

Chapter 2

Integrating Informal Learning into Corporate Learning via Social Media

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Introduction

Recently, informal learning has received considerable attention in the context of corporate learning. It has been argued that informal learning is more important than formal training when it comes to developing requisite knowledge and competence for performance. The interest in informal learning has been reinforced by developments and transitions in corporate communication and cooperative work prompted by Web 2.0 technologies and social media. This has also prompted a debate about the role of Learning and Development (L&D) units within corporations. Both these developments represent a challenge for strategic Human Resource Development (HRD). L&D leaders have taken note of these issues and they are taking up this challenge.

In this chapter, we briefly introduce informal learning and social media, and then present key findings from empirical case studies on informal learning and the use of social media in five corporations. We look at the prerequisites for successful informal learning in a corporate context and at the current role of social media in supporting informal learning. Building both on discussions with our case study partners and relevant literature, we differentiate three basic modes for tying together formal and informal learning ('Extended Training', 'Workplace Learning' and 'Networked Learning') and the uses of social media these imply. We conclude by suggesting that L&D units in organizations should simultaneously pursue (1) how to employ social media in *managing* training and learning (in particular through dialogue with their various stakeholder groups), and (2) how to leverage social media in *designing* training and learning as well as the development of a new learning cul-

ture within an organization. At the very end of this chapter, we point out questions for further research that we will pursue in the future.

Informal Learning and Social Media in Corporate Learning and Development

Over the last couple of years, several authors have proposed that informal learning is more important than formal training when it comes to developing the knowledge and competences required for performance in the workplace. Regarding the relative weight of informal and formal learning, models such as 70:20:10 (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2002) or 80:20 (Cross, 2007) have been proposed, attributing far more importance to informal learning (70-80% knowledge and competence developed in this mode) compared to formal learning (10-20%). Based on this, it has been proposed that corporate Learning and Development (L&D) units need to reposition themselves. They should reduce training offerings and instead focus on enabling informal learning in their constituencies (e.g., Hart, 2012).

“Informal Learning is not new”, as Marsick (2009, p. 265) has pointed out. The term and concept of informal education **is was** first explicitly elaborated in Knowles' work (1950) as he believed that every individual is continuously learning. Informal learning has gained enormous popularity as a research topic over the last decades, making it a broad and interdisciplinary field of research (e.g., Eraut, 1994; Schugurensky, 2000). Informal learning is often defined as the opposite of formal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 12): “Formal learning is typically institutionally-sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning... is not typically classroom-based or highly structured and control of learning rests primarily in the hand of the learner”. While formal learning usually is didactically designed to achieve specified learning goals, this is not the case with informal learning. Goals may be vague or not formulated at all. Often, informal learning results from everyday life and experiences, and centres on the analysis of experiences (Marsick & Volpe, 1999).



Alongside these developments related to informal learning, individual social media applications such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), video sharing sites (e.g., YouTube), weblogs, wikis and podcasts, as well as integrated social media platforms such as Yammer and Jive are increasingly finding their way into the business world.

Yammer (www.yammer.com) is a private social networking platform for the support of collaboration within companies. It has a Facebook-like look and feel, and provides features such as user profiles, activity streams, polls, wiki-like pages, file repository, private messages and more. Jive (www.jive.com), providing a similar set of features, positions itself as a comprehensive social business platform supporting teamwork, enterprise collaboration, social customer services and social marketing.

Marketing, sales and advertising departments have been early movers here, using social media in order to, for example, attract greater attention through viral marketing (e.g., Subramani & Rajagopalan, 2003). Social media is used here as the umbrella term for Internet-based media in which information, personal opinions and experiences can be exchanged both through text as well as with pictures, videos and audio. Nowadays, weblogs, forums, social networks, wikis and podcasts are the most widespread social media applications (Bingham & Conner, 2010). With the aid of a new generation of web technologies, users of the Internet previously restricted to consuming content have become producers of contents themselves, thus giving rise to a new culture of participation (Baumgartner, 2006; Kahnwald, 2008; Tynjälä, 2008). In contrast to Web 2.0, social media frequently has a strong association with online communities and social communities, which serve as a meeting place for users, as outlined in the following definition by Safko & Brake (2009, p. 6):

“Social media refers to activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios.”

L&D units in businesses and corporations generally have not been early movers with regard to these developments. Nevertheless, the re-analysis of a recent trend study (Diesner & Seufert 2010) indicates that informal learning and social media now clearly are on their agenda (Seufert, **forthcoming**). However, the challenge is to create “... a learning culture, within which a range of training, development and learning strategies both respond to corporate strategy and also help to shape and influence it” (McCracken & Wallace, 2000, p. 282).



Informal Corporate Learning and Social Media: The Case of Learning Professionals

In an ongoing research and development project, different forms of informal learning within the corporate learning function have been investigated. Learning activities of corporate learning professionals have been placed in focus for two reasons: (1) this provides a clear focus on learning activities in one specific job family (learning professionals) which (2) functions as a key facilitator and role model multiplier for learning activities across the entire organization. The focus has been placed, additionally, on informal learning as a leadership task because the important role of leaders as facilitators of learning in organizations is increasingly recognized and institutionalized as part of the job description.

The research question we pursue is how L&D managers can support informal learning as an important mode of learning among their subordinates, the learning professionals. We have been pursuing this through an extensive review of literature on informal learning, discussions of leadership and also through empirical case studies.

In order to better understand how leaders in corporate learning can and do support informal learning among learning professionals, partners for carrying out case studies were identified. We were looking towards professionals from large corporations in knowledge intensive industries and with high standards in L&D work willing to engage with us in interviews and workshops on the topic. The following partners participated in this research:

- Caterpillar University, Customer Services Support (Geneva)
- Deloitte & Touche GmbH, Personalentwicklung / Aus- & Fortbildung (Duesseldorf)
- IBM Learning & Development, Switzerland (Zurich)
- Siemens Learning Campus (Munich)
- UBS AG Business University (Zurich)

For each of these partners, a senior person in a management role dealing with informal learning was identified. On the basis of an elaborate interview schedule, intensive exploratory interviews, usually lasting about three hours, were conducted by two interviewers. If available,

documentation on the L&D function was analysed beforehand. The cases were written up, submitted to the interviewees for review and subsequently refined. Conclusions derived from the interviews were written up as research statements and discussed with the interviewees in the course of a half-day workshop.

Specifics of L&D in Different Organizations

As emerged from the interviews, each of the companies participating in the study features some specifics with regard to the development of learning professionals. With IBM, for example, the elaborately formulated global learning strategy with a strong focus on technologies and social learning struck us as interesting. This strategy involves “be more interconnected” (e.g., through the use of emerging technologies to improve learning), “be more intelligent” (e.g., through deeper analytics to improve the search for and personalization of learning) and “be more collaborative” (e.g., through weaving social learning into learning interventions and work life) (see Bopp 2010, slide 24).

Other L&D units placed an emphasis on particular forms of learning and development. At Deloitte, for example, secondments (i.e., assignment of employees to a different unit, usually for the duration of 18 months) are an important instrument for personnel development. The representative of Caterpillar University considers “deliberate practice” (an approach to continuous improvement firmly based in the workplace and not in the classroom that is less informal than some other forms of informal learning) an important mode of informal learning:

“Instead of doing what we're good at, we insistently seek out what we're not good at. Then we identify the painful, difficult activities that will make us better and do those things over and over. After each repetition, we force ourselves to see - or get others to tell us - exactly what still isn't right so we can repeat the most painful and difficult parts of what we've just done.” (Colvin, 2008, p. 71–72).

At UBS, to provide another example, the importance of online learning has increased over the last couple of years. Different forms of online learning are distinguished and systematically developed, including “Self directed individual learning” based on Web Based Trainings, “collaborative learning” mainly on the basis of “eClassrooms”, “social learning” based on a social media platform in expert communities and, finally, “eTesting”.

Learnsapes

In order to obtain a better perspective on the forms of formal and informal learning in use in the participating organizations, learnsapes, (i.e., landscapes of forms of learning, cf. Cross, 2007) were constructed by differentiating two dimensions:

- the “formal learning” vs. “informal learning” dimension, and
- the “learning organized by leader / manager” vs. “self directed learning” dimension.

This resulted in a field with four sectors (Figure 1):

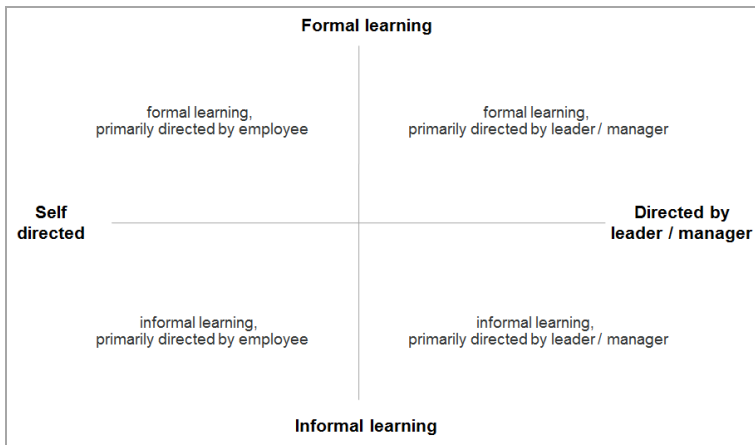


Figure 1: The landscape of learning.

When constructing the learnsapes, we deliberately did not provide the experts interviewed with a definition of “formal” or “informal” learning. Rather, we provided our partners with the two-dimensional layout represented in Figure 1 and asked them to appropriately place each form of learning and development available to the learning professionals in the unit they are directing.

The learnscape of each participating organization comprises a range of different forms of learning and development available to the learning professionals, both formal and informal and directed by leader / manager as well as self directed. A consolidated view of the different learnsapes that emerged from the expert interviews is presented in Figure 2:

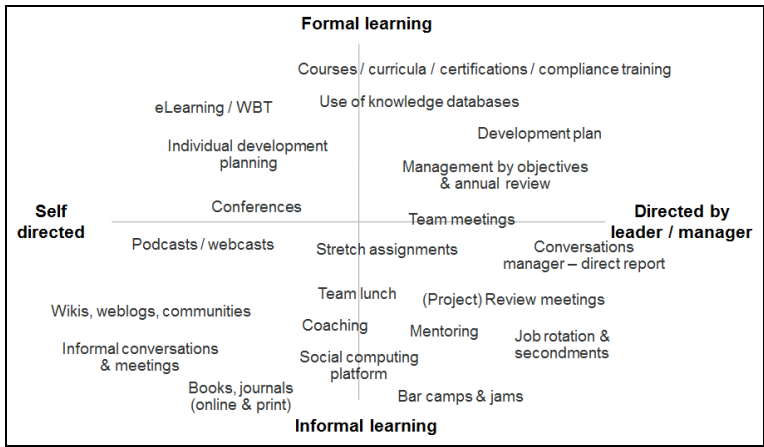


Figure 2: Consolidation of learnscapes of participating L&D units.

While Figure 2 may look fairly full and complex, it suggests a more straightforward state of affairs than actually is the case. When comparing the different learnscapes, it emerged that in some instances forms of learning that were termed similarly were actually positioned differently in the two-dimensional space (Figure 3). This points not only to differences in perception but also to differences in procedures and styles across the participating companies.

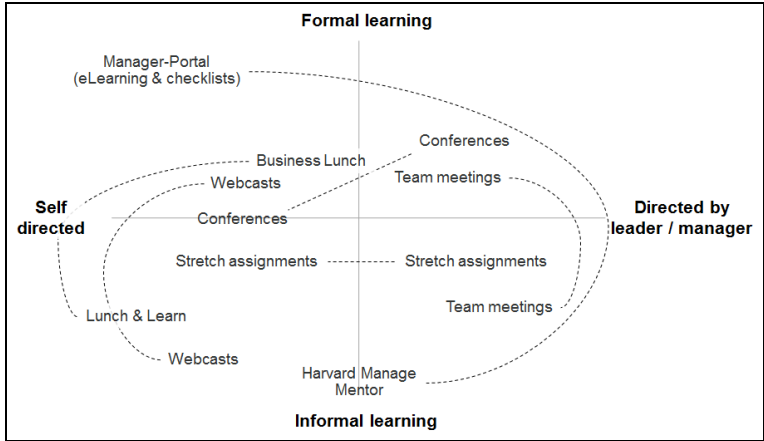


Figure 3: Differential positioning of similarly termed forms of learning.

Even though the resulting picture (Figures 2 and 3) is complex, the following observations can be derived:

- Formal learning in the context of courses, curricula, certifications or compliance training is usually initiated by leaders and managers. However, there are instances where subordinates participate in the initiation of these forms of learning, for example by asking for / demanding such measures in the course of annual reviews. The same is true for the employing company's knowledge bases in the course of work processes. While this may be required by managers, it may also occur on the basis of employees' own initiative.
- Annual reviews, goal setting and development planning are considered as forms of formal learning initiated by leaders / managers.
- The forms of formal learning usually initiated and directed by employees typically comprise eLearning and participation in conferences.
- Informal forms of learning initiated and directed by leaders / managers typically comprise activities such as conversations between manager and subordinates, review meetings, job rotation and secondments. Bar camps and jams are also placed in this quadrant. While support by leaders / managers may be indispensable at the initiation stage, their influence may be less pronounced in the actual proceedings.
- Informal learning activities initiated and directed primarily by employees typically are participation in webcasts, use of wikis and weblogs, participation in communities (online or offline), informal conversations and meetings, reading books and journals as well as coaching activities.



Prerequisites for Successful Informal Learning

While it is sometimes suggested that informal learning is the way humans learn in their everyday practices and that it occurs naturally (e.g., Cross, 2007), we believe that in an organizational context there are important prerequisites for successful informal learning. The experts interviewed were asked to identify prerequisites for informal learning in the following three areas:

- individual employees and teams,

- leaders, and
- organization and culture.

The results obtained were reviewed and validated in the joint workshop with the industrial partners participating in the research. We will detail each set of prerequisites in turn.

Prerequisites at the Level of Individual Employees and Teams

A key prerequisite for successful informal learning is curiosity and willingness to learn on the part of the individual employee. Or, as one of the experts interviewed put it so aptly:

“Learning is an attitude, really. It is being curious, wanting to know and wanting to learn and being open to learning.”

Other prerequisites at this level are:

- Initiative and taking up responsibility.
- Ability to reflect on personal development needs and the capacity for self directed learning.
- An understanding of development potential and competence gaps identified as something valuable, as an opportunity for development rather than a deficit to be hidden.
- Trust in the manager / leader that development opportunities can be openly discussed.
- Trust in other team members so that feedback from others is accepted and that actively soliciting feedback is not regarded as an indication of weakness or a lack of competency.
- Autonomy. Employees have to be able to learn in a self-directed manner. They need to be able to judge to what extent (if at all) their current learning strategies and practices are successful and conducive to the goals pursued.
- Media competency. Online media and so-called 'social media' play an important role in self-directed and informal learning, and employees have to be competent in using them.

Prerequisites at the Level of Team Leaders

A key prerequisite for successful informal learning at the level of team leaders or managers is that they act as role models with regard to life long learning and actively promote the willingness to learn. In the words of one of our experts:

“The most important task of a leader is to enable and inspire his or her direct reports, to point out opportunities for development and to support this development.”

Other prerequisites at this level are:

- Provision of a safe environment for their direct reports to talk about and reflect on learning (even if this proved to be less successful than hoped for), thereby enabling further discussion and possibly the discovery of solutions to barriers for learning and development.
- Willingness to reflect on and communicate personal learning experiences, both in informal interaction and in the context of formal training and development.
- Trust in direct reports, in their abilities and their orientation to goals.
- Provision of time and (financial) resources required for informal learning, for example through participation in meetings and conferences.
- A leadership style conducive to learning. Tolerating mistakes (if committed for a first time). Actively showing an interest in how their direct reports perform their work. Assisting direct reports with networking. Provision of support and coaching when required. Initiation and support for reflection on work experiences together with their direct reports.

Prerequisites at the Level of Organization and Culture

Finally, there are important prerequisites for informal learning at the level of organization and culture. Most important, perhaps, is a flexible organization of work and the ability to sequence work activities. Again, in the words of one of our experts:

“[As employee, the authors] I have to be assured that I can engage in learning activities whenever it makes sense with regard to my personal work process and that I can access learning resources when I need them - even when I am away from my workplace.”

The other prerequisites for informal learning include:

- Leeway for experimenting and practicing.
- Resources and a budget for self directed learning and development activities. Also, there needs to be transparency with regard to what this budget is and how it is used.
- Transparent pathways for development and career.
- Easy overview of the available opportunities for learning and development.
- Tools and technologies for communication and collaboration – in particular for geographically distributed teams.
- Knowledge and learning resources that are available in an easy manner at any time (e.g., Harvard Manage Mentor or knowledge databases).
- Knowledge and learning resources that are up to date and of good quality. Learners need to have trust in these resources. A lack of trust is detrimental to learning and the motivation to learn.
- An organizational culture conducive to learning, including
 - acceptance of learning on the job and of allocating times for learning;
 - openness for personal opinions – even if these may be uncomfortable for leaders or the organization as a whole;
 - appreciation for trying out new ways of doing things;
 - appreciation for opportunities to learn something new.
- Measures supporting the goal orientation in activity (on the part of all persons involved, leaders as well as their direct reports).

- Explicit goals for exchange, collaboration, learning and development, formulated, for example, in the course of annual reviews.
- Responsibility of leaders and managers for learning and development established as part of their role and activity profile.

The Current Role of Social Media in Supporting Informal Learning

For all training and development organizations participating in this research, Web 2.0 technologies are important tools in supporting informal learning. The tools employed are mostly discussion forums, weblogs, wikis and microblogging tools such as Yammer.

Several organizations have integrated these tools into platforms for learning and collaboration:

- With Caterpillar, for example, this is the Cat@Work intranet platform providing access to different tools for information, communication and learning (e.g., company news as well as knowledge communities, wikis or weblogs). Discussion forums play a particularly important role in the communication and exchange among learning professionals distributed across regions and continents.
- At Deloitte, the focus is currently on using the microblogging tool Yammer, which is popular for its look and feel and the easy way in which users can switch between the discussions carried out by different groups and in different channels. Communication via Yammer has replaced to some extent the use of Email.
- IBM has integrated Web 2.0 technologies into its 'Career Smart'-platform that supports both formal and informal learning and development. This platform features four distinct areas:
 - plan your development;
 - gain skills and experiences, with access to both online learning resources and networks for social learning;
 - track your progress; and

- search for learning, including a messenger system that allows to directly contact experts on a wide range of topics.
- With Siemens, weblogs and wikis are integrated into community spaces.
- At UBS, wikis, blogs, webconferencing, discussion forums, document management and other tools are integrated into the social computing platform Jive.

Development Modes in Corporate HRD and Uses of Social Media



What are the implications of all this for corporate HRD functions? They are: (1) the importance of informal learning, (2) the interplay of formal and informal forms of learning in complex landscapes of learning, (3) the prerequisites for informal learning at different levels (team members, team leaders, organization and culture) and, last but not the least, (4) social media increasingly finding their way into the workplace? In a follow-up workshop with the experts interviewed, three basic scenarios were discussed:

1. once top management realizes the increased importance of informal learning, the L&D function will be reduced in manpower and budget;
2. once top management realizes the increased importance of informal learning, the L&D function will be provided with a new mandate: to design context conditions for learning throughout the enterprise.
3. there is no change in top management attention but the L&D function nevertheless needs to adjust to the increased importance of informal learning and the need to create conditions conducive for learning throughout the organization;

The general feeling among the experts present was that the third scenario is most likely. Adapting to the changed realities implies, in particular, (1) enabling employees to proficiently employ social media and (2) employing social media to improve the educational process.

In this section, we will develop the implications of this, at first from a management perspective, and subsequently from a learning design perspective.

The management perspective: With all the talk about Generation Y entering the corporate world it is often overlooked that even among this generation most people are used to and able to consume content on the Web, but far fewer actually create content on the Web or through social media (e.g., Schulmeister, 2009). Not surprisingly, some large companies have begun to set up courses devoted to enhancing the media competencies required in order to work with social media in a proficient way. An example of this available on the Web – albeit in German language – is a report on a course developed for Bayer, a global player in healthcare, nutrition and high-tech materials (<http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/14630159>). L&D units still have to discover, develop and routinize just when and how social media can be profitably employed in the educational process itself – from needs analysis right through to quality assurance (see Figure 4 taken from Seufert 2011).

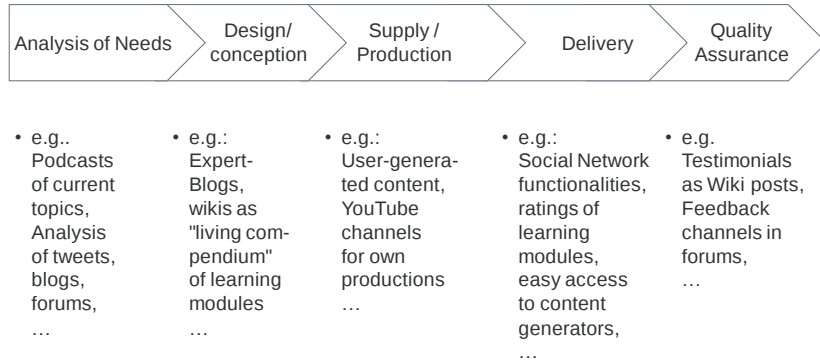


Figure 4: Examples of social media used for educational processes in companies.

The learning design perspective: The challenge here is to tie together formal and informal learning activities. Three basic modes in which this can be pursued have been distinguished (Poell et al., 2000; Verdonshot, 2009; Seufert, 2011): (1) extended training; (2) workplace learning; and (3) networked learning. In Table 1, these different modes are characterised with regard to – among other aspects - the objective for learning, the relationship between learning and working, the facilitation of learning, etc.

Table 1: Forms of learning & their characteristics.

	Extended Training	Workplace Learning	Networked Learning
Objective	Be able to perform a new task/ job	Become more proficient at performing the task / job	Be able to innovate at work / on the job
Metaphor for learning	Acquisition – value creation via transfer of knowledge & skills	Performance / Proficiency – value creation via improved performance	Creation – value creation via exchange among peers, adoption and diffusion of innovations
Relationship learning – working	Learning precedes working	Learning supports the work processes	Learning enables the transformation of work processes
Logic underlying the designing of learnscapes	Designing learning environments, e.g.: - Task analyses - Instructional Design, e.g. learning in a simulated reality practicing skills in a role playing game - Support in transfer to the workplace	Designing working environments, e.g.: - Cognitive apprenticeship - Legitimate peripheral participation - Opportunities for feedback from managers, colleagues, and customers, evaluation, and reflection	Designing networked working environments, e.g.: - idea capture via trend watching within a profession - feedback from outside, benchmarking, involvement of external experts pushing e.g. a team to take a market-focused approach toward new solutions
Learning is facilitated by	L&D unit with the support of the participants' managers	The Participants' managers with support by L&D	Network communities with support by participants' managers and L&D
Focused level of knowledge / ability	Individual: Individuals acquire knowledge, practice skills, reflect attitudes, achieve (better) transfer of learning back at the workplace	Group / Organization: Groups / organizations gain knowledge, practice skills, reflect attitudes at work, improve performance, achieve better business results	Networks inside & outside the organization: Participants in networks create new knowledge, develop gradual improvements and radical innovations
Content of the learning process	Content is known in advance and consists of structured and explicit	'Content' is available in the workplace and needs to be discovered	'Content' is available in the network and needs to be discovered

Table 1: Forms of learning & their characteristics.

	Extended Training	Workplace Learning	Networked Learning
	knowledge	by learners in interaction with the tasks at hand	ered by learners through interaction with members of the network
Locus of control, monitoring, quality assurance, etc.	Monitoring is top down both by L&D and by management in order to support learning transfer	Monitoring is both top down and bottom-up, by L&D, by management, as well as by learners (self-directing their activities)	Monitoring is bottom-up, by autonomous learners and by (internal) communities aiming to create value to the profession or the business
Social media are employed in order to ...	...support transfer from learning to the working environment Examples: Podcasts on seminar topics are integrated into learning materials in order to highlight the relevance/strategic significance of the topics in the preparation phase; wiki posts by trainers or participants are added during / after the seminar;	... support reflection and participation at the workplace Examples: A wiki employed to document, reflect and comment on learnings during an action learning project; a weblog used as a learning journal, a moderated forum and a weblog used by a quality circle or by a coaching programme;	... support innovation processes Examples: A weblog for “trend watching” and the observation of current developments, a quality handbook created through teamwork by members of a social network in a particular profession on the basis of a wiki;

Dialogue and the Promotion of Conditions for Learning

Based on the avenues for employing social media outlined in Table 1, HRD must deal with the question of its fundamental role within the company. Those responsible for training and learning may focus on employing these new forms of communication in order to engage in more intensive dialogue with their various interest groups. This amounts to taking up a role of a promoter of a “participatory society” (see Figure 5, quadrants on the left). In doing so, the HRD unit demonstrates that it is open to cultural change, that it experiments with the

innovation potential of social media for its own training processes and probably also collaborates more intensely with other units, e.g., the communication department.

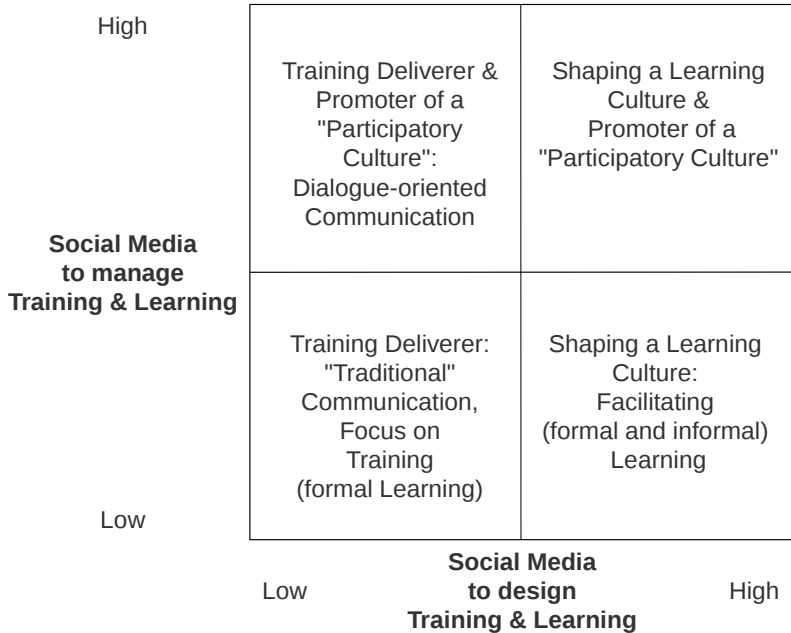


Figure 5: Positioning of Learning & Development based on different uses of Social Media.

HRD may, however, focus on a different aspect: the transformation of the current and the development of a new culture of learning within an organization (see Figure 5, quadrants on the right). L&D may assign priority on creating **framework** conditions for successful (informal) learning through the provision of social media infrastructures for learning, incentive systems conducive to learning and the involvement of managers as promoters of learning. In this way, commonly known barriers to organizational learning are addressed with priority (Marsick, 2009).



Conclusion and Future Directions

To conclude, we suggest that the greatest potential benefits can be realised if both development paths are pursued together. There are primarily two reasons why we suggest this. On the one hand, L&D cannot take on the role of a champion for a new learning culture that places due attention on informal learning within an organization in a convincing manner unless it is itself deeply involved in employing social media. It must gain its own learning experiences with a “participatory society” in order to champion this in other places. On the other hand, the potential benefits of a participatory culture of learning will be more limited in the mid to long term if the core mission to support individual and organizational learning processes in the company is neglected.

Further research will focus on validating and further elaborating the theoretical framework outlined above, based on a design-based research methodology. The framework helps to systematize further research questions from both a management and a learning design perspective:

Management perspective: How to design and evaluate new ways of dialogue along the value chain with clients, based on the idea of a learning organization enabled by social media? How will the communication culture change through the use of social media, and how can more feedback mechanisms be integrated into the work of L&D units?

Learning design perspective: How to provide mechanisms for the integration of formal and informal learning? What kinds of competences are required for informal learning? How will informal learning based on social media platforms change corporate learning processes? What kinds of supporting conditions can L&D provide for individual and organizational learning?

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