THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL LEARNING ON BUSINESS & EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In the digital world of the 21st century, social learning is replacing scientific management as the one best way of managing people, programs and projects. Key principles that form the basis of social learning include the following developed in this paper: All of us know more than one of us. The person with knowledge is more important than the knowledge. Relationships make many more things possible.

INTRODUCTION

It took nearly a century to move the control of work out of the hands of management and into the hands of workers. Scientific Management, described and developed by Frederick Winslow Taylor, emphasized the importance of identifying the "one best way" to work – a system that worked exceptionally well during the industrial age. As indicated below, Taylor's description of scientific management emphasized the importance of management in selecting, training and helping men in doing specific tasks:

> Perhaps the most prominent single element in modern scientific management is the task idea. The work of every workman is fully planned out by the management at least one day in advance, and each man receives in most cases complete written instructions, describing in detail the task which he is to accomplish, as well as the means to be used in doing the work. And the work planned in advance in this way constitutes a task which is to be solved, as explained above, not by the workman alone, but in almost all cases by the joint effort of the workman and the management. This task specifies not only what is to be done but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it. … Scientific management consists very largely in preparing for and carrying out these tasks. (Taylor, 1911)

In the 21st century, scientific management has been replaced by social learning putting the power and responsibility for continuously improving work in the hands of the worker. It is the worker who knows best how to do his or her job based upon efforts to improve work performance.

SOCIAL LEARNING

Social learning has been described as "learning with and from others" (Bingham & Conner 2010). More specifically, social learning describes the behaviors in using the tools of social media to interact with people through social networking. It is this daily, ongoing process and practice that needs to be attended to by management. The system of management has moved from emphasizing command and control to supporting connecting and collaboration. In communicating

with one another, workers are able to determine the best way of doing their work by sharing ideas with other workers on a consistent and regular basis.

While scientific management is based on the idea that "… every single act of every workman can be reduced to a science" (Taylor, 1911), social learning focuses on the sharing of experience as a way of improving performance. The emphasis is on the dialogue and interaction within the group. "My research strongly suggests that the secret to understanding what makes a collaboration successful lies inside the box, in moment-to-moment interactional dynamics" (Sawyer, 2007). People learn from each other things that are not found in books and papers. The dynamic of discussion within a group stimulates ideas and innovations especially when participants speak their minds and listen to the words and ideas of others. "In both an improve group and a successful work team, the members play off one another, each person's contributions providing the spark for the next" (Sawyer 2007).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MOBILE LEARNING
Two other ideas related to social learning need to be understood and compared to one another. "Social media is a set of Internet-based technologies designed to be used by three or more people" (Bingham & Conner, 2010). One to one interaction is identified as narrowcast, one to small groups as niche-case and one to many as broadcast. Mobile learning is related to the location and mobility of individuals connecting and communicating with others, who may also be mobile. "Helping people when and where they need it is critical" (Quinn, 2011). In other words, mobile learning involves knowledge for learning "just-in-time" and "just-for-me." Technology used in social learning includes the use of computers and knowledge databases within an organization, laptops and cell phones in the hands of individuals, and websites, webinars and videos presented and stored on the Internet available to anyone.

CHALLENGES IN USING SOCIAL LEARNING
The advent of social learning is changing the way leaders and managers work with their employees and with one another. Giving up control and not being available to command the one best way to work within the organization is a reality in business today. Management's responsibility is to support workers in sharing ideas on how they have learned to work best in the jobs. The emphasis is on learning through dialogue and discussion in contrast to scientific investigation, discovery and training. While the latter are necessary and important, they are just the beginning or foundation of what employees need to know to function in the workplace. Continuous learning through more informal communication needs to become an ongoing practice in organizations. The knowledge, skills and value of employees increase through the process of sharing experience and ideas about performance improvement. This is in direct contrast to withholding such information to protect and secure one's job in an organization. Organizations benefit from ideas freely shared that might lead to innovations in work, products and processes. No one gains when nothing is shared. Managers need to move from command to support, from control to listening, to take advantage of the knowledge, skills and abilities employees gain through social learning.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES
The key idea is to provide the technology and establish the support for individuals to interact with each other in sharing information and ideas that would commonly not be available in training programs or in knowledge databases. Collaboration and communication among employees can

be formally set up within organizations involving workers from many or all departments using online technology wherever they may be located. One practice is to structure Whole Systems Transformation Conferences bringing workers throughout the organization to share ideas on problem solutions as well as best practices (Herman, 2002). Such formal systems give management both direction and control of social networking within the organization. Such activities can be developed into communities of practice with different groups of employees meeting informally at various times to continue the discussion on best practices.

INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES
Regardless of what social learning activities and programs organizations plan and develop, individual employees are likely to establish their own contacts for connecting, communicating and collaborating on problems and projects depending upon their interests and needs. "All of us know more than one of us" is the principle that forms the bases for such interactions. Besides establishing their own communities of practice, identified as "digital habitats" (Wegner, White & Smith, 2009), individuals may also be learning from other employees who have the knowledge they need to function effectively. While technology such as email may be used, the "knowledge shared is more important than the technology and the person with the knowledge is more valuable than the knowledge itself." The person sharing such knowledge can specifically focus on what the individual needs as well as putting this information in context, which usually is not available in organizational knowledge databases. Such knowledge is likely to be more current and relevant than much of what might be found elsewhere. This informal sharing of ideas adds more value to learning than the formal acquisition of information stored in documents and databases.

LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS
A common practice for establishing a learning organization is to collect ideas and information from subject matter experts and post this knowledge in a database available to all employees. It is also common to provide orientation and employee training workshops based on information contained in a company manual. Such activities are good when an individual first begins working in the organization but tend to be of less value when they need more relevant and specific information to improve their performance after they have been in their job for some. Interactions with other employees based on interest and need just-in-time and just-for-me are always more valuable than knowledge stored in a knowledge database. What benefits learners is "living content" that is relevant and meaningful to the individual seeking such knowledge. This is often social learning at its best and finest – meeting the needs of the learner exactly as desired and often available only in this way.

While technology makes such social learning more possible and available throughout an organization, such practices have been in existence through face-to-face interaction among employees. An excellent example of this is found in the practice of Xerox representatives discussing concerns and problems they encountered in working with various clients described as follows.

> While eating, playing cribbage, and gossiping, the reps talked work, and talked it continually. They posed questions, raised problems, offered solutions, constructed answers, laughed at mistakes, and discussed changes in their work, the machines, and customer relations. Both directly and indirectly, they kept one another up to date about what they knew, what they'd learned, and what they were doing. (Brown & Duguid, 2001)

Scientific management is no longer the one best way to do things. In the high-technology world of computers and cell phones, social media and mobile learning, the one best way to improve performance is to consistently connect, communicate and collaborate with others in sharing ideas and knowledge as needed in particular situations for individual workers. All of us know more than one of us and the person with knowledge is more valuable than either the knowledge or technology. Such relationships in sharing ideas and information make many more things possible than databases and documents. These are the kinds of communities of practice, digital habitats, available online and onsite, that build the learning organization to be competent and successful. This is the new science of management – social learning: continuous connecting for collaborating and performance excellence.

ENDNOTE

Many years ago when I was in school, my father told me about the way he worked as a machinist in a factory. His job was to cut carbon disks to a certain width measured with a micrometer pushing the handle of the blade used for the cutting. Because that machine was very heavy to operate pushing that blade back and forth for each cut, my father cut up some old inner tubes and wrapped them around the handle so that it would be easier to complete each cut. With this system he was able to work more quickly while producing high quality parts. He told me he had once received an order to make 2500 pieces with his cutting machine on the carbon material he was provided with. He was expected to turn in 500 completed pieces each day for that particular week. Because he was able to do his work much more quickly and effectively using the system he had created, he finished all 2500 pieces in one day. Since this practice was neither expected nor allowed by the foreman, my father had to hide most of his work and turn in only the 500 pieces required each day. He said he spent the other four days cleaning up his work area, working on his machine to make it easier to use, and not telling anyone else about what he was doing. He offered to teach some of the other workers in the factory how to make their work much easier by using his method, but no one was interested in working either that way for fear they would get into trouble with the foreman. He kept his method a secret sharing his system only with his brother throughout his time in the company. It was only after he had retired that he was invited to come back to the company and teach others how to use his method of high performance quality work.

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