

# The Future of Learning

BY RANDY EMELO

To produce employees who are constantly retooling to meet job challenges, organizations need a new learning system driven by intentional learning connections.

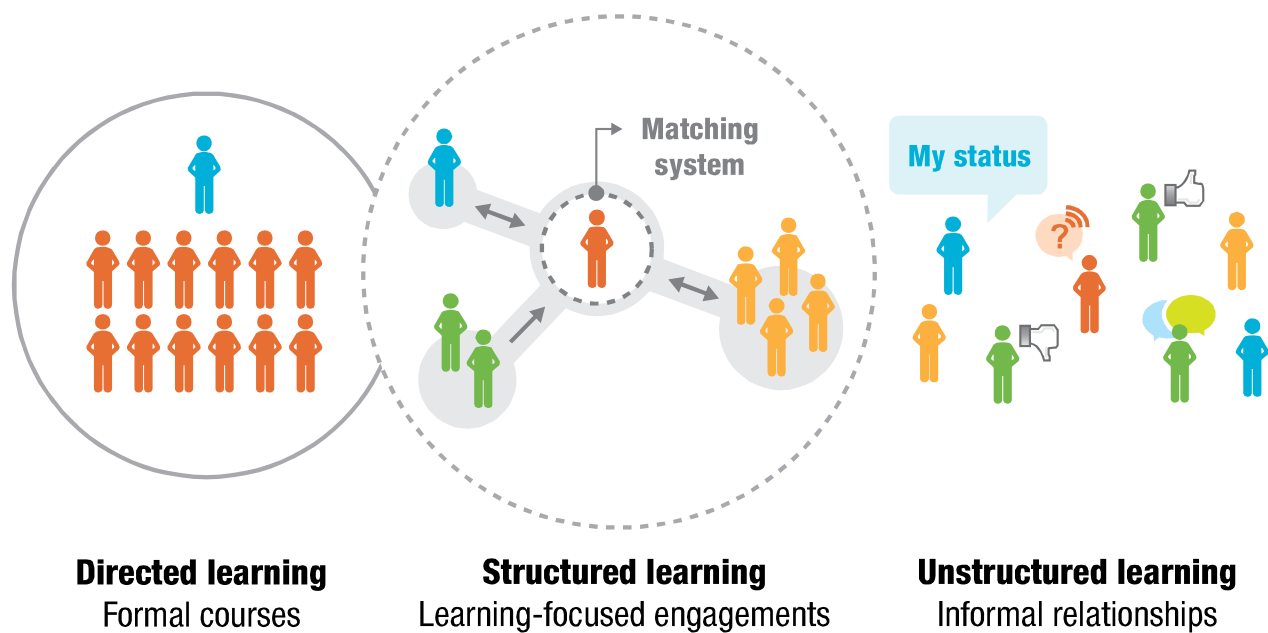
During the last 25 years, technology has dramatically changed the way people live, from the Internet and email to hand-held devices and digital entertainment. However, during that same time, little has changed in preparing workers for a globally connected world. The learning system itself is still the same content-driven, certification-based process developed in the Industrial Age of the 19th century. The only difference is today technology often supports training delivery.

However, the shifting workforce and workplace demand a change in the approach to learning. “More than 10,000 baby boomers turn 65 every day, and Gen X, that sits right behind them, is too small to fill the void,” said Karie Willyerd, co-author of *The 2020 Workplace*. “That means millennials, people born after 1977, will fill the gap. They are sometimes called digital natives because they expect to learn, to get knowl-

edge, and to connect with other people digitally.” This demand for virtual connections and knowledge sharing will grow more insistent as workforce demographics change. Consequently, static, content-driven systems will not be able to satisfy the digital natives who seek more dynamic and organic information to do their jobs.

To produce effective workers for tomorrow’s organizations, development needs to be centered in relational knowledge transfer, but in a way that aligns with organizational competencies, development goals and measurable learning gains. “With the impending retirement of many current leaders in the workforce, it is essential that companies focus on developing leadership capabilities at even lower levels in the organization so that there is a strong pool of talent that will be ready to move into those leadership positions,” said Missy Ballew, senior manager of global talent management at Hewlett-Packard (HP).

FIGURE 1: FUTUREScape OF ORGANIZATIONAL L&D



Learning leaders can pave the way for this type of development by shifting their focus to more connection-based learning that includes both traditional training approaches and ad hoc learning opportunities via Web 2.0 systems such as social networking and online collaboration systems. Holding it all together will be a true social learning system that provides enough structure to focus and measure learning, and allow for relationally driven connections. This is the future of learning and development (Figure 1).

### Four Changes Shaping Learning

This rapidly changing world requires people to be creative, imaginative, relationally connected, generous and confident when questioning the status quo. “In today’s transformational environment, the ability to adapt and change — to develop new innovations that lead to competitive advantage — are the keys to success,” said Anita Balakrishnan, vice president of executive talent management and career development for HP.

Four major changes are shaping creation of a new connection-based learning paradigm, and each is pushing learning toward relationally based, broadly networked, real-time, egalitarian relationships (Figure 2).

**1. From conformity to creativity:** Old training methods, developed to produce factory workers, reward compliance and conformity. This does not fit well in today’s workplace. Workers cannot wait for people up the chain to see and address

all issues. They must be able to find the resources they need immediately to make informed and creative decisions based on current realities. To do this they need freedom to explore, connect, collaborate and experiment, unleashing underdeveloped creativity in the workforce. “Companies will continue to face the challenge of filling the talent supply and demand gap that exists,” Ballew said. “With that in mind, HP focuses on developing and nurturing our talent from within to turn this challenge into an opportunity and to provide employees with unique opportunities to learn and grow in their careers.”

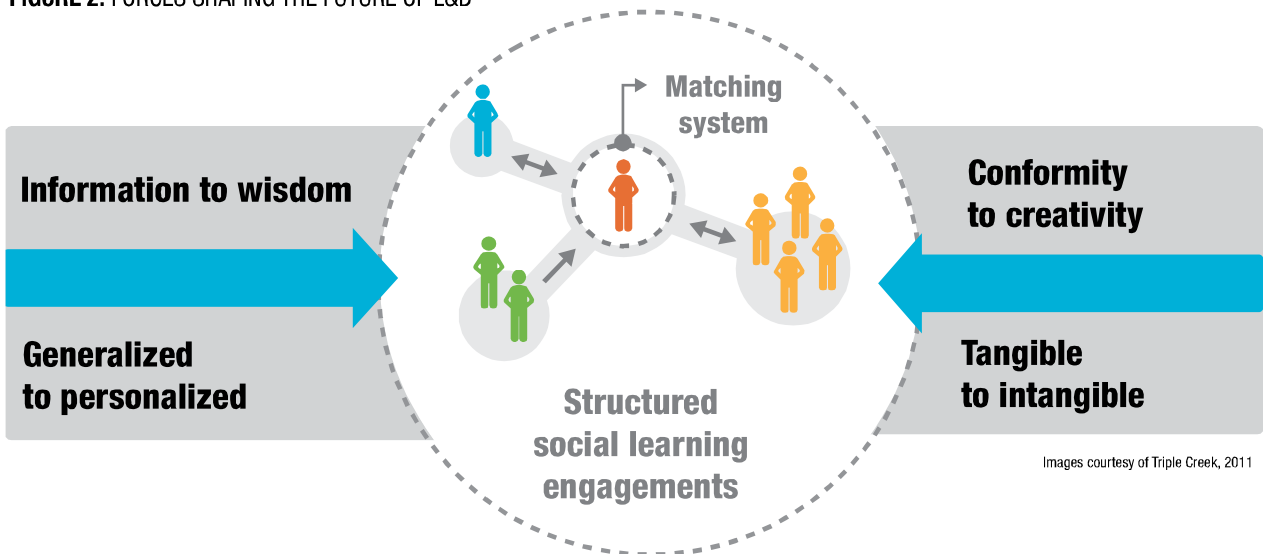
In his book *Linchpin*, Seth Godin describes people who use insight and creativity to challenge the status quo as artists. These artists envision possibilities and seek to innovatively connect people and ideas to form new solutions, rather than just move by rote as things come down the line as assembly line workers would do.

This need for creativity has led many organizations to search for ways to increase the amount of informal learning in their organizations. They know formal, organizationally controlled learning tends to produce compliance outcomes, while individually controlled informal learning has a greater

### ON THE WEB

To read about how the LMS is projected to change in coming years, visit [CLOmedia.com/articles/view/4060](http://CLOmedia.com/articles/view/4060).

FIGURE 2: FORCES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF L&D



Images courtesy of Triple Creek, 2011

chance to produce creative outcomes. To achieve the results needed in the 21st century, cutting-edge organizations seek to blend the strengths of both methods. Learning solutions of the future will harness the power of informal learning and make it more reliable and predictable for the organization by providing connecting structures that help focus and support intentional learning dialogues.

**2. From information to wisdom:** Thanks to the Internet, average workers have instant access to almost unlimited sources of information. Unfortunately, this access to information causes them to search and stare, often falling prey to information overload and never applying the information to make decisions. Yet

nation of best practices and increase workforce speed to competency. This shift from information to wisdom will give workers the knowledge they need to make the myriad informed decisions they face daily in the rapidly changing work world.

**3. From generalized to personalized:** The skills and knowledge of today's information workers grow obsolete quickly, within 12 to 18 months in many situations. This means people have to constantly gather new, timely information to keep up with new trends and emerging approaches to work in their field to stay relevant. Given the vast amount of information available via the Internet, it can be daunting to comb for the relevant bits of data

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companies today need people across the workforce to leverage wisdom, not just be skilled at accessing information. "At HP, innovation is imperative, and we know that the best ideas come from our people," Balakrishnan said. "The big question is, how do we harness ideas from our employees and ensure we're executing on them to deliver value for our customers? This requires our workforce to be flexible, adaptive and integrated in a way that allows employees to work together seamlessly."

Content must be understood and processed within the worker's context before it is useful. Wisdom is the ability to apply acquired knowledge in practical ways to one's business context, and it is gained the same way that craftsmen have learned their trade over the centuries: from other people and practitioners, not from a database. In a 2009 Triple Creek research study, "Impact of Web-based Mentoring on Productivity and Effectiveness," respondents were asked to rank the effectiveness of five common learning strategies. The result: Web-based mentoring users rated on-the-job training and mentoring/coaching as more effective than e-learning — 88 percent and 79 percent respectively vs. 37 percent — as a way to gain contextual wisdom.

Most organizations know they should do more to invest in solutions that provide just-in-time access to people who have experience or expertise that can help learners address their most pressing problems. They are looking for new learning methods and systems that allow both learners and subject-matter experts to initiate learning engagements that speed the dissemi-

nation of best practices and increase workforce speed to competency. Willyerd said younger workers use their peers as knowledge filters to address this situation. "People in college are essentially forming social guilds to keep up with the huge growth of information. It takes a guild to sort through the vast amounts of information now at our fingertips," Willyerd said. If organizations want to remain competitive, they need to help their employees increase their speed to competency significantly to keep up with this pace.

The old curriculum-based learning model used a generalized method to efficiently teach many people the same material, but it is too slow to keep up with the demands of workplace realities today. It can take 12 to 18 months to research, develop and deliver content through virtual or classroom training. By the time it is delivered, it is outdated and learning needs have shifted to the next new thing. On top of this, course material may not be meaningful to many learners because it is not personalized to their actual work context.

With the new era of connection-based learning, all content can be personalized to meet the learner's exact needs, having a greater impact on them as they transfer that knowledge into job solutions. For example, someone new to management would not simply go to an orientation session or complete an e-learning module to learn management techniques and professional skills. Instead, they would have access to someone who has made the transition to a management role in the past few years and who understands the nuances of the job shift in their particular organizational context. The content of

whatever formal learning was required is processed in the context of actual work and conversations with this adviser.

Every worker could leverage this type of learning method, building flexible learning networks that shift with each individual's changing learning needs. These constantly growing networks of collaborators and advisers — the most powerful of which are diverse in function, experience and background — can be resourced as needed. "Leaders need to be able to leverage the diverse perspectives of cross-cultural teams and inspire their employees to think outside of the box to generate the most innovative ideas," Balakrishnan said. Social learning systems must provide the structure and support to build these networks and foster collaborative engagements where individuals develop the skills they need to be effective and to advance in their careers.

- 4. From tangible to intangible:** The movement from the Industrial Age to the Information Age brought with it a shift from tangible assets and outputs to intangibles such as knowledge and expertise. This makes it more challenging for organizations to measure their assets. It's no longer a matter of how many cogs a company has in the warehouse, but more an issue of how much knowledge they have housed in their workers' brains. This has led many learning leaders to wonder: How can we measure the impact of learning engagements in terms of value to the organization and individuals' development progress?

In this new knowledge-driven era, someone who is an expert but hoards his or her knowledge is not as valuable as someone who is still learning, but who willingly shares knowledge to help others improve. To assess value today, companies can measure people's competency development, along with the knowledge they shared and their impact on others in their learning network. Organizations also can use this process to identify and address competency gaps across the enterprise, going so far as to suggest learning connections and leverage experts in the organization as advisers and teachers. Progress could be measured in terms of the aggregate increase made by people in that competency area.

### The Revolution Starts Now

Building intentional learning networks will be how tomorrow's knowledge workers get their work done, and organizations must support them in this endeavor. In tomorrow's organizations, workers will tie learning goals to the development of organizational competencies in their collaborative networks, which will increase the personal effectiveness of the individual, the intellectual capital of the enterprise and the performance of entire learning networks.

"Technology has come a long way in allowing companies to offer e-learning solutions, but this platform is also being used more frequently to connect and engage employees, facilitate idea generation and promote relationship building through mentoring and other professional communities," Ballew said.

Companies that want to be successful must make a radical shift in their approach to learning and development. The curriculum and certification approaches of the past are too restrictive and slow to keep pace with the rapid shifts in the global economic landscape. Simply adding social networking to the mix is not proactive or structured enough to speed the dissemination of best practices and wisdom across the enterprise.

To produce creative, wise and fearless employees who are constantly retooling to meet their job challenges, organizations need a new learning system driven by intentional learning connections. Technology will be used to help guide these engagements, expand access to the accumulated wisdom of others, and track progress toward closing critical competency gaps. But in the final analysis, it is the people who will make the difference in transforming information into contextual wisdom and revolutionary creativity. [CLO](#)

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