolded.”—from “Where Social Learning Thrives,” Marcia Conner, *Fast Company*, February 11, 2010.

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What Is the New Social Learning?

The new social learning is not just the technology of social media, although it makes use of it. It is not merely the ability to express ourselves in a group of opt-in friends. The new social learning combines social media tools with a shift in organizational culture, a shift that encourages ongoing knowledge transfer and connects people in ways that make learning enjoyable.

“Social learning thrives in a culture of service and wonder. It is inspired by leaders, enabled by technology, and ignited by opportunities that have only recently unfolded.”⁴ Social learning is the natural complement to social business, connecting people to people, information, and insights within an organization.

Social learning can be defined as joining with others to make sense of and create new ideas. It has been around for a long time and naturally occurs in groups at conferences and among old friends in a café as easily as it does among students online in a distance-learning program who have never met in person.

We experience social learning when we go down the hall to ask a question of a colleague and when we post that same question on Twitter anticipating someone will respond. It can be self-organizing or orchestrated by facilitators interested in encouraging others to learn.⁵

Social learning is augmented with social media tools that bridge distance and time, enabling people to easily interact across workplace, passion, curiosity, skill, or need. Most often social learning is intrinsically motivated and happens as naturally as breathing. It benefits from a diversity in types of intelligence and in the experiences of those learning.

Social learning is accelerated when we give our attention to individuals, groups, and projects that interest and energize us. We self-select the themes we want to follow and filter out those that feel burdensome, all with impunity. No one gets offended when we don't follow a project outside our domain. No

one notices when we temporarily filter out the rants of people beating their own drum.

It's because we have independent thought and inevitably spend some time alone that we benefit from the creative abrasion of groups, and it's in pairs and teams in which we can harmonize our insights with others. Both sides of the African proverb are true and important. *If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.* The new social learning assists us with both.

A willingness to keep stretching and moving beyond our comfort zones determine success in this network era.

—Sahana Chattopadhyay

Social media is a set of technologies used to engage two, three, or more people; social business is connecting people to people, information, and insights within an organization; and social learning is working with others to make sense of new ideas. What's new is how powerfully they work together. Social tools leave a digital audit trail, documenting our journey—often an unfolding story—and provide a path for others to learn from.

Tools are now available to facilitate social learning that is unconstrained by geographic differences (spatial boundaries) or time-zone differences (temporal boundaries) among team members.

The new social learning reframes social media from a mere marketing strategy to an approach that encourages and facilitates knowledge capture, transfer, and use, connecting people in a way consistent with how we naturally interact. It is not a delivery system analogous to classroom training, e-learning, or even mobile learning. Instead, it's a powerful approach to sharing and discovering a whole array of options—some of which we may not even know we need—leading to more informed decision making and an intimate, expansive, and dynamic understanding of the culture and context in which we work. “When working in the open, building distinction, and uncovering expertise, social learning makes knowledge relevant and actionable, building

WHAT THE NEW SOCIAL LEARNING IS NOT

Another way to think about the new social learning is to compare it with what it is not.

- The new social learning is not just for knowledge workers. It can empower people who work on shop floors, backstage, on the phone, behind retail counters, and on the battlefield.
- It is not your corporate intranet, although features of social learning may be included there. Document management, calendaring, blogs, and online directories may contribute to learning socially, but they are often task oriented rather than community oriented.
- It's not at odds with formal education. Students often use Twitter as a back channel for communicating among themselves or with instructors. Teachers can also use social media before and after classes to capture and share everyone's ideas.
- It's not a replacement for training or employee development. Training is well suited for compliance, deep learning, and credentialing. Formal development programs are still needed to prepare employees to progress through the organization. Social learning can supplement training and development in the classroom or online. It complements training and covers knowledge that formal training is rarely able to provide, and fosters the creation of new knowledge and understanding.
- It's not synonymous with *informal learning*, a term often used to describe anything that's not learned in a formal program or class. The broad category of informal learning can include social learning, but some instances of informal learning are not social—for example, search and reading.
- It's not the same as *e-learning*, the term used to describe any use of technology to teach something intentionally. That broad category can include social tools and, if it's organized using an online learning community such as Moodle, can be quite communal.

WHAT THE NEW SOCIAL LEARNING IS NOT (CONTINUED)

- It's not the approach used with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), which aim at bringing pre-packaged content to unlimited numbers of people through open access on the web. While some offer ways for students to interact with one another using ancillary social tools, the programs themselves are largely broadcast.
- It's not a new interface for online search, which could only be considered social because other people developed the content you discover. Finding content with a search engine does not involve interpersonal engagement—a hallmark of social learning.
- It's not constantly social in the same way a party is. Often people are alone when they are engaged and learning through social tools. The socialness refers to the way interaction happens: intermingling ideas, information, and experiences, resulting in something more potent than any individual contribution.

the kind of trust, transparency, and agility needed to deliver social business results,” says Ed Brill, author of *Opting-In: Lessons in Social Business from a Fortune 500 Product Manager*.

In many ways, the new social learning is far bigger and more transformative than any lens we've previously used to look at learning in organizations. “It is a socio-political, historical shift that is bigger, broader, and much more fascinating,” writes social business leader and former director at OpenText, Deb Lavoy. “A new perspective is changing how we think about society, politics, interpersonal relationships, science, government, and business. New approaches are emerging. Learning and self-expression are exploding. Values are changing. Leadership is changing. The economy is changing. Change itself is changing—it is accelerating and becoming the norm.”⁶

The new social learning provides people at every level, in every nook of the organization, and every corner of the globe, a way to reclaim their natural capacity to learn nonstop. Social learning can help pilots fly more safely, salespeople be more genuinely persuasive, and doctors keep up to date on current techniques in their fields.

For a long time, many of us have known learning could transform the workplace. We longed for tools to catch up with that potential. Only recently have changes in corporate culture and technology allowed this eventuality to unfold.

Clay Shirky points out, “Prior to the Internet, the last technology that had any real effect on the way people sat down and talked together was the table.”⁷

Social learning happens when we keep the conversation going by posting a photo on Instagram and tagging it in a way that elicits more comments from our friends, when we write about it on a blog, during coaching sessions with our mentees, or in a casual conversation with the person on the treadmill next to us at the gym.

Social software has been around for almost 50 years, dating back to the Plato bulletin board system. Network communities included CompuServe, AOL, and Usenet. The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a dial-up discussion board, was launched when the founders of Facebook were toddlers.⁸ Back then, however, it was only technology enthusiasts who used those systems, primarily because their interfaces were difficult to navigate, not terribly intuitive, and didn't readily surface or share the best ideas.

The new social learning moves services, assets, smarts, and guidance closer to people who are seeking answers, solving problems, overcoming uncertainty, and exploring ways to improve how they work. They facilitate collaboration and inform choices on a wide stage, fostering learning from a vast, intellectually diverse set of people.

**10 THINGS SAID ABOUT SOCIAL LEARNING . . .
THAT YOU SHOULDN'T FALL FOR**

1. Social learning is new.
2. Social learning requires digital tools.
3. Social learning needs social learning policies.
4. There's no data to support social learning, and no way to show return on investment.
5. It's always informal (or never informal).
6. A vendor can sell you social learning.
7. Social learning only works for white-collar workers.
8. The talent development department needs to initiate a social learning program before the organization learns socially.
9. For social learning to provide value you need a new LMS. Or an upgrade. Or an LMS.
10. Social learning doesn't affect you.⁹

These new social tools don't replace training, knowledge management, and communications practices used today. They augment them. They introduce approaches that fundamentally change getting up to speed, provide a way to share mockups as easily as finely polished documents, and elicit the participation of departments that previously hadn't considered themselves responsible for employee development at all.

Most of what we learn at work and elsewhere comes from engaging in networks where people co-create, collaborate, and share knowledge, fully

participating and actively engaging, driving, and guiding their learning through whatever topics will help them improve.

Training gives people solutions to problems already solved. Collaboration addresses challenges no one has overcome before.

The new social learning allows us, as Stowe Boyd (who first coined the term *social tools* and continues to observe their influence) puts it, “[to grow] bigger than my head. I want to create an idea space where I can think outside my mind, leveraging my connections with others.”¹⁰