Creating a Social Learning Platform

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Introduction

The proliferation of Social Learning in business is starting to gain traction and many companies are now looking at how best to implement a social platform that suits the complex requirements of their internal environment.

Social Learning is not a new concept. It is the cornerstone of civilisation; humankind has been passing on knowledge and skills from person to person since the dawn of time.

The vast majority of what we learn, we learn from others. We monitor the behaviour of others in order to mimic or modify our behaviour to match.

The challenge in business is how to create a platform to enable the transfer of knowledge and skills from one person to many without having classrooms, trainers, and all the associated resources.

This paper aims to help to guide the reader through the many challenges and pitfalls associated with a Social Learning Platform.

Social Learning in Business

Businesses have, over the years, invested heavily in the skills of employees. Deploying traditional training is costly. On the flipside, the skills that these classes offer are imperative to provide the services, support, and products that keep a business alive.

With this in mind, there is a sustained drive to push training out of the classroom and to empower staff within the business to share their knowledge and skills in a more informal setting.

The proposed magic bullet is to create a social learning environment, where the skills and knowledge that has been invested in a few individuals can be distributed to the many without the heavy re-investment in Instructor Led Training. This single place or Portal, where all of this information can be accessed, shared, commented and rated, is vital.

This is, however, only a small part of the challenge. Learning and knowledge transfer needs to keep everyone up to speed and to keep up with the pace of change within the business.

Strategy for Knowledge Management

Mechanisms are already in place for people to share information, ideas, and knowledge. Facebook Groups, Internet Forums, Twitter, Flikr, LinkedIn, WordPress, YouTube, Vimeo to name but a few, show us that people love to share.

Although these tools are readily available and heavily subscribed to, most businesses do not want to have all of their accrued knowledge made public. The mainstream sharing mechanisms cannot be utilised and getting all of the dispersed information, content, and resources accessible in one centralised place requires a framework.

Building a framework that offers a dynamic experience that is still flexible and most importantly, measureable, requires a full audit of the resources available to the business. In most companies, there are repositories of information, but they are scattered and owned by many different departments.

These pockets of information, content, SharePoint, CMS systems, and Wiki information all need to be taken into account when devising a solution.

This scattered information does not need to be centralized, but rather plugged into. In most cases building a Portal based Social Learning framework is the key that can bring all of the resources together without relocating them.

Portal Design

The design of the framework or portal is key and will differ from business to business. The following outline the types of things that would be considered in the design of a portal.

Connections

Often the person that holds the knowledge that a seeker requires is unknown, so one critical factor of any solution is to provide links or a searchable directory. This directory should be searchable by skill, knowledge, or area of expertise, so the right people that hold the information can be contacted.

Languages

Bridging the gap in global countries is a huge hurdle. Solutions need to be able to have a system that bridges the language barriers, allowing diverse cultures and communities to communicate and share.

Dashboard

Consider adding a user configurable dashboard where people can customise the delivery of the information and feeds that are important to them. Often a base Dashboard configuration can be defined with small areas of end user customisation.

Collaborative feeds

Forum based feeds can be included that have real-time discussions. Hot topics and common areas of interest can be a valuable source of knowledge and information.

Making all information feeds and sources fully searchable by keyword and metatag helps to build a library of content that will keep users coming back for more.

Blogs

Enabling people to share their experiences and thoughts will help to motivate people to use the Portal or framework that has been provided.

Encouraging Subject Matter Experts to create, update, and maintain a Blog may be time consuming, but will have the effect of building expert led communities that share experiences and knowledge.

Wiki's

User built repositories of information can be accessed and updated on a constant basis. All documents are 'live' in a good wiki system and this type of encyclopedia based resource can be the first stop for quick knowledge injections.

Groups

The communities need to be and stay connected. Groups are a great enabler of keeping people focussed and giving them a reason to stay and participate.

Interaction

Tag, Bookmark, Share, Contribute, Discuss, Question, Participate. Every user needs to be given the tools to participate.

Linking

Tagging and linking of information is key. Tag Clouds enable a user to create their own pool or move from one piece of content to another seamlessly without the need for constant searching.

Videos

Content from any source is a key consideration. Sharing of videos, screenshots, and pictures can be encouraged to deliver a rich social experience. The proliferation of mobile phone cameras facilitates blogging and sharing.

Measurement

Most of all measuring it, getting usage statistics and adjusting the environment to encourage participation is a rolling task. A social media platform will gather dust if it is not reviewed and refreshed on a regular basis.

If you build it they will come

Unfortunately building a social media platform is not as simple as creating a baseball diamond in a field of dreams. There has to be a reason for the user to be there from the very first click. Building a library of operational content that will keep the user engaged and make them return before releasing it to the audience is one of the most important considerations.

Marketing

Once the platform is ready for release, drive the adoption. VPs, managers and staff alike need to encourage usage. Changing mass internal communications from email to blog is just one example of how adoption of a Portal or platform can be promoted.

Conclusion

The building of the framework is only the first step. Maintaining and keeping your Social Learning Ecosystem healthy is an on-going task that is imperative to longevity of the solution.