

INFORMAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER



By Eric Sauve

The dynamics of the North American workforce are rapidly changing, and that trend is altering how organizations facilitate the transfer of ideas and information to their employees. The millennial generation, globalization, and workforce diversity are changing the rules of traditional knowledge sharing, learning, and training in organizations of all sizes.

Evolution of the workplace

In the pre-industrial age, communities existed to connect people. People joined guilds to find mentors who would help them master their crafts. During the industrial revolution, workplace tasks were divided into small chunks to help employers define their employees' roles and responsibilities.

With the advent of the knowledge worker, the workplace has undergone another transformation. Now, jobs that involve the most complex type of interactions make up the fastest-growing segments in many industries.

A 2005 McKinsey & Company report titled, "The Next Revolution in Interactions," examines how workplace tasks are completed in developed economies. It describes a shift from valuing transactional interactions—those that are routine and involve noncreative 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. Gartner, a research institute, estimates that the frequency of nonroutine situations that require tacit knowledge will double between 2006 and 2010.

The reality is that in many industries in which situations change rapidly, formal learning once or twice a year doesn't provide employees with the experience or knowledge they need to find ongoing success on the job. This means that organizations must revamp their budgets and shift their resources from formal learning settings to informal situations in which the majority of learning actually takes place. (A recent study from Forrester Research detailed the rise of social computing—interactions continued through online or other technological means—and its impact on e-learning indicates that more than 80 percent of adult learning takes place outside of the classroom.)

While the changing nature of work is key, it is important not to overlook technology trends and how they influence the expectations and requirements of workers. The rise of social computing, based on highly innovative, new Web 2.0 technologies, such as MySpace.com, YouTube.com, Digg.com, and Facebook.com, offers a new paradigm for how we approach learning and knowledge sharing, and is beginning to have a powerful impact on corporate learning.

Informal knowledge transfer

As the importance of informal knowledge transfer grows, organizations are looking to communities of practice (CoPs) as a solution. A community of practice, according to Wikipedia.com, refers to the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest or problem "collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations."

CoPs build on existing formal content tools, such as portals, learning management systems, document management, content management, and knowledge management, as well as team and productivity tools. CoPs enable organizations to add a new casual dimension to their learning cultures.

This informal approach to learning offers a way for workers to not only consult learning materials from the company,

but also combine that information with learning materials they create and share through question and answer forums and professional networking opportunities in which peers, mentors, and subject matter experts solve problems.

Gartner has recognized CoPs as one of the five best practices for increasing organizational agility. CoPs deliver unique benefits to an organization. The peer-to-peer environment of CoPs fosters employees' natural trust in advice from someone in their situation. It also encourages emotional as well as instructional support.

CoPs focus on context-specific information sharing rather than advice sharing. Because users seek to solve immediate problems, on-demand information availability is enormously beneficial. CoPs also replace the one-way flow of information—typical of corporate training programs—with fluid, multi-pronged conversations.

CoPs are being used by the United States military to adapt quickly to new situations and address complex challenges. For example, CompanyCommand is an internal Army website in which junior officers who are facing professional challenges can seek guidance from their peers. With this informal learning device, soldiers can get advice quickly to help them make fast and accurate decisions on complex problems. Since its inception, CompanyCommand has received significant recognition as an example of how innovation and leadership through an informal network can yield incredible results.

John Deere, one of oldest industrial companies in the United States, relies on CoPs to drive innovation, efficiency, and lifelong learning by facilitating connections among knowledge workers.

Since implementing the current CoP technology in 2002, John Deere has built a network of 300 communities that covers a wide variety of topics from Six Sigma to mergers and acquisitions to the Deere Production System. Subject matter experts are available via email, face-to-face meetings, or through online conference.

The CoPs at Deere are based on practice areas, and cover best practices, training, mentoring, and peer resources.

Collective intelligence

To effectively leverage workplace trends, a new breed of technology is evolving from the principles of collective intelligence, which emerges from the collaboration and competition of many individuals. Time and time again, it has been proven that a large group of peers is more adept 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, editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, to explain new 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 also has changed the rules for the flow of knowledge in the workplace.

Most organizations are trapped in the economics of formal learning approaches, which can be expensive, time consuming, and inflexible. The economics of learning content are changing because organizations are tapping into the next source for enterprise learning content—the learners themselves—by empowering them to teach each other in community environments. With less organizational oversight, these groups can produce learning resources in a cheaper and more flexible way.

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Learning strategies

Successful communities are built on actual community process and structure, and the technology platform that underpins the system. In planning and building a community, there are multiple factors to consider from the initial planning stages of the project.

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 associated with their setup and maintenance. 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 after the launch of the community?

For many organizations, technology has proven to be a stumbling block in setting up a CoP. With the broad range of enterprise software systems offering some collaboration or learning functionality, organizations often implement a CoP based on systems designed for purposes other than communities.

In an effort to use existing systems or cut costs, organizations end up with limited functionality when they actually require significant customization.

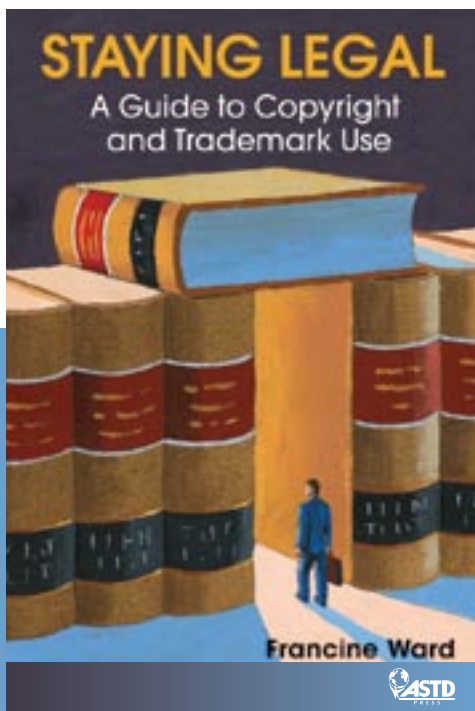
When addressing technology as part of an overall CoP strategy, companies should consider the following questions:

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

- Does the technology provide features and benefits that address the contributions of leaders, contributors, active participants, and occasional users in the community?
- How does this technology integrate with our other learning and collaboration systems?

Formal training has been stretched to its limit when it comes to successfully supporting learning for employees facing complex work. Organizations must address the need for informal learning systems that provide on-demand access to critical information while addressing the need for collective intelligence strategies. CoPs help organizations gain a significant competitive advantage.

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