



Corporate Whitepaper

Communities 2.0: Addressing Workforce Trends through New Learning Models

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The dynamics of the North American workforce are rapidly changing and they are rapidly altering how organizations need to facilitate the transfer of ideas and information. Current workplace trends include the millennial generation, globalization, workforce diversification – all of which are changing the rules when it comes to traditional knowledge sharing and learning in organizations of all sizes.

Changing Workplace Trends

In medieval times, communities existed to connect people and offered a workplace training and learning vehicle in the form of medieval guilds. People would tap into these groups to find others who would help them apprentice, and then become a journeyman and finally a master. Then, during the industrial revolution, this model changes, with scientific management breaking up tasks into small chunks where employers would define what each person's role should be.

With the advent of the "knowledge worker" the workplace has undergone another transformation where jobs involving the most complex type of interactions make up the fastest-growing segment in many industries. A 2005 McKinsey report titled, "The next revolution in interactions," looked closely at how workplace tasks are completed in developed economies. They coined this as a shift from valuing transactional interactions – those that are routine and involve non-creative interaction – to complex interactions – those that require people to deal with ambiguity and solve problems based on experience, or tacit knowledge.

The phenomenon of the tacit worker is continuing to rise, with industry analyst firm Gartner estimating that the frequency of non-routine situations requiring tacit knowledge will double between 2006 and 2010. The reality is that in many industries where the goalposts are constantly moving, and situations change rapidly, formal learning once or twice a year doesn't provide the experience or knowledge that workers require on an ongoing basis. For organizations, this increasingly means there needs to be a significant shift of budgets and resources from formal learning settings to informal situations where the majority of learning actually takes place.

Technology Trends Impacting Learning, Knowledge Sharing

While the changing nature of work is key, it is important not to overlook technology trends and how they are impacting the expectations and requirements of workers. The rise of social computing is based on highly innovative, new practices such as those seen on popular sites such as MySpace.com, Youtube.com, Digg.com and Facebook.com. These Web 2.0 technologies are constantly in beta and offer a new paradigm for how we approach learning and knowledge sharing.

A recent study from Forrester Research on social computing's impact on eLearning indicates that more than 80% of adult learning takes place in informal settings outside the classroom, leaving only 20% for formal learning situations. This particular study goes on to emphasize how informal, social computing approaches including Communities of Practice (CoPs) should be adopted.

Making Informal Knowledge Transfer a Reality: Communities of Practice

With the growing importance of informal knowledge transfer, organizations are increasingly looking to Communities of Practice as a solution. CoPs are distributed groups of people who share a common concern, problem, mandate, or sense of purpose.

CoPs build on existing formal content tools such as portals, learning management systems, document management, content management, knowledge management as well as team and productivity tools. Communities of Practice enable organizations to add a new dimension - the informal organization. Communities offer a way for peers to not only consult learning materials from the institution but combine information with learning materials they create and share amongst themselves, forums for questions and answers, and professional networking where peers, mentors and subject matter experts are connected and consulted to solve problems.

Industry analyst firm, Gartner has recognized CoPs as one of the five best practices for increasing organizational agility, highlighting how horizontal workplace technology can make a significant impact on organizations with the right priorities.

There are several reasons that a CoP is different and delivers unique benefits to an organization:

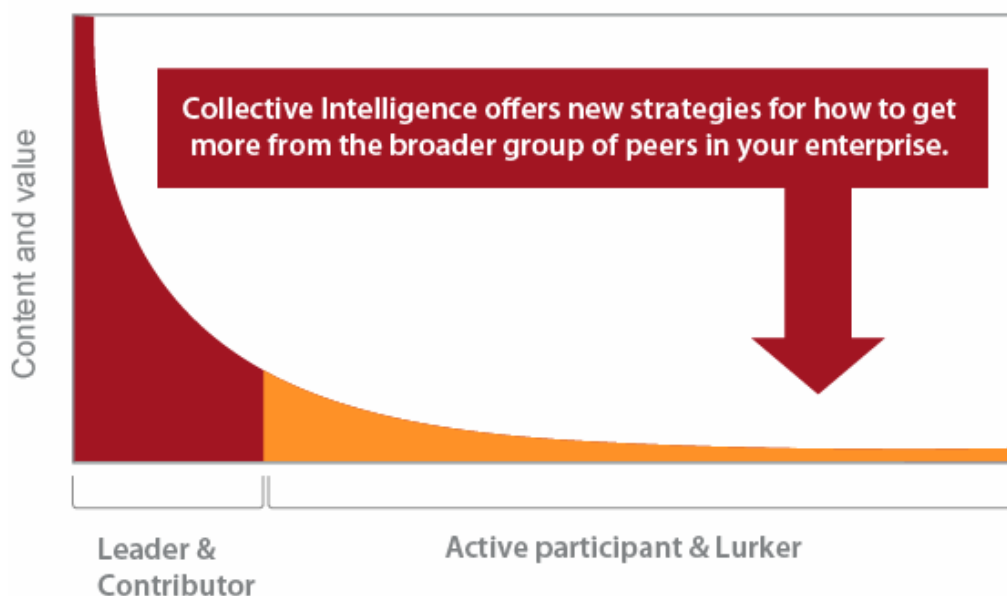
- ◆ The peer-to-peer environment fosters employees' natural trust in advice from someone in their situation. It also encourages emotional as well as instructional support.
- ◆ The focus is on context-specific information sharing rather than broadly applicable advice, as in most conventional development and training programs. Because users seek information to solve immediate problems, there is enormous benefit in the information being available almost immediately.
- ◆ A CoP replaces the one-way flow of information that is typical of corporate training programs and replaces them with fluid, multi-pronged conversations.

The U.S. military is a leader in training and development and CoPs are being used as a way to adapt quickly to new situations and address complex challenges. For example, "CompanyCommand" is an internal Army Web site in which junior officers facing professional challenges can seek advice from their peers. With CompanyCommand, soldiers can get the information they need to make fast and accurate decisions to complex problems by getting advice within minutes. This CoP illustrates the power of a new model for tacit interactional learning and leadership development within an organization. Since its inception, CompanyCommand has received significant recognition as an example of how innovation and leadership through an informal network can yield incredible results.

Technology Strategies for Collective Intelligence in Communities

To effectively leverage workplace trends, a new breed of technology is evolving based on the principles of collective intelligence. Time and time again, it has been proven that a large group of peers is more effective at solving complex problems than a small group of experts. New technology approaches are now enabling organizations to leverage the "Long Tail", a term coined by Chris Anderson to explain new business models that are changing the economics of doing business through the Internet. It is based on a well-known model of statistical distribution. Just as the "Long Tail" has changed the rules for the flow of products on the Internet, it is changing the rules for the flow of knowledge in the enterprise.

The Long Tail



While most technologies focus on the small number of members (contributors and leaders) that contribute a lot, the “Long Tail” and Collective Intelligence help us understand how to additionally leverage the activity of the 97% of community members, the Active Participants and Lurkers. Collective Wisdom is an approach that offers a set of principles that help understand how technology can most effectively leverage the critical mass of knowledge and insight of the group. Ultimately, this approach offers a diversity of perspectives and aggregates the group view of people, knowledge and conversations, all at a low cost as it only has to facilitate the content of the peers rather than consume time to create it. Just as the “Long Tail” changed the economics of business on the Internet, innovative peer to peer community technology changes the economics of learning and collaboration in the enterprise. It is now cheaper and quicker to facilitate the connecting of those who know to those who need to know than to have the institution intermediate this process with formal learning and training approaches. Collective Wisdom approaches offer the means to seamlessly aggregate this information to derive ongoing value for the organization.

Implementing Communities of Practice as Part of Your Learning Strategy

Successful communities are built half based on actual community process and structure, and the other half around the actual technology platform which underpins the system. In planning and building a community, there are multiple factors to consider on both sides of the equation.

On the process side, there should be a focus on setting short and long term goals for the community and ensuring there’s an ongoing plan in place that anticipates many of the common issues involved with the set up and maintenance of any CoP. Questions that should be considered upfront include:

- ◆ What communities will offer my organization the highest potential return?
- ◆ How will we find and train community leaders?
- ◆ How will we continue to engage new users beyond the launch of the community?

For many organizations, technology has proven to be a stumbling block when it comes to setting up a CoP. With the broad range of enterprise software systems offering some collaboration or learning functionality, enterprises often look to implement a CoP based on these systems designed primarily for purposes other than communities. In an effort to leverage existing systems or cut costs, organizations actually find they require significant customization and end up with limited functionality. When addressing technology as part of an overall CoP strategy, enterprises should consider the following:

Is this technology platform designed to address Community-specific challenges?

- ◆ What type of functionality does this platform offer the organization? Does it deliver advanced features such as ranking, filtering and other smart tools that add true value to the community?
- ◆ Does the technology provide features and benefits which address the contributions of leaders, contributors, active participants and lurkers in the Community?
- ◆ How does this technology integrate with our other learning and collaboration systems?

Conclusion

Formal training has been stretched to its limit when it comes to successfully supporting learning for workers facing non-routine and complex work. Organizations must address the need for informal, learning systems that provide access to critical information and experience on-demand while addressing the need for collective intelligence strategies. Communities of Practice offer organizations a proven model for combining collaboration and learning to gain a significant competitive advantage