

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER

Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

Social Networking Meets Corporate Learning **Jeanne C. Meister** **October 2007**

Assume you could develop a learning program that attracts millions of learners, holds their attention for hours, impels them to contribute often and come back with their friends.

Well, this is happening on numerous social networking sites. Just go to one of them, and you can get a feel for how important social networking is to a growing and diverse population.

Social networking is all about making connections and bringing people together. In May, the Institute for Corporate Productivity, in conjunction with HR.com, surveyed 322 business executives whose average age ranged from 36 to 45. Surprisingly, 65 percent of respondents said they use social networking sites for both professional and personal reasons. Of these sites, the most frequently used were LinkedIn and Yahoo 360°.

The survey identified various ways business professionals use these sites:

- Fifty-five percent of those using networks do so to share best practices with colleagues.
- Forty-nine percent use them to get answers to issues they are facing on their jobs.
- Forty-seven percent use the networks to connect with potential clients and to showcase their skills.

The feature that makes social networking sites so compelling is the ability to treat users as co-creators rather than passive consumers of knowledge. These sites have developed “pull” platforms where users

are comfortable sharing some aspect of their lives.

As learning executives, we should be creating social networking experiments within learning departments so we can better understand the power of how to use this medium for learning.

Below is a list of what's possible to move your learning platform from one that "pushes" mass content to one that "pulls" you into a network of personalized ideas and experts.

Podcast Your Stars

Develop a podcast series profiling experts who share their top tips in less than 10 minutes. Model it after Harvard Business Review's Ideacast, www.hbrideacast.org, a weekly podcast that features breakthrough ideas and commentary from leading thinkers. In fact, HBR Ideacast was recently named a Staff Best Pick of 2006 on iTunes. Ideally, the podcast series you create can be customized to your company's best practices such as recent new-business wins or product implementations, or even a CEO book club (a monthly interview with your CEO on his/her bedside books). Wouldn't everyone want to read the books the CEO is reading?

CEO as Blogger

Encourage your CEO to start a blog, if he or she has not done so already. One of the first CEOs to do this is Sun Microsystems' Jonathan Schwartz. You can check out what he regularly writes about at <http://blogs.sun.com/jonathan>. Schwartz frequently writes about myriad topics such as why July 27 is Industry Appreciation Day for system administrators to the power behind a great brand. But most important, Schwartz is not afraid to tackle tough issues, such as disappointing earnings or new product misses, on his blog.

Use Wikis for New Ideas on Learning Programs

Finally, consider starting a wiki for new ideas about what learning programs to develop to meet specific business units' strategic goals. The typical way for CLOs do this is to develop a learning needs assessment, but think about what would happen if you opened up the floodgates of new ideas with a wiki targeted to your business partners. It's easy to use, and it can happen 24x7 (so there are no more

cancellations to that business partner meeting), and you'll have a running record of all possible ideas for new learning programs around specific business needs.

Remember: This will not take the place of more formal needs assessment processes (although it might someday), but it can jump-start excitement among the workforce, from senior executives to front-line employees, about what learning is doing.