

SOCIAL LEARNING

WHY NOW IS THE TIME

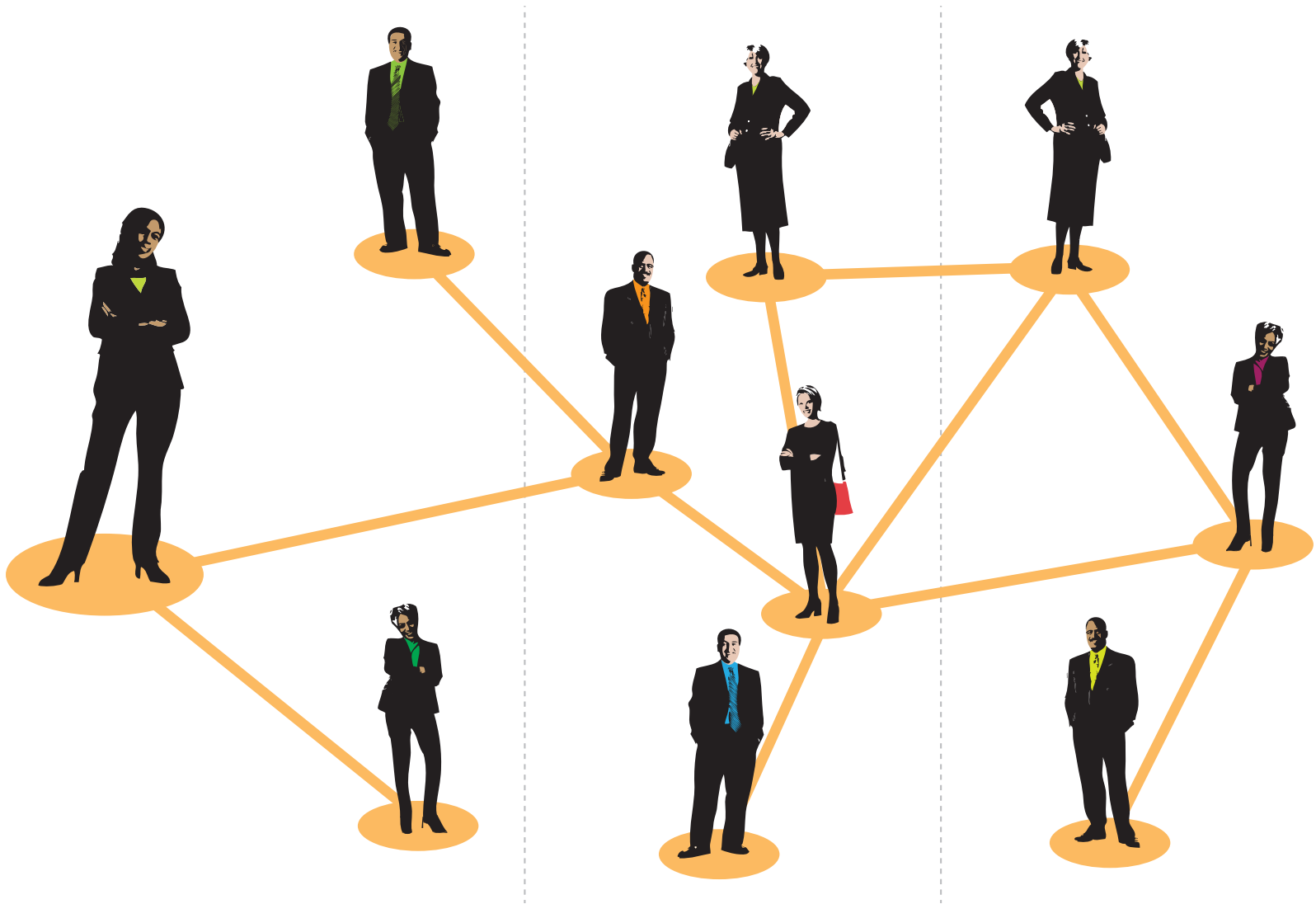


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INTRODUCTION



The future of organizational learning is being carried along by three streams that are ready to converge: intentional learning structures, social networking processes, and knowledge management systems. After more than 20 years of research on these three (sometimes competing) disciplines, one central and seminal conclusion is emerging: People prefer to learn important things from other people.

This was the central theme from Triple Creek Associates' 2009 Open Mentoring® Summit, attended by more than 40 learning professionals from 23 organizations. This paper expands on Triple Creek President and CEO Randy Emelo's keynote address, utilizing key input from the participant forums conducted that reinforces the central idea that a growing need exists to develop an integrated social learning system.

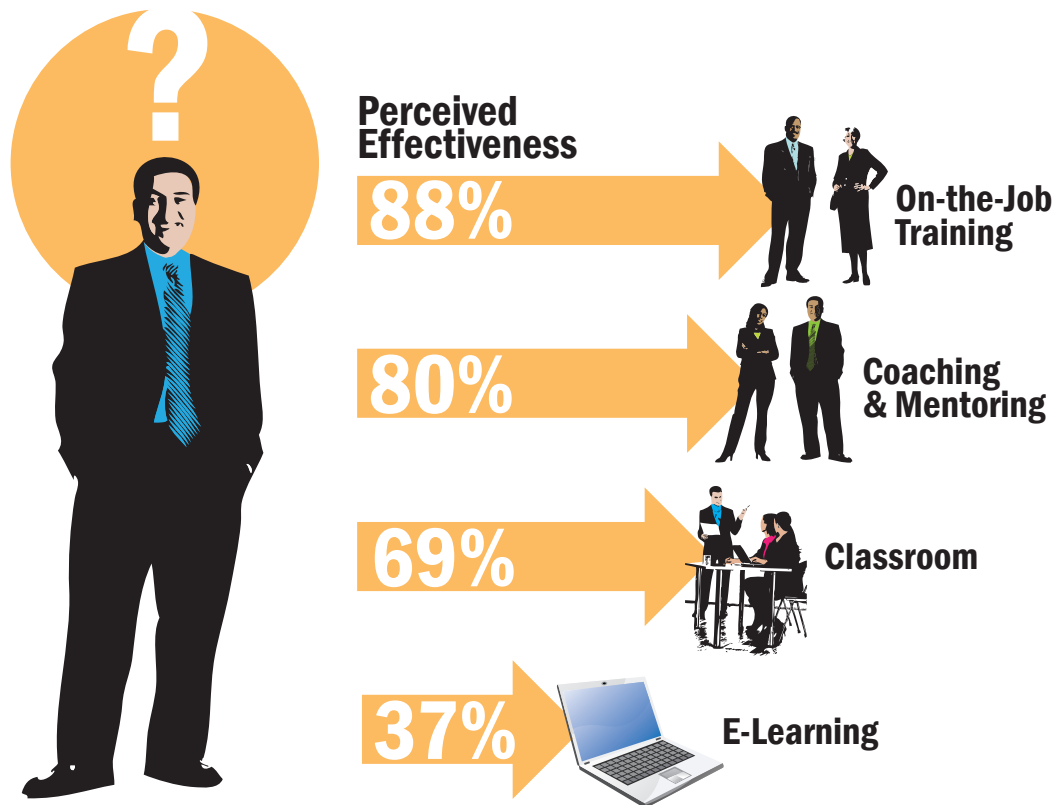
WHERE THINGS BEGAN

Beginning with Tom Allen's¹ work on knowledge management in the 1970s to more recent studies on social networking, researchers have concluded that learners will bypass expensive databases of stored information in order to find a person who can provide them with information they need to do their job. Rob Cross, a leading social networking researcher at the University of Virginia, says this:

In summarizing a decade worth of studies, Tom Allen of M.I.T. found that engineers and scientists were roughly five times more likely to turn to a person for information than to an impersonal source such as a database or a file cabinet.... Despite the ubiquity and increasing ease of access to vast stores of data, people still rely heavily on other people for information, problem solving and to learn how to do their work. As we move further into an economy where collaboration and innovation are increasingly central to organizational effectiveness, executives must pay more attention to the sets of relationships that people rely on for these purposes.... We studied information seeking from relationships that forty managers relied on for informational and learning purposes. We found that despite easy access to a world class knowledge management system and other accessible information sources, 85% of the managers indicated getting information that had an impact on the success of a project from their personal network.²

Triple Creek Associates' own research looked at this issue from the perspective of intentional learning structures. Our recent survey of more than 1300 web-based mentoring participants asked them to rate the effectiveness of various training and learning opportunities. Respondents overwhelmingly chose hands-on interpersonal methods of training as the most effective, with 88% rating on-the-job training as the most effective, with 80% rating mentoring/coaching as highly or mostly effective. E-learning ranked lowest, with only 37% of respondents rating it as highly or mostly effective.³

LEARNING STRUCTURES



While classroom training and e-learning have their place, contextualized learning is perceived as more effective. Why? Human interaction is critical to learning complex skills and having meaningful development occur. Organizations must tune in to this reality and offer ways for people to engage in social learning relationships.

A NEW MODEL: SOCIAL LEARNING SYSTEMS

This begs the question: How do we construct social learning systems so that they actually facilitate learning, support personal development, and increase organizational effectiveness? Again, the research gives us some helpful structures with which to evaluate the contributions of knowledge management, learning structures and social networking to the construction of a new social learning system.

SOCIAL LEARNING COMPONENTS

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Knowledge Management	Uses technology to open access to knowledge.	Does not provide enough focus on relational transfer of tacit knowledge.
Learning Structures	Creates intentional facilitation of learning.	Offers more focus on delivery of information than on contextualized learning.
Social Networking	Allows for development of growing relational networks around common interests.	Provides little focus on intentional learning.

Knowledge Management – The Importance of Access to Knowledge

The primary contribution of the field of knowledge management has been to use technology to increase access to knowledge. Knowledge is useless if it cannot be easily accessed in a timely fashion. The storage and retrieval of codified knowledge (person to document) became the focus of this field. According to AMR Research, American companies were projected to spend \$73 billion on knowledge management software in 2007, with that number increasing by 15% in 2008.⁴ We are sure this investment has some value, however the missing dimension has always been the transfer of tacit knowledge, which by its nature is best transferred from person to person.⁵ That said, leveraging technology to broaden access to knowledge sources, including people, is critical to the development of a social learning system.

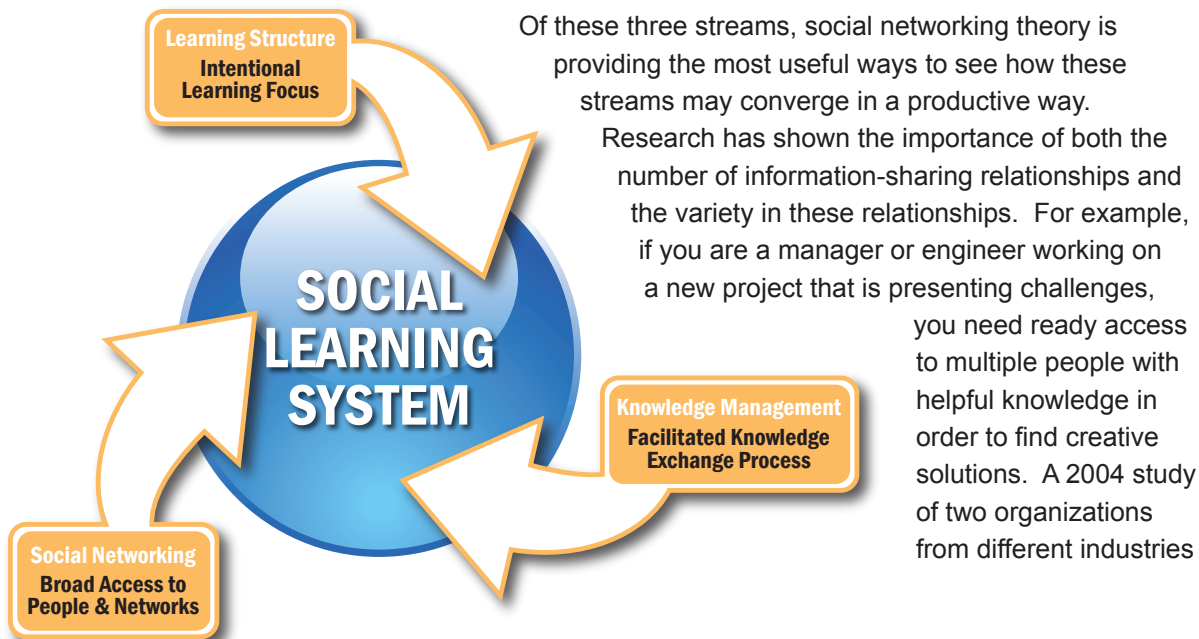
Learning Structures – The Importance of Intentional Learning

While a great deal of difference exists between classroom training and mentoring, they do have a central premise in common: the need for intentional learning. Without providing the structure and support for learning, the chances

of useful learning occurring are greatly diminished. Both classroom training and formal mentoring programs find that agreed upon objectives, goals and mutually understood expectations can be helpful in establishing learning focus and support. In recent years organizations have made sizable investments in e-learning as a way to make training more accessible and efficient to employees. *Chief Learning Officer* magazine reported, “e-learning is on the rise, and demand for it is expected to exceed \$52.6 billion by 2010 worldwide.”⁶ However, like knowledge management, the human connection to learning is often missing. This makes e-learning a useful way to give access to information, but an ineffective way to achieve valuable learning outcomes. E-learning often lacks the relational context needed for learning to be integrated into one’s work environment. Again, people need access to other people to contextualize learning and retain useful knowledge.

Social Networking – The Importance of a Variety of Relational Opportunities

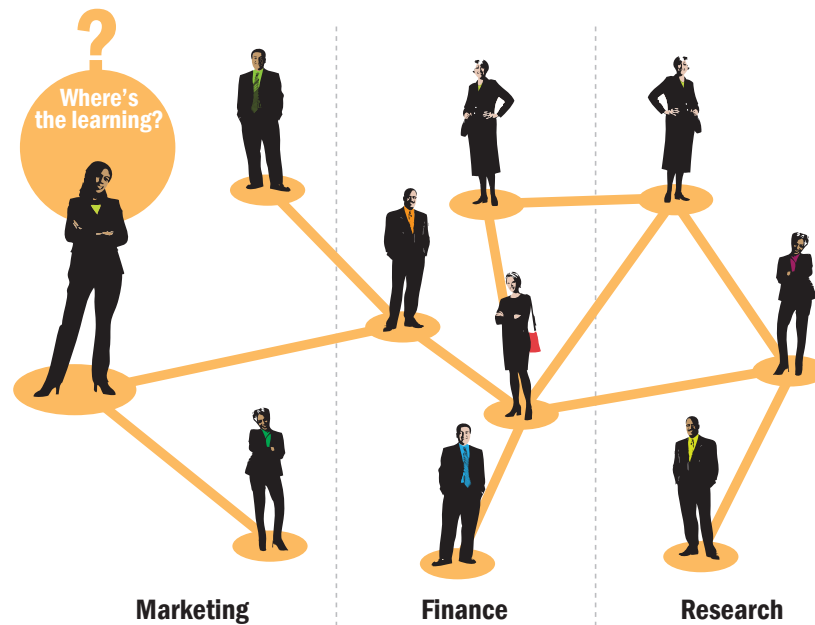
With the proliferation of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), people now understand the power of technology to create multiple relational opportunities. Boasting millions of participants, these networks expand virally by connecting people through common interests and common friendship ties. However, the amount of intentional learning that takes place varies widely with the sites and with the focus of self-forming groups that emerge. More intentional social learning processes such as communities of practice have been effective ways to form collaborative learning environments when properly managed and supported by organizational cultures. Yet, a great deal of energy must be expended to keep these communities engaged in intentional learning practices.



sought to measure actual performance ratings of employees engaged in knowledge intensive work against their positions on the existing social networks along which information flows in organizations.⁷ The study found that:

- Being connected directly to multiple people who are not themselves connected to each other increased employee performance. In other words, people who are centrally located on the social information pipeline will perform better than those who are more isolated.
- The awareness people have about the expertise of others and having access to them relationally increases their performance.
- The number of informational relationships that span outside of their immediate organization positively impacts their performance.
- The number of informational relationships that span to other departments in their organization increases their performance ratings.
- The number of informational relationships that span beyond the physical barriers of their specific locale increases performance.
- Greater access to those higher up the power ladder did not, in fact, increase their performance ratings. It was not the power position of the contacts that mattered, but the number and variety of contacts that made the difference.

SOCIAL NETWORKING



This important study suggests that organizations that want to boost employee performance should be promoting ways for workers to:

- Become more aware of the expertise of others.
- Connect with others in multiple learning relationships, forming robust information networks.
- Connect across departmental and geographical boundaries with those they might not come in contact during normal business processes.

E-MENTORING: THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL LEARNING

Our view is that the future of learning systems will begin with innovation on the *social* components, not the content components. While the expansion of e-learning, learning content management systems, and knowledge management databases have increased access to information, virtually all research says that new forms of social learning connection technology will lead the way to actual employee performance improvement. We believe that continuing to expand the conceptual understanding and the range of application of the idea of mentoring will be critical to implementing any social learning system that would:

- Utilize technology to increase access to knowledge in a relational context.
- Facilitate intentional learning relationships in a goal- and competency-centered process.
- Create a growing network of social learning opportunities.

The range of mentoring relationships is boundless. Consider these three options for creating a robust social learning system that uses the power of e-mentoring.

1. Expand the Use of One-to-One Mentoring as a Productivity Tool

The value of one-to-one mentoring relationships as a vehicle for learning and advancement has been clearly established in 30 years of research. In our view, any approach to social learning systems must address the ongoing need for people to form intentional one-to-one collaborative learning relationships. These relationships have the distinct advantage of confidentiality, where honest questions and feedback can be addressed without other social consequences.

Researchers Kathy Kram and Monica Higgins agree. As early as 2001, they saw the value in the social networking framework to re-conceptualize mentoring from a “one to one, high intensity modality” to a multiple mentor approach with the relational intensity varying with the purpose of the relationship.⁸ At that point

in time, Triple Creek had already developed the Learning Levels Model™ to emphasize the ways in which mentoring could be used for development and the need for multiple mentors for differing developmental purposes. By 2001, Triple Creek was also already utilizing web-based matching processes to facilitate broad, self-directed mentoring programs for corporations, allowing for a multiple-mentor approach. However, our experience has been that many organizations still have trouble viewing mentoring as anything other than a one-to-one, senior-to-junior, high intensity relationship matched by a third party for some organizationally directed outcome. This view of mentoring must be expanded for organizations to reap the full benefits of mentoring.

Fortunately, we are not alone on the mission to rethink and reposition mentoring. IBM published a book entitled *Intelligent Mentoring* in 2009 that chronicles the evolution of social learning processes at that company, which now include traditional mentoring, “just-in-time” mentoring, speed mentoring, reverse mentoring and communities of knowledge.⁹ Mentoring is being used as an umbrella term to describe a wide variety of collaborative, intentional learning relationships. We feel that this reconceptualization of mentoring is reaching a tipping point that may well be pushed over the edge by the recent emergence of social networking software.

It is the viral nature of social networking applications that is now enabling organizations to at least ask such questions as, “Could our employees actually be as excited about learning from each other as they are about posting pictures of their children on their Facebook page?” Our belief is that they can be as excited, if they have an efficient way to search for and connect with experts and fellow learners. We believe that two more social learning processes need to be integrated with one-to-one mentoring to form a true social learning system; these are group mentoring and situational mentoring.

2. Increase Learning Networks with Group Mentoring

Group mentoring occurs when a group of individuals comes together to collaborate and share learning focused on central development goals. These groups have typically been seen as a way to stretch limited mentor resources to accommodate multiple mentees more efficiently. However, the power of group mentoring is now being re-examined as an effectiveness process. Group mentoring provides an additional social learning component to the delivery and processing of content in a way that traditional classroom training methodologies cannot. Participants learn from leaders and other participants during meetings, but perhaps more importantly, they learn from one another between meetings, giving time to contextual learning. When combined with good collaboration technologies, a wide variety of organizational outcomes and needs can be addressed through group mentoring.

While the form and function of these groups may vary widely, they all share the common purpose of accelerating the learning and development of the members of the group. Organizations already use group mentoring for many reasons, as illustrated in the following chart. The three categories shown represent the type of mentoring groups we have observed.

TYPES OF GROUPS

	Relational	Topical	Procedural
Description	These groups can meet for both personal and professional development reasons, but the goals are more about building relational support networks and handling issues as they arise.	These groups can meet for personal or professional development, but the focus is pre-determined by the organization or group facilitator/instructor.	These groups generally meet for pre-determined outcomes set by the organization. They usually require invitation to participate and demand a high degree of accountability from the participants.
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open • Ongoing • Size depends on group needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open or permission-based • Ongoing or time bound • Size depends on facilitator capacities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permission-based • Time bound • Size depends on group outcomes

Adapted from Beebe, S.A., and Masterson, J.T. (1993). *Communication in small groups: Principles and practices*. Harper Collins, p.168.

At our 2009 Open Mentoring® Summit, clients suggested many ways to use group mentoring in these three broad categories. As they pointed out, some issues, such as the presence of multiple generations in the workforce, can be approached as ongoing relational groups or more directed topical groups. There are no right or wrong methods for this; it simply depends on your organization's need and structure. On the following are examples of how group mentoring can be used, as provided by mentoring champions and administrators at some of our current clients.

GROUP MENTORING EXAMPLES

Relational	Topical	Procedural
Affinity Groups	Cyber Security	Competitive Programs
Dual Military Parents	Functional Groups	Fast Track Development
Employee Networks	Generational	Introducing New Competency Models and Behavior
Generational (Gen Wired, Veterans/Former Military, Retirees, Sandwich Gen)	Leading Through Difficult Times	Leadership Development
Hi-po Alumni	Performance Appraisals	Lean Manufacturing/Six Sigma
Onboarding Alumni	Project/Program Management	New Onboarding Process
Work/Life Balance	Time Management	Reorganizations/ Restructures/ Integrations

As this list indicates, group mentoring can address a wide variety of developmental and learning needs. We also envision these groups spawning one-to-one mentoring relationships and ongoing collaborative learning relationships utilizing the next mentoring approach, situational mentoring.

3. Solve Pressing Issues with Situational Mentoring

“With today’s fast-changing technology, increasingly global, multi-cultural, and team-based work environments, no one mentor can possibly provide the guidance, exposure, and opportunities that are so essential to effectively manage current job challenges or prepare for future leadership roles.”¹⁰ So say researchers Kram and Higgins, and we certainly agree. Today’s employees often need quick access to advisors and experts who can provide them with very specific guidance on a finite topic. This is where situational mentoring plays a starring role.

Situational mentoring is as straightforward as it sounds. A mentee who has an issue or problem completes a short online form that helps them frame up what the situation is, what perceptions they have about the issue, and what they hope to gain from people who are willing to advise them. The person with the problem then opens up their issue to experts who can help, allowing the mentee to recruit a team of advisors to collaborate on their high-impact issue. With situational mentoring, learners can find help on problems, projects and innovations, and can move beyond their current social network to search for new nodes of knowledge

in the organizational network. This allows them to create a collaborative learning team formed for a single, high-value purpose.

We envision a wide variety of collaborative learning relationships emerging from this process:

- Short-term learning coalitions that end when the project is complete or the problem is solved.
- Ongoing open nodes of learning that function like communities of practice.
- Group mentoring interactions where expertise gained in situational mentoring is exported to a larger audience so more people can benefit from it.
- One-to-one relationships that can broaden or deepen the learning.

Situational mentoring is completely need-driven from the perspective of the individual worker. However, we did ask our 2009 Summit participants to project how they see their fellow employees using this process. The following list is a sampling of their ideas.

SITUATIONAL MENTORING EXAMPLES

Client Relations Issues

Crisis Management

Cultural Differences

Disciplinary Help

Employee Relations (difficult employee issues/conversations)

Generational Differences

Health and Wellness

How-To's (e.g., how to have feedback/performance conversations with employees)

Planning & Organization

Project Management

We envision all three processes—one-to-one, group, and situational mentoring—stimulating and reinforcing each other, creating a positive feedback loop that accelerates the development of intentional, social learning relationships across the enterprise.



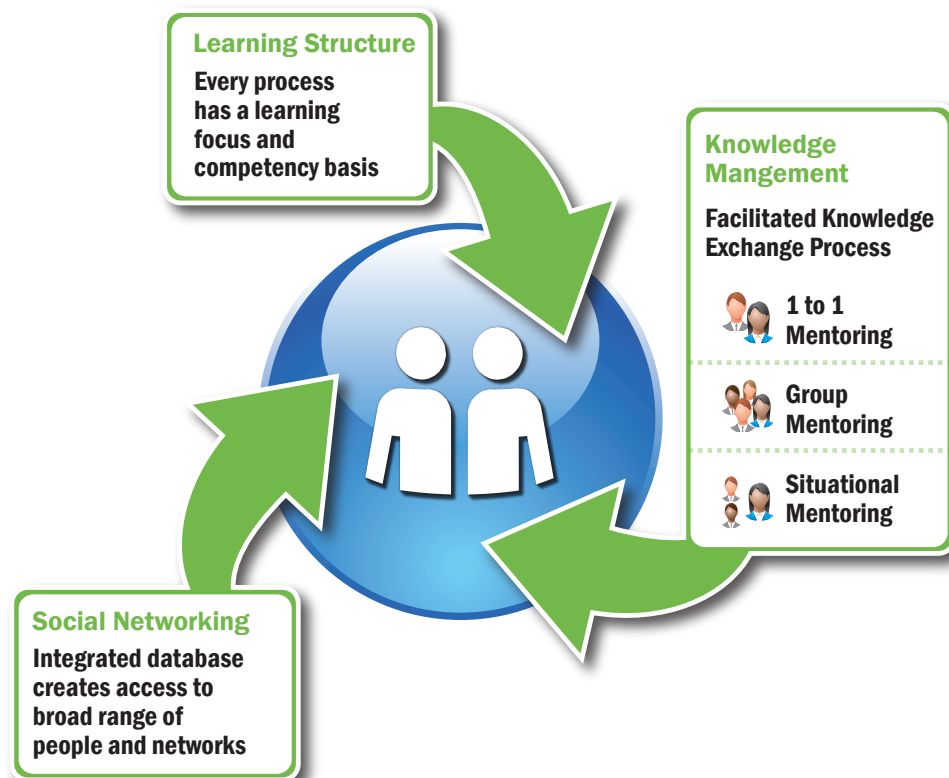
Mentoring Relationship Types

- One-to-One Mentoring
- Group Mentoring
- Situational Mentoring

CONCLUSION

Decades of research in the fields of knowledge management, learning structures and social networks are concluding that critical learning occurs best in a relational context. We believe that the future of organizational learning will focus on the development of a highly integrated, technology-supported learning structure that focuses on the expansion of socially based, intentional learning relationships. An expanded vision of mentoring is emerging that will allow multiple modalities of learning relationships based on the needs of learners and the expertise already present in the organization. We suggest that the term “social learning system” may describe this new approach. In fact, we are expanding Open Mentoring® to include an integrated suite of learning options to facilitate this revolutionary approach for accelerating these collaborative learning relationships (patent-pending).

OPEN MENTORING® A SOCIAL LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM



A system like this will provide all employees with a way to build learning relationships across the enterprise on an as-needed basis. It will leverage the vast amount of tacit knowledge residing in your own organization in intentional learning-focused relationships. It will also add the much needed social learning component to current learning practices, training content, and social networking attempts. With intentionality comes direction and focus; and with a social learning management system like Open Mentoring® comes diverse ways for people to connect, learn and share.

To learn more about our products or research, please contact us.

Toll-free 866-470-1603
 Direct 303-707-0800
 Email info@3creek.com
 Web www.3creek.com

ENDNOTES/REFERENCES



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