

Social Learning Adoption in Small & Mid-Sized Organizations

The State of Employee Training

WHITE PAPER



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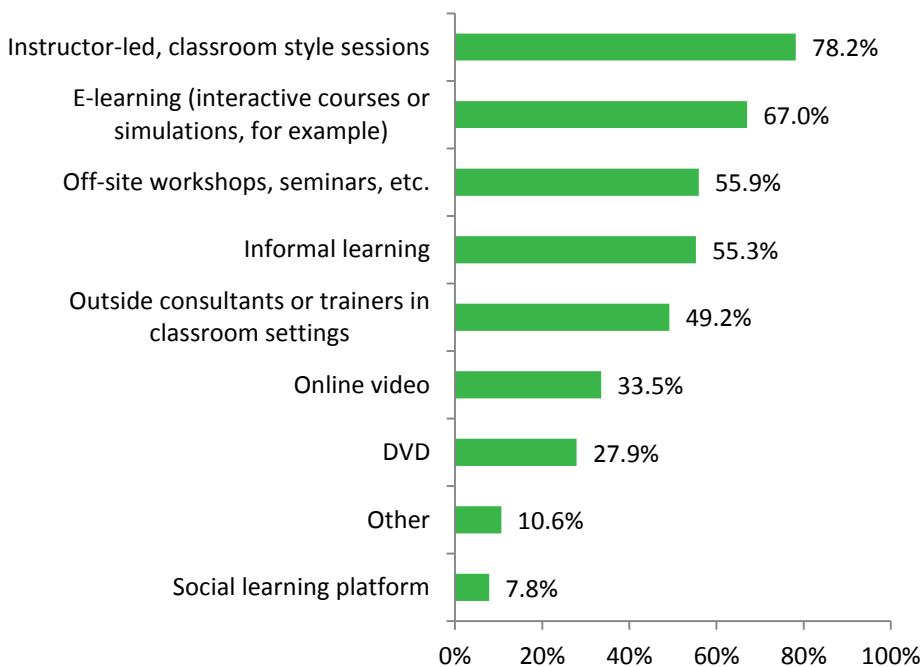
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THE STATE OF EMPLOYEE TRAINING – HOW DOES SOCIAL LEARNING FIT?

From September 15 through October 18, 2011, BizLibrary conducted a market survey in an effort to learn more about current efforts to incorporate social learning into organizational training programs and whether organizations are using social learning tools or platforms as a part of their employee training and development efforts.

The results of this survey show that organizations are using blended learning solutions, but that social learning tools are not yet an important part of the mix. The chart below represents the current elements of training programs from the entire survey.



As you can see, instructor-led training remains a cornerstone of employee training programs for 78% of the respondents. E-learning is a part of employee training programs for 67% of the total respondents, and one in three participants use online video in employee training programs.

55.3% identified “informal learning” as a part of their employee development programs. The reality is that every organization’s employees learn more informally than in formal training programs. It’s interesting that just over half of the total survey identify informal learning as a part of employee training and development.

Informal learning also has become a key activity and not only because of foreseeable economic hardships and formal training as the model to aspire to as training becomes intrinsic to everyday interactions and work cultures. Companies see that most learning occurs informally and that action learning and collaboration are vital areas of a learning organization.

Chief Learning Officer, January 2009, *The Training Industry in 2009: A Look Ahead*.



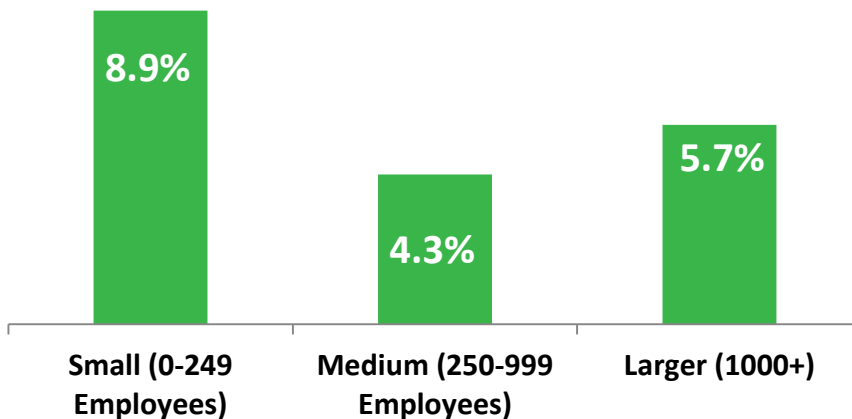
Bringing up the bottom of the choices on the survey is “social learning platform.” Only 7.8% of the survey participants identify a social learning platform as a part of their employee training and development programs. However, it’s small organizations that are adopting social learning at the highest rate. In our survey sample, 13.9% of organizations with fewer than 50 employees currently use some form of social learning platform.

This data is interesting, especially in light of the attention social and informal learning garner in HR and training industry publications. From the sheer volume of writing on the topic, it would be reasonable to assume social learning platforms are already in use in many organizations. The results from BizLibrary’s survey indicate otherwise. It looks like those organizations that are using some form of social learning platform might be the early adopters of social learning platforms. We believe such tools will become a very important element of “best practices” learning organizations in the future. The market looks like it’s heading towards a 20% rate of adoption in the next 12 months – at least among this survey sample. That’s combining the 7.8% of organizations now using a social learning platform with the 12.8% planning to add a social learning platform in the next 12 months.

TRAINING PROGRAM ELEMENTS COMPARED BY EMPLOYEE COUNT

Let’s start with a quick overview of the use of social learning platforms or tools.

Usage of Social Learning Platforms

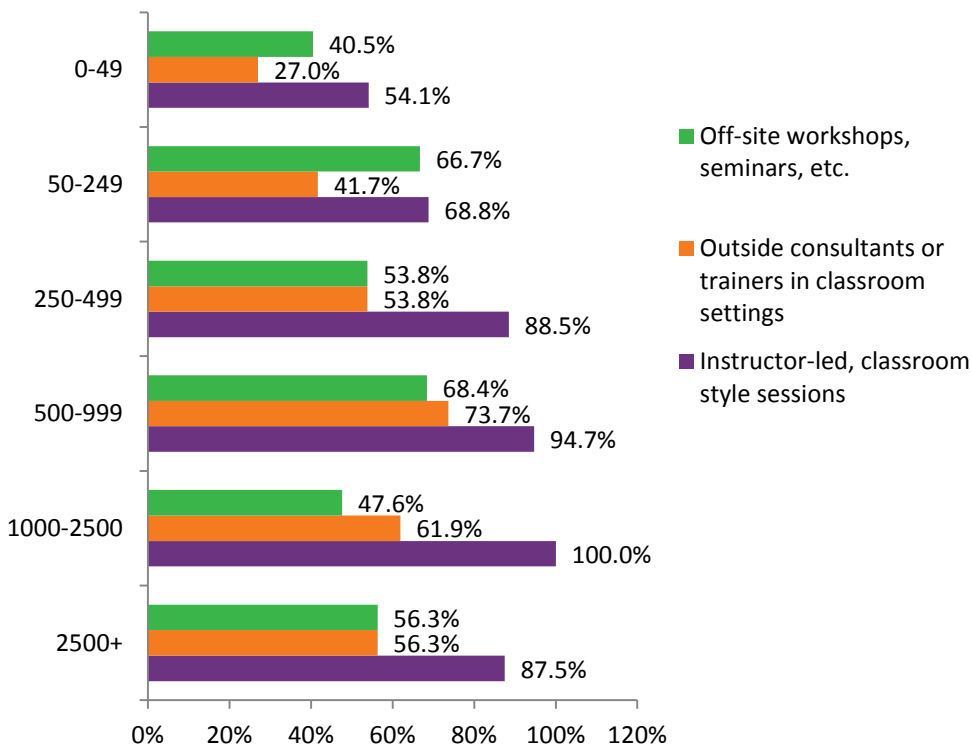


Social learning really isn’t new. Social learning theory and a wide recognition of the value and power of social learning has been around for decades. In fact, social learning is as old as human beings. We’ve always learned from our colleagues, classmates, family, social situations and each other. We learn by observing, communicating and imitating. What’s new in “social learning” is the blending of social media tools and employee training, learning and engagement.



The rate of usage for the entire sample was only 7.8%, and as the data shows, only the smaller organizations (fewer than 250 employees) participating in the survey exceed that overall rate of adoption for social learning platforms.

The mix of training and employee development elements varies quite a bit depending upon the size of the organization. The survey results confirm that larger organizations rely heavily upon formal training methods like, instructor-led sessions and online training. Larger organizations also use outside resources, either consultants or off-site programs, at a significantly higher rate than smaller organizations. Smaller organizations typically have to be more creative in how they spend employee training and development budget dollars, so we see a greater mix of resources, and less reliance upon formal training elements we usually associate with large-scale training departments, like instructor led sessions or external resources like workshops and consultants.



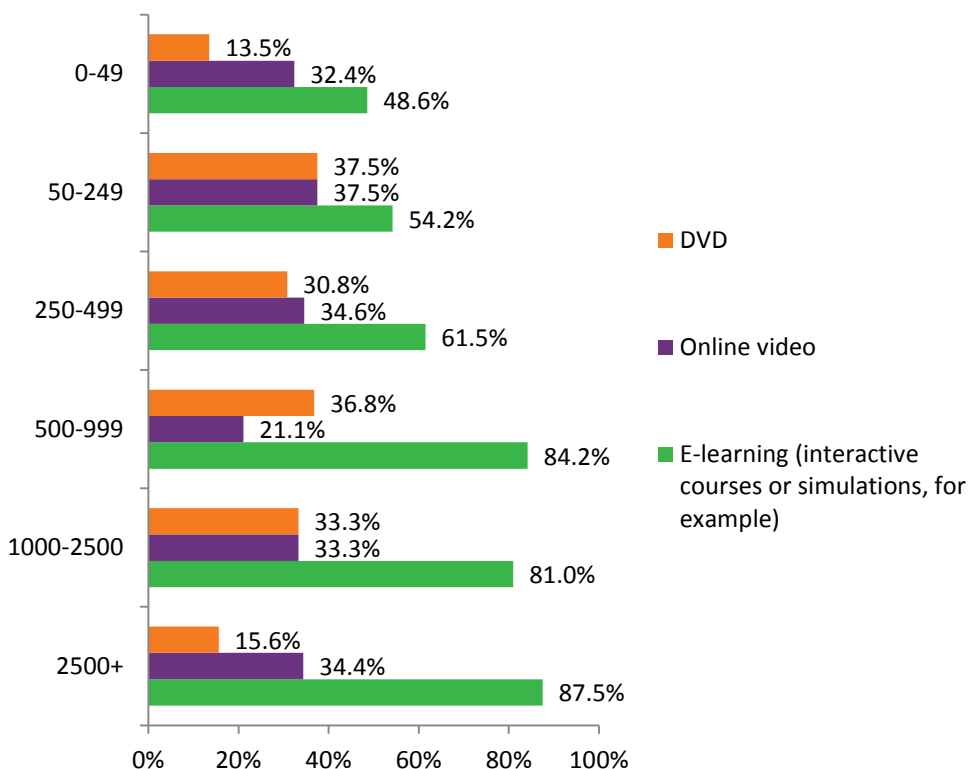
As the data illustrates, smaller organizations use formal, instructor-led sessions less than larger organizations – 54.1% for the smallest organizations (0-49 employees) and 68.8% for organizations with 50-249 employees. Once we move towards mid-sized and larger organizations, the use of ILT sessions in employee training is much higher – 88.5% (250-499), 94.7% (500-999), 100% (1000-2500) and 87.5% (2500+)

According to a Chief Learning Office Survey published in February 2011, instructor-led-training is the **primary delivery method** in 66% of participating companies with fewer than 2500 employees.

CLO Media 2011



Technology based training follows a very similar pattern as the chart below illustrates.



E-learning courseware is an element in at least 81% of the organizations in the survey with 500 or more employees. For organizations with 250-499 employees, 61.5% of the survey sample uses e-learning, and the percentages are even lower for the smallest organizations in the survey sample: 54.2% for organizations with 50-249 employees, and only 48.6% of the smallest organizations or those with fewer than 50 employees. E-learning usage appears to be closely associated with the level of formality and structure within an organization for its employee training – the larger the organization, the more likely it is to have a training department and access to web-based tools like e-learning. Smaller organizations still provide employee training, but they appear to make use of a wider variety of tools.

What is most striking about the use of technology based training resources, is the growing use of online video, and the fact that there is not any meaningful difference in the use of online video based upon organization size. The smallest organizations (0-49 employees) have very similar usage as the largest (2500+) – 32.4% compared to 34.4% respectively. In fact, with the exception of organizations with 500-999 employees at 21.1%, each other size grouping in the survey ranged between 32.4% and 37.5% in the use of online video.

Teachable moments point to “just in time” instruction providing relevant information and skills when the mind is most ready to receive them.

Building Expertise: Cognitive Methods for Training and Performance Improvement, Ruth Colvin-Clark




The ongoing use of training DVD's might be a surprise to some people, but training DVD's (formerly VHS tapes) have been a mainstay of BizLibrary's business for 15 years. The largest and smallest organizations are at similar use levels – 15.6% for organizations with 2500+ employees compared to 13.5% for organizations with fewer than 50 employees. For the middle four groups in the survey, the use of DVD's for employee training is between 30.8% and 37.5%.

Formal training methods continue to dominate the employee training and development world. We see differences in the mix of various formal training elements based upon organization size, and the differences are logical and make sense. Larger organizations are far more likely to have training departments or designated trainers, meaning they are making a more substantial investment in “high personal touch” training programs and events, *e.g.* off-site programs, outside consultants, etc.. Organizations across a wide spectrum of sizes make great use of technology-based resources, whether online or DVD. There is a clear difference in the use of e-learning across organizations by size, but we see little to no difference in the use of online video for employee training across the survey sample. This result is not surprising given the YouTube world in which we live, and the need for shorter more targeted online training content. We fully expect to see video continue its rise in prominence and emerge as an even greater element of employee training efforts – regardless of organizational size.

Video greatly enhances the message quality and experience... Content delivered with video has a much higher retention rate.

“Tap the Potential of YouTube for the Enterprise,” Forrester Research, Jan. 2009



There is little to no difference, whether a large or small organization, in the use of online video for employee training.

The most surprising part of the survey results might be the level of recognition of the role of informal learning. Employees learn more about how to perform their jobs from informal learning than formal or social learning. There is a substantial body of research indicating upwards of **70% of all workplace learning is informal**. But the percentages of organizations reporting informal learning as a part of employee training and development range from a low of 46.2% (259-499 employees) to a high of 56.8% (fewer than 50 employees). There simply was not much difference between the organizations by size. This may very well be a reflection of the confusion in the market about the terms “social learning” and “informal learning,” and we’ll cover that a bit later.



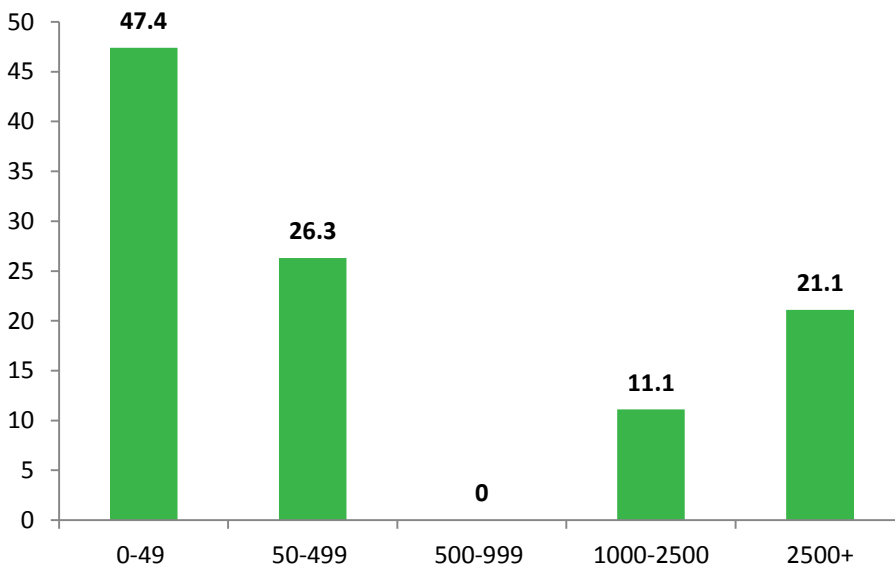
SOCIAL LEARNING TODAY

There are essentially three choices for social learning platforms in today's market:

1. Free web-based tools like Yammer, wiki's, blogs, etc.
2. Third-Party Vendors
3. Internally Developed Tools

Not surprisingly, the results of the survey vary based upon the size of the organization. Of the smallest organizations (fewer than 50 employees) who are currently utilizing a social learning tool, nearly one-half of them make use of free web-based tools. Over one in four – 26.3% of organizations with 50-249 employees use some sort of free, web-based tool for social learning. This level of adoption is likely a reflection of the need to be creative and find no-cost and low-cost ways to facilitate employee training and development. tools.

Percentage Using Free, Web-Based Tools



No respondent to the survey in organizations with between 500 and 999 employees said they were using free, web-based tools, but these same organizations represent the highest percentage of respondents using an internally developed platform at 38.5%.

Top 100 Social Media Tools for Learning 2011

1. Twitter
2. YouTube
3. Google Docs
4. Skype
5. WordPress
6. Prezi
7. Moodle
8. Slideshare
9. Dropbox
10. Diigo

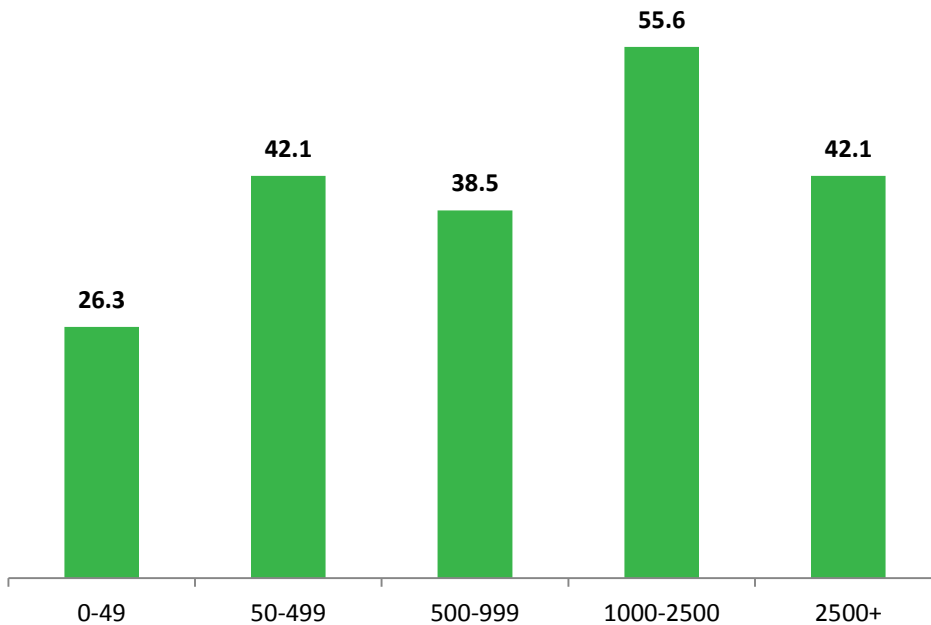
Source: C4LPT for the entire list [click here](#).



Free is always very tempting, and for many organizations free tools look like a social learning solution for the present. However, free, web-based tools also carry some risks. When your employees are sharing information outside your internal system's security and firewalls, you run the risk of inadvertent disclosure of confidential information, and a lack of candor or utilization due, in part, to the risk of disclosure. Many of the organizations in the survey using social learning platforms say they are using third-party vendors, and one of the best reasons to do so is to encourage employees to participate while protecting your confidential information.

When asked about using third-party vendors, the usage varied by organization size, and we believe this is largely due to the perceived (or real) expense of some third party solutions. The next chart illustrates the use of third-party vendors by organization size. The smallest organizations responding to the survey show the lowest use of third party social learning solutions at 26.3%. The remaining four groups by employee size range from 38.5% (500 – 999 employees) to 55.6% (1000 – 2500 employees). While the overall percentage of organizations who participated in the survey using social learning platforms was low at only 7.8%, there appears to be a strong preference for third party tools among the current, and early, adopters of social learning platforms.

Use of Third-Party Vendors



Panelist Jeff Cobb, associate director of workforce development at Verizon Wireless, said that after two years developing it, Verizon is now moving social learning outside of workforce development and into other divisions of the company. According to Cobb, **social learning will one day be as essential as email.** "People will laugh that it was ever questioned," he said.

Highlights from Day One of the Spring 2011 CLO Symposium

SOCIAL LEARNING – WHAT IS IT?

As part of the survey, we provided an opportunity for respondents to comment, and we specifically asked for comments from respondents about their organizations' decision to either use a social learning platform or not. The responses are interesting and enlightening about the work needed to bring some clarity and understanding to the market.

We indicated before that we thought the results of our survey may reflect some of the overall confusion in the market about the terms "social learning" and "informal learning." The terms are not technically synonymous, but a fair amount of the writing over the past 3-5 years use the terms almost interchangeably. The comments confirm this confusion. One response got right to the point. *"Have no idea what social learning is."* Another expressed the confusion pretty well. *"It seems we do not have a social learning platform."* (Emphasis added to both quotations). Well – your organization either has a social learning platform or it does not. The fact that the participant wasn't sure is not the fault of the respondent - far from it. Those of us in the employee training and development industry simply need to do a better job of explaining exactly what social learning is and why it is so important in today's knowledge-based economy.

We believe the really important to understand that formal learning is different than informal and social learning. Worry about the differences between informal learning and social learning does not really help organizations trying to maximize employee learning, development and training. Charles Jennings offers this excellent, simple and easy to understand definition of social AND informal learning.

Social and informal learning is:

The learning that occurs (mostly) Outside the Classes, Courses and Curriculum model.

<http://www.slideshare.net/charlesjennings/8-reasons-to-focus-on-informal-social-learning>

As we noted with the very first chart, only 7.8% of the total survey responses indicate that a social learning platform is a current part of employee training and development efforts within the participants' organizations. 55.3% of the survey respondents identified "informal learning" as a part of their current employee training programs. So – something important is happening, and it's crucial learning professionals come to grips with effective methodologies and tools to effectively harness the power of informal and social learning in the workplace.

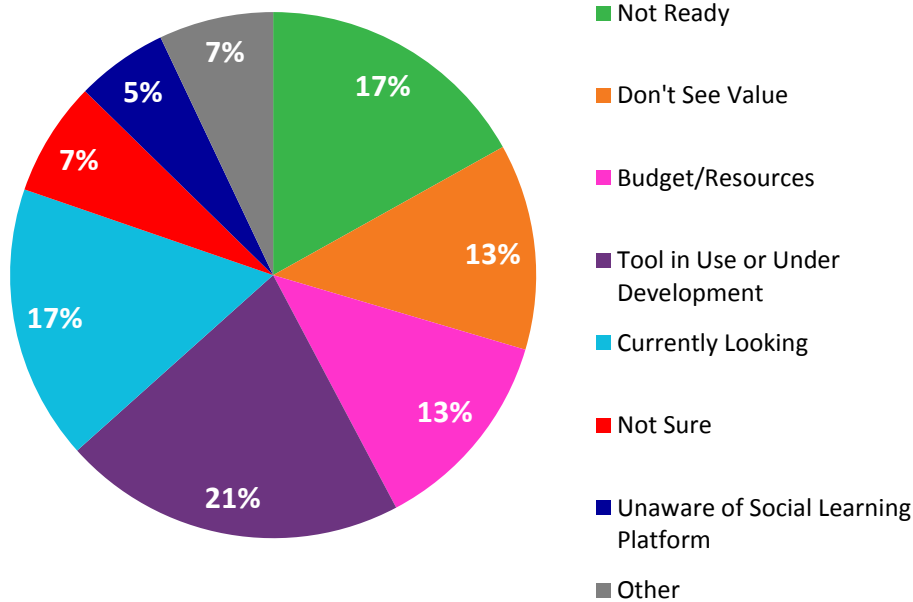
It's not a replacement for training or employee development. Social learning can supplement formal training and development in the classroom or online. It complements training and covers knowledge that formal training is rarely able to provide.

Bingham, Tony. "Dealing with Critics and Objections". Social Learning for Learning Professionals. ASTD. © 2011.



The reasons respondents offered for their organizations' current use or nonuse of a social learning platform are varied and interesting. Most of the 70+ comments fell into five broad categories as illustrated by the chart below.

Reasons for Current Approach to Social Learning Platform



About 1 in 5 of the participants who supplied comments, work in organizations either currently using or currently developing a social learning tool or platform. For organizations not currently using a social learning platform, the stated reasons fall into four primary categories:

- **Organization simply isn't ready (17%)**
- **Currently looking at acquiring a social learning platform or implementing a solution (17%)**
- **Budget (13%)**
- **Don't see value for organization (13%)**

Engaging senior leaders in social learning is about positioning it well within the organization. It is critical to demonstrate clearly how social learning is going to further the organization's goals and strategies. This does not necessarily mean using a traditional return-on-investment (ROI) calculation. It requires alignment to what's important to the organization, and often that includes

- retaining institutional knowledge
- attracting and retaining people
- planning for succession
- connecting dispersed employees
- solving complex problems collaboratively
- providing an integrated and holistic approach to people development.

Bingham, Tony. "Dealing with Critics and Objections". Social Learning for Learning Professionals. ASTD. © 2011.

Here are some sample comments about organizational readiness and not seeing or understanding the value of social learning tools.

“ Our organization just "isn't there yet." I am hopeful that we will have a functioning "real" intranet within the next 12 months. Currently we have a website for our employees that has links to information, but no social aspect to it. I will be lobbying for our President... and a couple of VPs... to have blogs, and for some "chat" areas for our sales personnel.

Our company does not support the idea, feels that any social media in the workplace is a distractor from getting work done. Upper management has a very old way of thinking.”

Our culture/population will not fully support it at this time.

The organization is not looking mostly due to not understanding the concept or possibilities. However, I am always looking to enhance and/or expand current learning initiatives.

”

The comments indicate pretty clearly that it's a blend of culture and leadership in organizations not ready to embrace social learning tools. It's interesting that some of the comments link the acceptance of social learning to the acceptance of social media by employees and/or leadership. We believe this linkage is appropriate and important.



Social learning is about learning through interaction with others.

Social media, at its very core, is about user-generated content. So is social learning. Think back to our definition: social learning is about learning through interaction with others. Social learning is not about content generated or presented in a classroom or traditional e-learning course. It is about information we gather and absorb that is generated by our fellow employees. That's why social media tools serve as excellent models for the top social learning platforms on the market today. So an acceptance and use of social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, blogs, Linked In, etc., is a great indicator of a willingness on the part of employees to embrace and use a social learning platform.

A significant number of comments came from survey participants working in organizations taking a real look at or considering acquiring a social learning tool. These comments are as interesting as the comments from organizations that are not quite ready for social learning. Here are just two illustrative samples.

“

We have several offices spread over several states and need a mechanism for education and training that doesn't involve travel.

We have identified the need to move into this area to better ‘knowledge share’ across an organization that has multiple domestic and several international operations.

”

The first comment applies with equal force to online training, but it's interesting to note the participant links social learning platform directly to employee education and training. The second comment specifically mentions “knowledge share,” and this is one of the greatest direct benefits of using a social learning platform. Going back to an important element of social and informal learning – it's about sharing knowledge with others. In today's market place, we can't always do that over the water cooler. Social media styled tools – social learning platforms – can become a “virtual water cooler” where employees meet and gather to share information, stories and knowledge.

HOW DOES SOCIAL LEARNING DELIVER VALUE?

We've been thinking about the value of social learning, and we came up with a list of benefits we anticipate organizations will see.

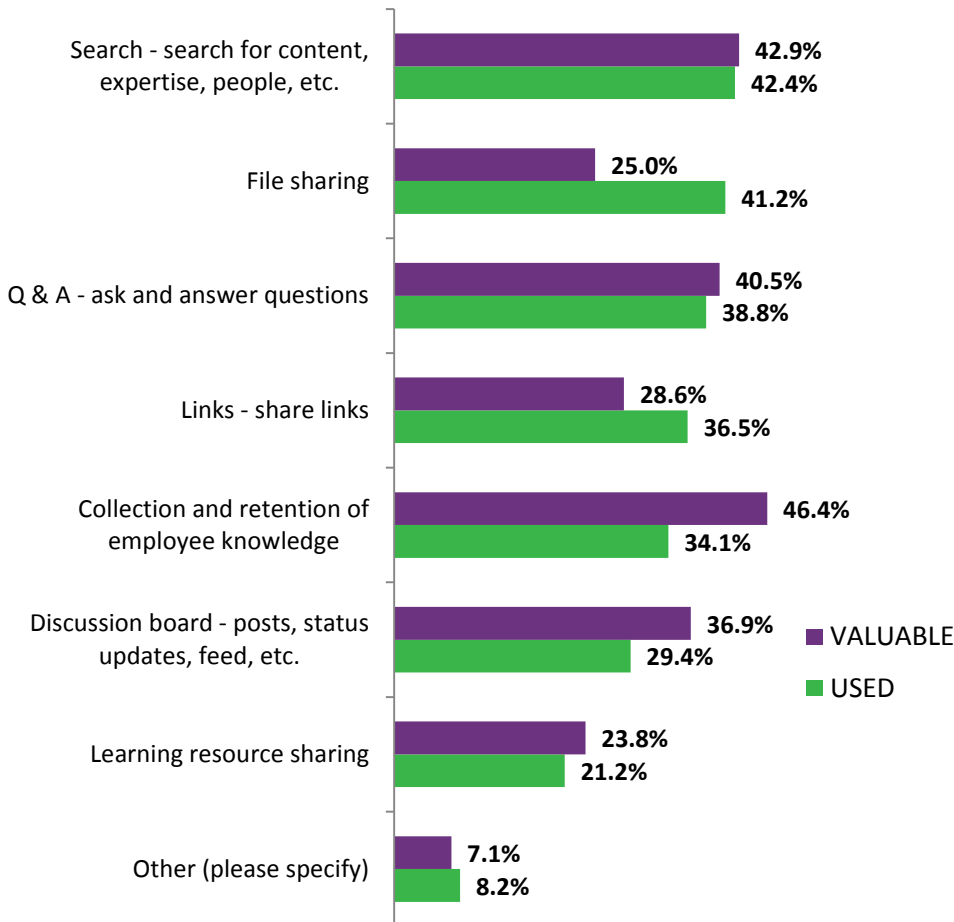
1. **Increase employee engagement.**
2. **Improve the speed at which you conduct business.**
3. **Increase organizational IQ.**
4. **Improve communication and performance.**

In fairness, we have been using our own social learning platform (we call it “Community”) in advance of its release to the market, and these are the benefits we've seen as a result of using this social learning platform. We wondered whether other organizations are either seeing or expecting to see similar benefits from a social learning tool, so we asked those questions in our survey.



We started by asking which social media features employees currently USE the most. Each respondent could select as many listed features as they actually use. The chart below shows that employees currently use their existing social learning tools mostly to search for content, expertise, people, etc., (42.4%), file sharing (41.2%), Q&A (38.8%), and link sharing (36.5%). These functions are also widely used in social media. The next two features or functions employees currently use are collection and retention of employee knowledge (34.1%) and discussion boards (29.4%). These two features are closely related, because both involve the publishing and sharing of employee generated content to a wide audience. Participants identified learning resource sharing as a feature they currently use at a rate of 21.2%. It's really interesting to see which features or functions the survey participants see as the MOST valuable and compare these responses to usage.

Social Learning Tools: Usage & Value Compared

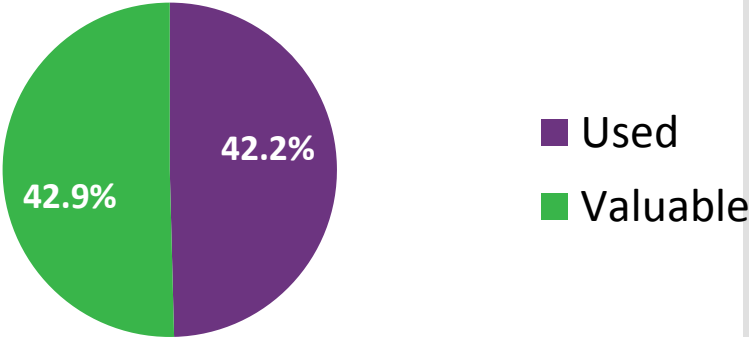


"The most significant thing going on in workplace training and development today is that we have punched through the walls of the classroom to allow experts and peers to bring their messages closer to work and life through technology,"

Allison Rossett, professor emerita of educational technology at San Diego State University, Bingham, Tony. "Dealing with Critics and Objections". Social Learning for Learning Professionals. ASTD. © 2011.

There is very close alignment on the search function . 42.9% of the respondents see this as a valuable feature, and 42.2% of respondents identify the feature as one used by employees. Q&A shows close alignment between value and use – 40.5% compared to 38.8%. However, we see quite a divergence between use and perceived value on the collection and retention of employee knowledge with only 34.1% of the respondents seeing employees use that feature but 46.4% of the respondents identify this as a valuable feature. File sharing went the other way with 42.2% saying employees use their current social learning platform to share files while only 25.0% said this is a valuable feature.

Search for Content, Expertise, People, Etc.



Based on a survey of corporate middle managers, by IDC and Forester, for every 1,000 employees, companies spend \$5 million in salary expense each year on *time wasted looking for information that is never found.*

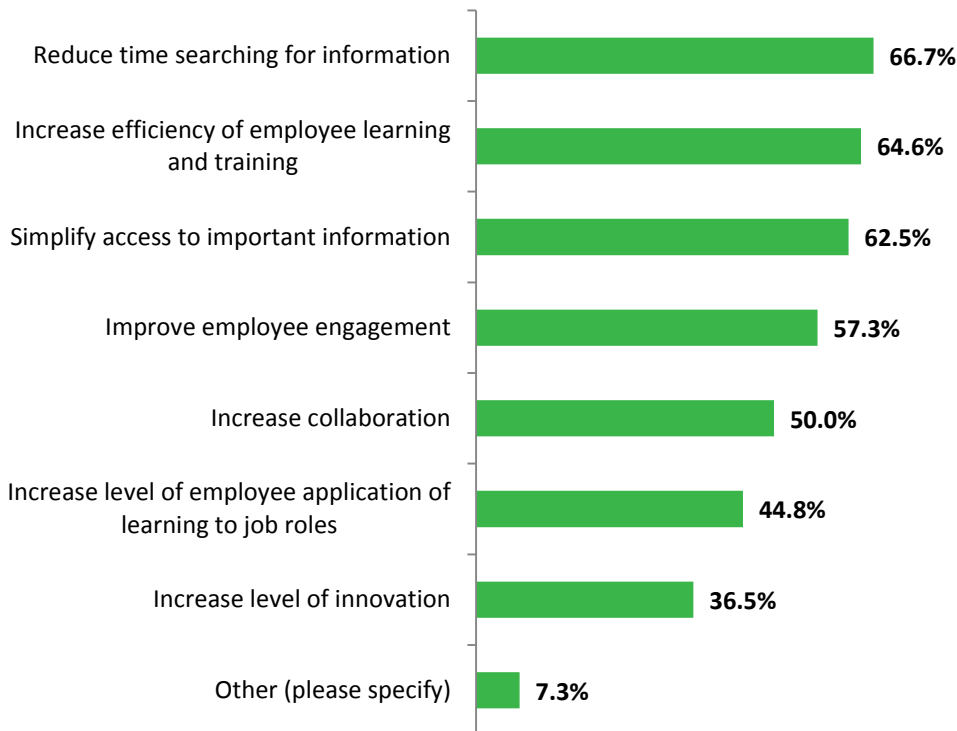


The largest difference between use and value along the business based uses and social uses. In other words, it looks like the current use of available social learning tools lean heavily towards the social, while organizations see potential value in the learning side of social learning. There is no reason effective social learning tools, platforms and applications cannot serve both elements equally – social **and** learning.

WHAT BENEFITS CAN SOCIAL LEARNING TOOLS DELIVER?

In the end, investing in a social learning platform is a business decision. If the investment does not yield actual business results, then the investment should not be made. So we asked the survey participants to tell us how they see social learning contributing to their organization's success.

Contributions of Social Learning to Business Results



Participants could make multiple selections, and the only "other" comments involved employee engagement. So the survey appears to have captured a broad scope of potential business impacts and benefits of social learning, and by extension, the impact social learning tools can have on business results.

As the chart illustrates, respondents identified three different results at a rate in excess of 60%: reduce time searching for information (66.7%), increase efficiency of employee learning and training (64.6%) and simplify access to important information (62.5%). Improve employee engagement was identified on 57.3% of the survey responses.

Using web-based social networking tools for learning and development can facilitate cost savings, which is a direct way to demonstrate the business impact of learning.

[The Business Benefits of Social Learning, CLO Media](#)

Social learning tools are also marketed heavily as “collaboration” tools or vehicles. Exactly one-half of the survey responses indicated collaboration as a potential business benefit. That’s a pretty fair percentage of the respondents seeing collaboration as a benefit, and given our experience with our own social learning platform, Community, this is accurate. Another extremely important benefit is to increase the level of training transfer, which 44.8% of the respondents identified.

As organizations look at social learning tools, these business results are very important, and when looked at as a whole, these results, with the proper metrics in place, can serve to build a compelling business case for the adoption of social learning tools.

So are current usage patterns pointing to these expected business results? Based upon the survey information, we believe they do. For instance, many of the most used and valued features and functions can provide a direct link to the types of business results organization expect from social learning.

- **Reduce time searching for information** – searching for content, people and expertise was a feature identified as actually used by employees AND valued by participants on over 40% of the surveys to both questions.
- **Simplify access to important information** – this is a classic value proposition usually identified with knowledge management, and employees are currently using available social learning tools to gain quick and ready access to a variety of information. In addition to search (42.4%), employees also use file sharing (41.2%), link sharing (36.5%), Q&A (38.8%), and discussion boards (29.4%), to access information easier and timelier.
- **Increase value and efficiency of employee learning and training** – the research around training transfer tells us that three key elements influence employees to apply what they learn on the job – a supportive culture, peer support and feedback, and supervisor support and feedback. Several features that are both valued and used support developing such a culture: Q&A, discussion boards, sharing of learning resources, sharing of files and links, etc. All of these features and functions allow employees to interact with each other in real time, and if the organization plans carefully, members of management (culture and supervisor support) can likewise participate and provide content and comments about training and education activities and goals.
- **Improve employee engagement** – data suggests strongly that organizations with engaged employees are more profitable. This is where the “social” part of social learning pays dividends. Employees already interact with their peers, friends, contacts, etc. using social media. It makes business sense to provide a communication and connection platform that behaves and feels like familiar social networking tools to the workplace. We have clearly seen an improvement in employee engagement since we started using Community, and most social learning platforms can track and monitor things like activity, posts, files shared, etc. While these metrics don’t prove engagement, the level of activity can be a good indicator that your employees are at least embracing and using your social learning platform.

CONCLUSIONS

We used to see statements in well-respected business publications about social media that went something like this. “It’s a fad. It’s for high school or college kids. There’s no place in business for it.” We are seeing the very same sort of resistance in some circles to social learning. But the trend line looks pretty clear. In our survey sample, 7.8% of the participating organizations currently use a social learning platform, 12.8% of the participating organizations are planning to add a social learning platform in the next 12 months. At a 20% rate of adoption, social learning platforms would approach the current use of DVD’s and eclipse other options like virtual training and webinars. In other words, social learning, just like social media, is not a fad. It’s here, and we’re going to see more and more organizations finding ways to bring social learning resources to their employees.

But even if we see more organizations moving towards the use of social learning, will organizations see results? Again, our survey results emphatically say, “Yes.” The types of results we will likely be seeing include things like **reductions in time to conduct business by simplifying access to important information and reducing the time needed to search for information, and increased employee engagement.**

The challenge for training professionals and organizations alike is to learn how to capture and report key performance indicators along these expected business outcomes. Once we’ve learned more about how and what we ought to measure, the business case for social learning will be clarified, and we will see a rapid increase in the rate of adoption, similar to what we’ve seen with social media. Social media use in businesses skyrocketed once organizations understood what results they could reasonably expect, and learned to measure those results.

Finally, like many innovative and new ideas, **small organizations are leading the way.** Organizations with fewer than 250 employees are making greater use of social learning than larger and mid-sized organizations. This result should not be surprising when we look to the history of innovation and business success in the US over the last 50 years or so. Most jobs are generated by small businesses, and most innovative ideas and products originate in small businesses. So it’s logical to see small businesses, with smaller training budgets, looking for new and innovative ways to improve employee training and development. Obviously, these organizations are running ahead of the rest of the market in terms of social learning adoption.

[Collaboration for Results - A Benefit of an Effective Blend of Social Learning Culture, Mind Set and Technology Tools.](#)

ABOUT BIZLIBRARY

BizLibrary provides online training for small and mid-sized organizations nationwide. We base delivery on the quality of the training content, technology platform and customer service. BizLibrary can deliver online training in the form of streaming video, interactive e-learning or custom developed courses. We also offer a lending library of video and DVD programs for those clients who are not interested in online training. BizLibrary's solutions also include an award-winning Learning Management System that is easy to use and very flexible, and we provide a range of professional services to its clients that include curriculum design, marketing assistance and a range of site customization services.

Learn more at <http://www.bizlibrary.com>.

BizLibrary's Community is a collaboration and social learning application designed specifically for small and mid-sized organizations. Utilizing the Community platform allows organizations to :

- Increase engagement
- Conduct business with speed
- Increase organizational IQ
- Improve communication and performance

Interested in learning more about how a social learning platform can fit with your organization? Schedule a free demo and consultation here. Or visit www.bizlibrary.com/community.

[5 Tips for Selecting a Social Learning Platform](#)

1. Focus on vendors with experience in the small and mid-sized business market.
2. Get references
3. Get a demo
4. Compare the marketing message to the reality of the product
5. Find a platform truly linked to employee learning

Click the link above to read the entire Blog Post.

