

# Five Ways to Use Social Networking for Learning

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Why should CLOs care about social networking for learning? Because social networking can improve organizational problems such as sharing knowledge, brain drain, multigenerational learning, competency management and talent management. Let's look at five characteristics of social networking and how one organization successfully uses social networking to support learning and to maintain a competitive advantage.

**1. Sharing is an attribute that allows users to dispense knowledge, resources and content.** Tools such as wikis and blogs can capture experienced employees' tacit organizational knowledge and provide a method to mentor less-experienced workers. Additionally, learning professionals sometimes can't keep up with the organizational demands for new content — lengthy development cycles might mean content is out of date by the time it is delivered. By empowering learners to create and share their own content, organizations can reap the rewards of user-generated, low-cost content.

**2. Relationships are the foundation of social networks.** Learners create profiles and can connect with others who have similar interests or needs. Connections can exist based on products, processes, roles, interests, geography, etc. Organizations that facilitate the connections among employees provide a way to make it easier to do business and keep in touch. It is not always feasible to meet face to face, and online social networking helps build relationships that might not have existed otherwise, especially among geographically dispersed workers.

**3. Conversations support the social aspect of learning.** Discussion threads offer ways to support instructor-led training (ILT) classes, provide mentoring and coaching opportunities, help improve processes and provide access to experts. The newest generation of learners — the "MySpace Generation" — lives online. Organizations that embrace this generation's desire to communicate online will have greater success attracting and retaining younger workers.

**4. Identity within social networks is based on individuals' choices.** This self-selection supports a learning culture that encourages on-

demand usage of learning versus consumption. Learners have a wider range of learning options when they can select what, how and from whom they learn. Identity is established via learner profiles, which often include a photo, interests, background and contact information. The information provided allows learners to connect to individuals, experts, mentors and groups that share interests, type of work, roles or location.

**5. Groups within social networks often are where day-to-day work happens.** Formed to solve a particular organizational problem or fill a need, groups often have greater cohesiveness than networks as a whole. When working without obstructions, telecommuters and globally dispersed co-workers can manage knowledge, find resources and solve problems easier. A study of two biotechnology firms found that using boundary-spanning social networks increased both learning and flexibility in ways that would not have been possible within a self-contained hierarchical organization.

How are social networks used in corporations? AT&T (formerly Cingular Wireless) uses internal collaboration tools to leverage its learning infrastructure and talent.

"Our learning organization is key to rapid deployment of new rate plans, new device releases, all framed up in the context of tremendous organizational change," said Jim Bowles, vice president of workforce development. "To ensure alignment between sales and customer service channels and efficient repurposing of evolving content, we use internal social collaboration tools. Our discussions play out in real time in this environment, drive organizational efficiency, drive down errors and create consistency across the organization in a way that helps us cope effectively with the pace of change."

Some learning professionals might struggle with the idea of learners creating and sharing their own content. But the power of sharing and networking is evident everywhere today. It has to become part of our learning strategy. By learning more about the tools of social networking, you can make the leap and reap the rewards. ■

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