Technology and networks – transforming the way we learn

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Summary

Networking has been an essential part of professional development for many years, but the advent of social media is providing opportunities to make and maintain connections that weren’t previously possible. Technology is also having an impact on work, which is becoming more complex and change is continuous rather than sporadic. Some now argue that learning and work have converged, with most learning taking place in the flow of work. Organisations will need to respond creatively and effectively to this emerging landscape if they are to learn faster and support staff in new ways of learning.

Understanding social capital in a changing world

Social capital is the sum total of knowledge, skills and experience contained within an organisation. Creating a connected workplace can significantly increase the value of this social capital, as individuals share what they know and learn from each other. Creating a connected workplace requires a platform to facilitate connectivity across space and time. Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) are similar to social networks such as Facebook, but the community is restricted to those within the organisation and invited guests. As a result, they provide a safe environment, where workers can talk about the things they are engaged in and share what they know.

But simply having a platform isn’t enough – individuals need to change their behaviour and ‘work out loud’ also. This is where the convergence between work and learning takes place. ‘Working out loud’ means providing a brief running commentary on what you are working on and the finished goods you are creating. This will result in a dialogue that reduces the distance between workers and senior management, will encourage transparency and empower workers by giving them a voice to make meaningful contributions and gain recognition.

We have been working with a 20 year old system that records knowledge in documents that are stored in a hierarchy of files and are almost impossible to retrieve. Today’s digital tools provide searchable content and messaging systems allowing us to know what is
happening right now. Organisations that are able to adapt to this new way of working will be current and agile, understanding what their customers want; and will be able to respond to a rapidly changing future.

How technology is changing the future

The influence of technology on our lives is growing exponentially. From the way we shop (with a mobile device you have the high street and a credit card in your hand), to the way we watch TV (the TV schedule is becoming superfluous) and the way we keep in touch with family and friends (this is inter-generational).

This influence can be seen across the housing industry. For example, the latest edition of Housing Technology Magazine (March 2013)¹ includes articles on systems that will predict and measure rent arrears, provide case studies on flexible mobile working; and offer systems for collecting and analysing ‘big data’. All these technology driven measures are aimed at improving performance and cutting costs.

Technology is impacting on the nature of work throughout the economy. Process driven jobs are likely to become automated or outsourced; valued work will be non-standardised, complex and creative. We often hear about managing change, but we are entering an era where everyone will need to be able to thrive in a world of constant change.

For housing, the changing political landscape adds an additional layer of complexity, which means delivering on our social business objectives will require a highly skilled workforce. Becoming a learning organisation will be a key component in developing this highly skilled workforce. But the traditional view of learning is also changing and it is important to have an understanding of this, if we are to develop effective learning organisations that are fit for the future.

Trends in learning

There are a number of key trends in learning that are having a profound impact on the way in which individuals learn, and organisations develop there staff. We will explore them here:

1. Connectivism – Connectivism is a contemporary approach to learning that has been promoted by George Siemens² and Stephen Downes.³ It is often described as the learning theory for the digital age. Central to this is the premise that knowing how to
find knowledge is as important, if not more important than actually knowing it. The thesis is that digital media has resulted in knowledge being more distributed than ever and its exponential growth means that individuals must develop personal learning networks, using online and collaborative tools to develop lifelong learning strategies. Siemens’ ‘Principles of Connectivism’ are:

- Learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions.
- Learning is a process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources.
- Learning may reside in non-human appliances.
- Capacity to know is more critical than what is currently known.
- Nurturing and maintaining connections is needed to facilitate continual learning.
- Ability to see connections between fields, ideas, and concepts is a core skill.
- Currency (accurate, up-to-date knowledge) is the intent of all connectivist learning activities.
- Decision-making is in itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there may be one right answer now, that same answer may be wrong tomorrow.

Connectivism brings a whole new level of meaning to what we call Networking.4

2. 70:20:10 – The 70:20:10 framework is based on research carried out in the 1990s, which found that lessons learned by successful managers came approximately from the following sources:

- 70 per cent from real life and on-the-job experiences, tasks and problem solving, sometimes known as informal learning.
- 20 per cent from feedback and working with or observing role models.
- 10 per cent from courses and reading.

Rather than a prescriptive model, this research demonstrates that we learn most by doing, and that all aspects of learning are important. As work becomes more complex, it also demonstrates that individuals have to take responsibility for their own learning. Most organisational interventions focus on courses, coaching and mentoring. This model suggests that learning and development professionals need to respond by facilitating informal learning, as well as providing traditional products and services.5
3. Push and pull learning – Traditional courses and qualifications are designed by an ‘expert’ who considers what a ‘typical’ worker might need to know or be able to do. The ‘expert’ then designs a programme to ‘push’ this learning out to learners. In more sophisticated versions, the expert will find out something about the workers they are delivering to, but they will still decide the programme. In many situations this is entirely appropriate, especially when learners are inexperienced.

But technology now provides opportunities for individuals to ‘pull’ knowledge to themselves from sources that they trust. To ‘Google’ has become a verb. There are now other ways to search for knowledge. Online tools such as Twitter, blogs, e-zines, and content curation sites like Scoop.it and Flipboard 2.0 allow individuals to ‘follow’ experts in their field. Experts who share their thoughts and links to resources they have found useful are highly valued and attract numerous ‘followers’. Much of this is in real time and the process of ‘liking’ or +1 or re-tweeting ensures that outstanding resources rise to the top. These are the basics of developing a personal learning network, although they become far more powerful when they are social learning networks.

Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs)

How do we take the principles of Connectivism, 70:20:10 and push and pull learning and apply them as a learning organisation? One step is to develop a connected workplace. However, many organisations are structured in hierarchical silos where communication between departments and even individuals within teams, is often constricted. To achieve this there needs to be a platform to enable connections and communication to take place within a safe environment.

Organisations are using Facebook, Linkedin and increasingly Google+ as a communication platform with customers and stakeholders. But they are generally open networks where information and communication is likely to be guarded. ESNs are similar tools but membership is restricted to invited people only, allowing transparent connections to be made.

Examples of ESNs are: Yammer, Chatter, Jive, Socialcast and Sharepoint. Some of the biggest names on the planet are acquiring ESNs and using them to create a connected workplace. For example, Yammer, a four year old company, was recently purchased by Microsoft for $1.2 billion and is being integrated into its Office suite of products. Whilst organisations such as T-Mobile, Phillips, Pearson and BUPA are using ESNs to boost collaboration amongst their workforce.
It should be noted that most ESNs are ‘freemium’ products – there is a basic level that is free and added functionality and security are available for a fee.

**So, why should organisations embrace social learning and invest in an ESN?**

As work becomes more complex, with change a constant feature, we are seeing a convergence of work and learning. Often jobs require employees to deal with problems or situations they have never come across before. There isn’t a process to follow and learning has to take place as you go and this is often best achieved through collaboration or co-operation (collaboration is where people are working together in some way; co-operation is when someone provides support without expecting anything in return).

ESNs can be used to fill gaps in knowledge, help with information flow and lead to more effective decision making. They make work transparent and give leaders the confidence to delegate decision making. This helps to streamline work processes and make the organisation more agile and flexible.

They do this by encouraging sharing and personal conversations that help to build strong working relationships. They create a two way dialogue that reduces the distance between leaders and across the organisation.

They capture knowledge, help identify expertise and then transfer the knowledge. For example, imagine a key employee, who has been active on the ESN leaves the organisation. Their replacement could track the profile of the person they have replaced, they will see the connections their predecessor had, the things they were working on and the knowledge they had. It could revolutionise induction!

ESNs empower employees by giving them a voice, providing the opportunity to make meaningful contributions and enable them to get recognition.

I’ve heard it said that great leadership is about motivation. Empowerment, fulfilling work and recognition are powerful motivators.7

**Great...let’s go out and get the platform, enrol everyone and we will have a collaborative workplace!**

*It’s not quite that simple.* The technology is merely a tool that enables collaboration to take place across the organisation in a safe environment. It’s not about people joining
the network and ‘following’ colleagues. It’s about them changing their behaviour, using the technology to ‘work out loud’ and share what they know.

I’ve been involved in workplace learning for fifteen years and I can’t remember any programme of learning where those attending haven’t said that they learned more from the other participants than they did from the teacher/tutor/trainer. ESNs provide the opportunity for large scale informal learning across the organisation by removing the barrier of location.

However, for it to be successful individuals need to adapt their way of working, with the two most common objections being ‘I don’t have the time’ and ‘I don’t know what to post’. This is because they see using an ESN as an extra thing to do, or an additional way to communicate.

This is where the convergence of work and learning needs to happen. Rather than an additional task, this is a way of reflecting on the work you are doing and the issues you are facing in an open way, so that others can see it, follow it and contribute to it whilst it is in process – thus making the link with Siemens’ ‘Principles of Connectivism’.

**Working out loud**

A key concept underpinning the reality of a connected workplace is that of explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is that which can be expressed either by speaking or in writing. Tacit knowledge is that which is contained within the individual and is only released when a new problem or question is encountered. This is often an area that is defined as creative or innovative as people use what they know already to solve new problems, answer new questions or create new products and services. If you tell others what you are doing as you work on it, they may ask you a question or give you a different perspective that leads to a better outcome.

Working out loud is providing a brief running commentary on what you are working on. Andrew McAfee encouraged people to narrate their work in an article entitled ‘Do’s and Don’ts for your works social platform’:

‘Talk both about work in progress (the projects you’re in the middle of, how they’re coming on, what your learning, and so on), and finished goods (the projects, reports, presentations etc. you’ve executed). This lets others discover what you know and what your good at. It also makes you easier to find, and so increases the chances you can be a helpful colleague to someone. Finally it builds your personal reputation and ‘brand’.”
A case study:
Enterprise Social Networking (Yammer) at Bromford Housing Group

Here at Bromford we are developing online learning communities as part of our overall learning management approach. Alongside this we have an embedded ESN, Yammer.

We have been using Yammer for two years now and it has been transformational. Our approach has not been to set rules – or do’s and don’ts – we have allowed Yammer to evolve naturally to find out how colleagues want to use it and go on an adventure to see how it can best add value.

Sounds almost romantic but OK, I’ll admit it, this approach was as much by accident than a well planned experiment. As early adopters, I could have written papers and made recommendations, instead we thought it would be more effective to test it out for real. The method? We sent the link to a few savvy and chatty colleagues and watched it spread like knotweed (only it’s been a good thing!).

How has Yammer added value to Bromford? Here is a brief summary of just some of the learning:

- There is increased transparency about what our CEO and senior team are up to and we get to hear what our housing managers and support workers are doing. Whether it’s a posting using the app from the train or a half time comment at an external meeting, it’s good to understand what everyone is doing no matter what their role, to help us achieve our overall strategic plan and live our DNA.

- It has raised awareness of what we are about across the whole of the business and has created a whole load of mini story tellers. The picture posted by our landscaping team of a colleague building a sandbag wall during heavy rain says it all when it comes to connecting support teams with the real world out there. Any colleague can take a view into the lives and work of others. It is hard to measure but elements from our annual engagement survey – which are linked to understanding what the wider business does – have increased dramatically since we have been using Yammer.
• Using groups and hashtags has helped us link themes and deliver a topic focus. At a recent learning event with a guest futurist speaker we were able to share the wisdom from the room using #futurefifty on both Yammer and Twitter. It’s just one of a number of virtual learning methods that can maximise the investment in learning – you don’t have to be there to be there – walls are virtually removed!

• It’s the big virtual water-cooler conversation. Personal announcements are on the money when it comes to ‘likes’ and comments which definitely adds to the feeling of one big family. It’s our own classified announcements with births, deaths and marriages and everything else in between. We don’t insist people join Yammer. It complements our ‘official’ communications and learning channels.

Our guidance to colleagues can be summed up as follows:

• You don’t have to join but if you choose not to you’re missing out on ‘goss’ and so much more. Go on, have a go, add your voice.

• If you wouldn’t say it out loud in the café area don’t yammer it (or tweet or blog it either).

• Respect data protection.

As I write this case study, 91 per cent of our current colleagues have chosen to join Yammer and our top poster with 1,808 messages is Mick Kent our CEO!

Helena Moore, Director of Organisational Development and Communications

A paradigm shift in the way we work

To reiterate, we are currently working with a 20 year old system, in which files become documents, documents are kept in folders and folders are saved in a hierarchy of other folders. As a result the knowledge contained within them is unlikely to be retrieved by anyone other than the person who put it there (and they can’t always find it!).

Today we have an abundance of digital tools that display searchable content and real time messaging systems that tell us what’s happening right now. They are ordered in relation to the time they were produced and designed to tell us what’s new. Organisations that are able to adapt to this new way of working will be current and
agile, they will know what their customers are saying and their colleagues are working on. They will be innovative and adaptable and be in a far better position to deliver the products and services that customers want.

Over the next five to ten years knowledge will be created, remixed and reviewed by most workers; a key skill will be to know how to learn and key behaviours will be collaboration and co-operation.

### Key points

- The influence of technology on our lives is growing exponentially, yet many organisations still approach learning and development with a 20 year old model.

- Knowledge in the modern world and in organisations is transferred in far more complex and porous ways: a successful organisation needs to support approaches and mechanisms which support better knowledge transfer.

- Social networking is a key way in which individuals learn, knowledge is transferred and organisations can grow – organisations need to develop a positive approach to networking and see it as a business advantage.

- In tomorrow’s workplace individuals need to take responsibility for their own learning. In fact their ability to learn will be more important than what they already know. Developing personal learning networks will be the new way to continuously develop as a professional.
Endnotes

1 http://www.housing-technology.com/magazine.php [accessed 10 June 2013]

2 http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Jan_05/article01.htm [accessed 10 June 2013]


4 For a fuller explanation on connectivism go to: http://education-2020.wikispaces.com/Connectivism [accessed 10 June 2013]

5 For more information on how to implement 70:20:10 go to: http://www.internettime.com/2013/02/50-suggestions-for-implementing-70-20-10/ [accessed 10 June 2013]

6 For more information on the tools and how they can be used go to: http://c4lpt.co.uk/top100tools/ [accessed 10 June 2013]

7 For more information go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzRiFch7eM8 [accessed 10 June 2013]