

AN INTRODUCTION TO **SOCIAL MEDIA** AND **LEARNING**

This is part one of a series of three articles, in which Barry Sampson defines social media and explains the basic concepts.

Plenty of L&D professionals have a real interest in using social media but many have no idea of where to start. A fact highlighted at this year's Learning and Skills Group conference held in June. The knowledge and understanding of the use of social media and learning is far more varied than most people had thought. A number of the sessions assumed a level of knowledge and understanding of social media that was lacking in most people in the audience. And delegates' also assumed that everyone else was on the same page.

This is not a surprise if we acknowledge that social media and its use in learning, has really become a hot topic only in the past two years. As the event progressed it became apparent that there are two distinct groups. Firstly, the people who are aware of its progress, but don't know very much about it, and are not ready to use it; and secondly, those who have been using social media for a considerable time, either within their workplace or at least for their own personal development.

So, although it certainly isn't new to everyone, in this article I will assume no prior knowledge or experience on the part of the reader.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media isn't just about millions of people following Stephen Fry on Twitter, or playing Farmville on Facebook. Neither is it about connecting with as many people as possible on LinkedIn in the hope that someone will look kindly on you should you get made redundant. It is about millions of people, having millions of conversations, and producing and sharing millions of pieces of content daily. And this is no exaggeration.

Google analytics expert, Avinash Kaushik said: "Social media is like teen sex. Everyone wants to do it. No one actually knows how. When finally done, there is surprise it's not better." This may be rather tongue in cheek, but this describes the way many people feel when they first try to understand social media.

A more formal description might be that it is 'media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, created using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. So let's break this and consider each of the three elements:



People have been sharing and collaborating for years just doing their job. This informal learning activity happened without any involvement from the training department. Whether you know it or not it's highly likely that your workforce is already using social media tools to share, help and learn from others. This may be during work or away from the workplace in their own time. Much of this activity is so natural that they may not even perceive it as a learning activity; it is simply the communication that happens as part of normal working life.

These connections are very powerful. Talking about the micro-blogging service Yammer, Mike Petersell, director of Pitney Bowes' Management Centre for Learning and Development said of Yammer, the micro blogging service, "Yammer is a learning goldmine. It enables those special connections we had created by bringing people together in the classroom, to happen all the time."

What's changing is that the training department is now taking an interest in these tools and looking for ways to use them. In many cases it is attempting to use these tools within the traditional framework of course delivery. They certainly can be used within structured programs (and we will consider this more in the third article in

this series) but given the chance they are ideal tools for informal learning.

NOT THE END OF FORMAL LEARNING

Whenever the discussion moves to social media, there can be an assumption that it is being promoted as a replacement for what is already there; the classroom, e-learning, LMS, etc. This is not a zero-sum game where one person gains from another's loss. There are many aspects of organisational life in which formal training activity remains the most appropriate method. The challenge is to identify those areas in which each methodology is most appropriate, and how they can be used to enhance each other.

Social media has the potential to free up other resources that can be focused on areas where a more formal approach is required. This can be done by utilising social media tools to empower learners to carry out self-directed activities, to share their learning and collaborate with others. Used well, social media gives the training department a much greater reach and allows it to provide support which previously would have been impossible.

This approach requires a change of mindset and a willingness to trust and empower your workforce. Is this a step you're willing to take?

NOT JUST FOR THE YOUNG AND TECH-SAVVY

Although less frequently than in the past, there is sometimes still the assumption that social networking and social media are for the young, or the very technical. This assumption is refuted in a report by market research company Inside Facebook:

- Between January 2008 and June 2009 UK membership of Facebook nearly doubled from 10,000,000 to 19,000,000 users.
- The largest increase occurred in people over thirty who now account for 42% of the UK membership.
- By the middle of 2010 UK membership of Facebook reached 26.5 million users.
- Globally 57% of Facebook members are aged between 18 and 34.
- More surprising, 26% of members are aged between 35 and 64.

In other words, 83% of Facebook members are of employment age, and nearly half the UK population have accounts. People are ready for social media in learning.

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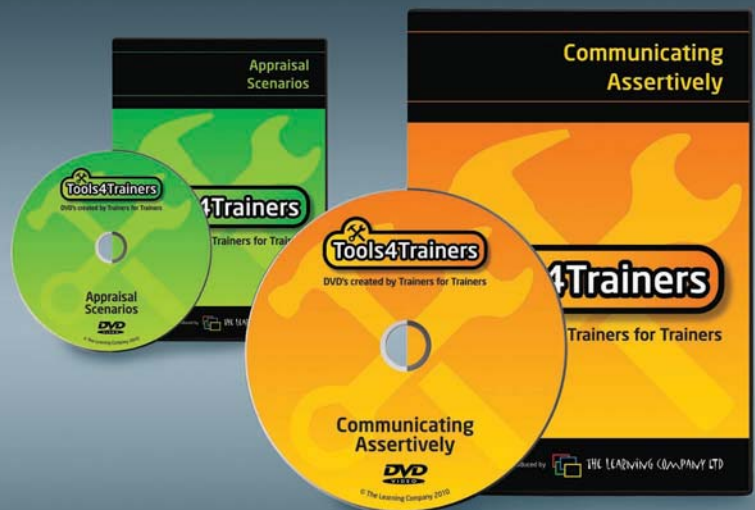
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