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The Changing Social Learning Landscape: Why You Need a Social LMS

About the Author



Karen O'Leonard,
Principal Analyst

Corporate learning is entering a new era – one of social, collaborative and employee-driven learning. Today's workers still need formal training that is built around specific problems and talent needs; however, they also need a complete "learning environment" that provides support, as well as the ability to collaborate, network and share information to solve problems. Learning organizations must go beyond the disciplines of building content for use in the classroom or online. They must provide context and pathways through which people can learn – and they must help the organization to be both better learners and better creators of learning.

These changes are exciting, but they can present certain challenges. As learning organizations venture into this new territory, they find that simply redesigning programs is insufficient; instead, they need to architect new learning environments comprised of both formal and informal learning elements. In many cases, this requires different skills sets within the L&D organization.

Providing structure around these learning environments presents another challenge. Modern, high-impact learning organizations have learned how to create environments to support various forms of informal learning (including social learning), establish clear objectives for each and implement processes for evaluating their success.¹ As

BERSIN & ASSOCIATES, LLC
180 GRAND AVENUE
SUITE 320
OAKLAND, CA 94612
(510) 251-4400
INFO@BERSIN.COM
WWW.BERSIN.COM

¹ For more information, *High-Impact Learning Practices: The Guide to Modernizing Your Corporate Training Strategy through Social and Informal Learning*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, July 2009. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/hilp.

companies get better at “formalizing” informal learning, the lines between all forms of learning become less clear.

Our annual research study captured data on current spending on social learning tools and services.² In this research bulletin, we discuss:

- In which social learning components companies are investing
- How much companies are spending on social learning tools and services
- Examples of how companies are using social learning to enhance their learning environments

Use of Social Learning Tools

Our Enterprise Learning Framework³ highlights the importance of both formal and informal approaches to learning (see Figure 1). Our study tracked the usage of several informal learning tools that are commonly considered social learning:

- Communities of practice⁴
- Social software (e.g., blogs⁵, wikis⁶ and forums)
- Expert directories

² For more information, *The Corporate Learning Factbook® 2012: Benchmarks, Trends and Analysis of the U.S. Training Market*, Bersin & Associates / Karen O’Leonard, January 2012. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/factbook.

³ For more information, *Defining Informal Learning: A Taxonomy for Describing How Most Learning Happens in Today’s Organizations*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, December 28, 2009. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library.

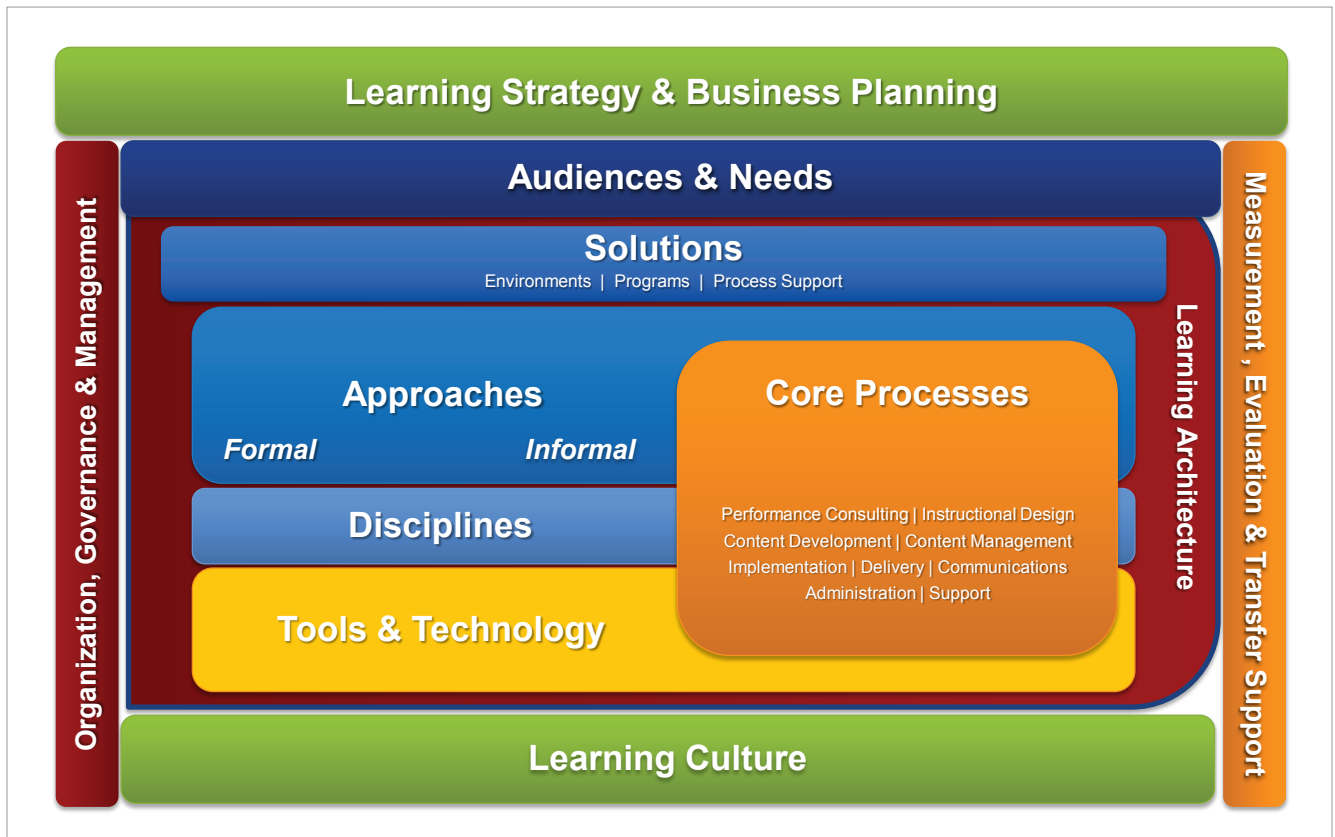
⁴ A “community of practice” (or “CoP”) is often defined as a group of people who share an interest or concern about a common topic, and who deepen their knowledge in this area through ongoing interaction and relationship-building within their group. While communities often come into being spontaneously, they nonetheless require nurturing if they are to become valuable to the members and remain viable over the course of their evolution.

⁵ “Blog” is a shortened form of the phrase “web log,” which is a form of personal publishing that readers can discuss.

⁶ “Wiki” is from the Hawaiian word for “fast” – and stands for web pages that can be collectively and collaboratively edited on the fly by readers.

The three tools reviewed in this research bulletin represent the most common social learning tools; however, a great number of vendors are focusing on the social learning space – and technology is quickly enabling social learning to take place in new, low-cost, highly interactive ways. At the leading edge of this technology are social learning management system (LMS) solutions that not only embed social learning into the workflow, but also blend different types of social learning such that people are learning from peers and experts in more organic ways than we have seen in the past.

Figure 1: Bersin & Associates Enterprise Learning Framework



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2012.



KEY POINT

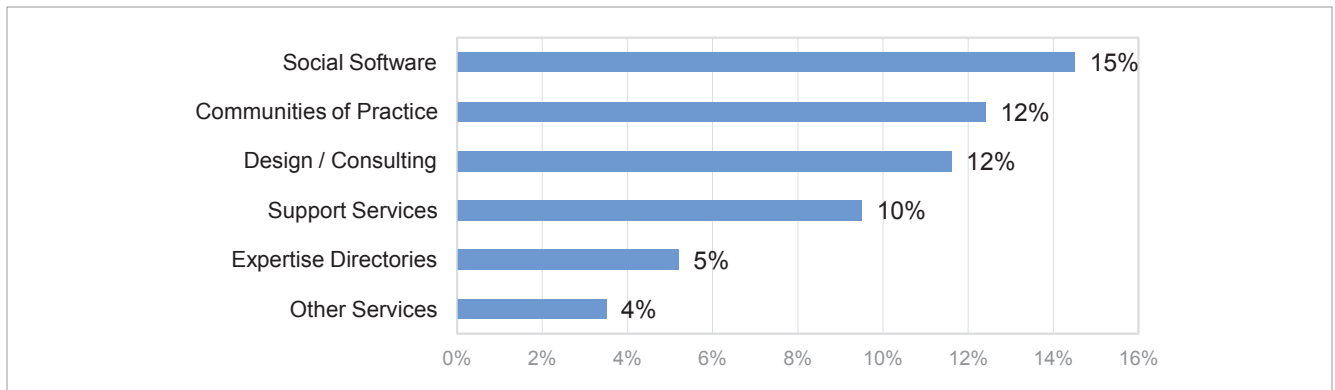
Communities of practice are one of the most popular social learning tools tracked by our study.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (CoPs)⁷ are one of the most popular social learning tools tracked by our study, with 12 percent of U.S. companies investing in them in 2011 (see Figure 2). Large businesses are more likely to use CoPs than small and midsize companies, and insurance firms have the highest investment of any industry sector, with 28 percent of these companies investing in CoPs for learning. By implementing a social LMS, social learning can be carried out right alongside core learning strategies.

Using online communities of practice, learners can interact and share ideas on a specific topic. Members of the community share a common interest – for example, they may be in a certain functional role or they may be part of an extended project team. Through this interaction, the learners deepen their knowledge about a particular subject area and strengthen their relationships with other members of the group.

Figure 2: Percent of Companies Spending Money on Informal Learning by Category 2011 – U.S. Total



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2012.

⁷ For more information, *Developing Communities of Practice: Best Practices and Lessons Learned from the Defense Acquisition University*, Bersin & Associates / Chris Howard, May 2007. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library.





KEY POINT

Social LMS technologies can make communities of practice more effective for just-in-time learning.

Cisco, for example, has developed hundreds of communities of practice to provide support information on technical products. From within each community, an employee who is seeking support can identify participants and experts, and then quickly access them online.

While communities often come into being spontaneously, they nonetheless require nurturing if they are to become valuable to the members and remain viable over the course of their evolution.⁸ New social LMS features help to support these communities by providing innovative ways of sharing (e.g., microblogs⁹ and videos), natural language searches and retrieving information (e.g., tagging, news feeds, subscriptions). This increased fluidity helps to make communities more valuable for just-in-time learning.

Social Software

In 2012, 15 percent of companies reported spending money to provide blogs, wikis or online forums in a learning context. Investment is greatest in the retail industry with 24 percent of companies using these tools. Business services / consulting firms also report high rates of spending on these tools, with 18 percent of these organizations investing in them.

While we group together these tools as a single category, each one has its own purpose.

⁸ For more information, *Developing Communities of Practice: Best Practices and Lessons Learned from the Defense Acquisition University*, Bersin & Associates / Chris Howard, May 2007. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library.

⁹ "Microblogging" is the concept of short, frequently updated messages from individuals (patterned after the website www.twitter.com) to allow people to "follow others." It is useful to find people and identify what they are doing, similar to the "presence awareness" available through instant messaging.



KEY POINT

Fifteen percent of companies reported spending money on blogs, wikis or online forums in a learning context.

- *Blogs* are useful for sharing knowledge and information across a wide audience. Product teams and functional groups (such as IT and technical support) commonly use blogs to communicate information to their internal and external customers. Such is the case at Symantec, which started a blog to support the launch of one of its new products.¹⁰ Through the blog, employees in sales, marketing and support functions were able to obtain a baseline understanding of the product and launch plans prior to attending a formal training class.
- *Wiki* tools can also be used to share knowledge or information across a wide audience. But, whereas blogs may be authored by a single person, wikis rely on group involvement to create content. In a more formal learning context, wikis can be used by groups of learners to create and edit content for a project. As an example, a high-tech company we interviewed created a training program in which teams of software developers were assigned to create code using wikis. The wikis enabled team members to create and modify code, and then share it with instructors and the rest of the class for feedback.
- Like wikis, *online forums* rely on group members to generate content. Somewhat akin to communities of practice, online forums allow learners to discuss issues and share ideas on various topics. Users can choose to read or contribute to whatever thread or topic is of interest.
- Blurring the lines between social software and communities of practice are *social workspaces* that allow groups to work together in a virtual environment as part of their daily work or as an interactive informal learning opportunity, such as team exercises, shadowing activities, discussions and research projects.

¹⁰ For more information, *High-Impact Learning Practices: The Guide to Modernizing Your Corporate Training Strategy through Social and Informal Learning*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, July 2009.

Expertise Directories

An expertise directory is an extension of the typical corporate contact directory. At the heart of these directories is a searchable database of employees and their contact information. What makes an expertise directory different is the inclusion of additional, searchable data about employees, such as areas of professional expertise. The purpose is to facilitate employees finding other employees with a given expertise in a certain subject area. In our study, approximately five percent of companies said they were investing in expertise directories to facilitate learning. (See Figure 2.)

Expertise directories can include a wide range of information on members, such as competencies mastered, past experience, association memberships, committees and accreditations. Newer examples of these directories add a social software component, allowing for the inclusion of tags and ratings by other employees, as well as communications tools (such as forums or discussion groups). Some organizations have directly integrated these directories with their internal communications tools (such as instant messenger) and with meeting scheduling tools (such as Microsoft Exchange).

Other examples also support an “ask-the-experts” function, by which employees are connected to experts outside of their personal networks and the knowledge generated is then actively shared with the rest of the organization. This function can be handled organically through blogs and forums, or in a structured format through technologies that automatically connect the learners and experts. For example, some social LMS systems can automatically route questions to the appropriate expert or experts, which not only helps learners with the question at hand, but also helps them to build their social network for the future. Leading-edge social learning technology can help embed learning in the workflow such that the line between learning and working is blurred. Expertise-based social learning brings to the surface the natural centers of knowledge within the organization and then facilitates the transfer of the knowledge.



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The following case in point demonstrates the ways in which Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) has used different social learning strategies to help its salesforce learn and collaborate.

Case in Point: Advanced Micro Devices Streamlines Learning through Portals and Communities

Established in 1969, Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) is a global leader in semiconductor design for a wide range of computing devices. AMD products include microprocessors, advanced processing units (APU) for commercial and consumer markets, as well as graphic, video and multimedia technologies for gaming. Given the rapidly changing landscape of the technology industry, keeping the company's salesforce up to date on product information and competitive intelligence is a significant business challenge. AMD created a social learning strategy, implemented through Kenexa's Social LMS, to meet this need.

In 2009, AMD established the sales enablement group (an internal ecosystem of experts, and selected business partners and customers), which was charged with the dissemination of information and training to the dispersed AMD salesforce. In a 2009 survey, the company found that its salesforce spent 15 hours per week, on average, looking for information about products, policies and customers which was spread across 39 different intranet pages. For that reason, one of the group's first major initiatives was to consolidate that information and training into one searchable portal.

The sales enablement group further recognized that providing the information was only part of the issue; the salesforce needed ways through which to quickly learn and share how to use the information to generate sales. With that in mind, the group created discussion forums to allow users to share ideas and discuss how to best leverage the assets from the portal, with each asset linked directly to the discussion forums to facilitate

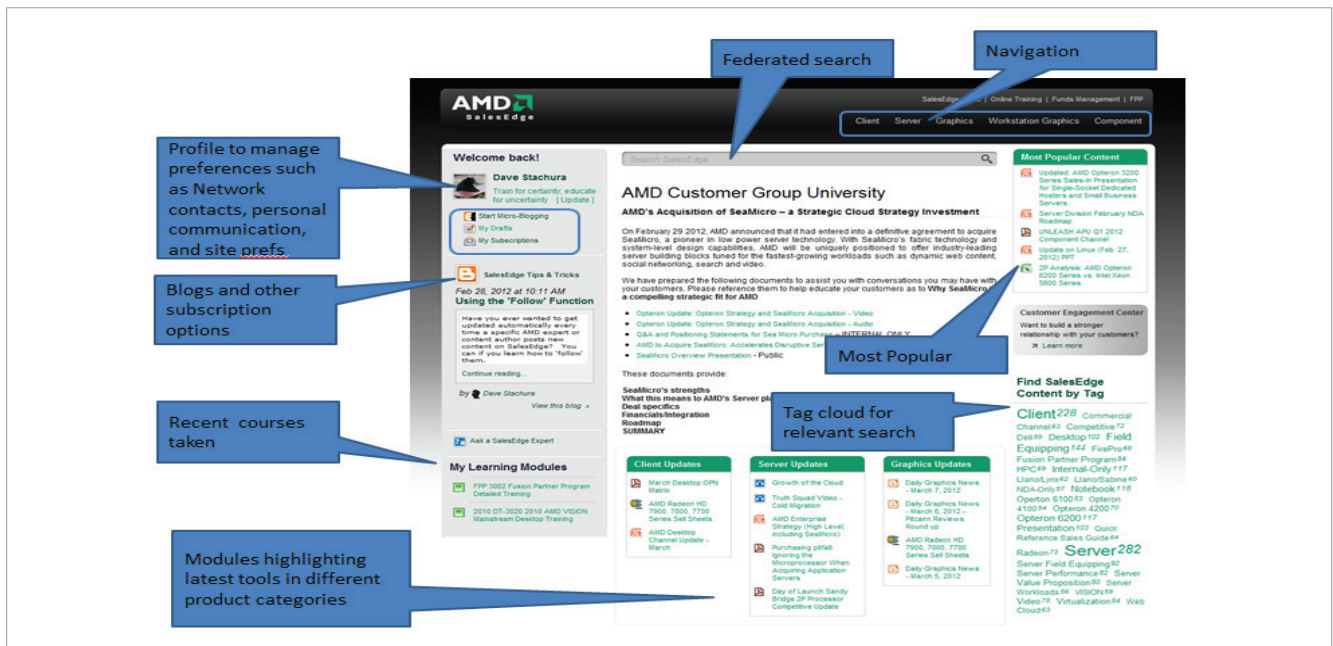
Case in Point: AMD Streamlines Learning (cont'd)

comments and questions. This helped to generate natural communities of practice based on interest in common products or customer groups.

Additionally, the sales enablement group has begun to use a social workspace functionality (part of the Kenexa Social LMS) to create social hubs related to the company's online courses. In these virtual workspaces, learners can meet with others who are taking the same course, and participate in interactions, skills checks and discussions that reinforce what was learned in their online modules. Given the dispersed nature of the salesforce, the virtual workspace learning opportunities help with both learning transfer and building effective networks.

By housing all of the product information and training in one place, and creating communities of experts to facilitate knowledge-sharing, the sales enablement group was able to reduce the average search time to about four hours per week. ↻

Figure 3: AMD's SalesEdge Portal



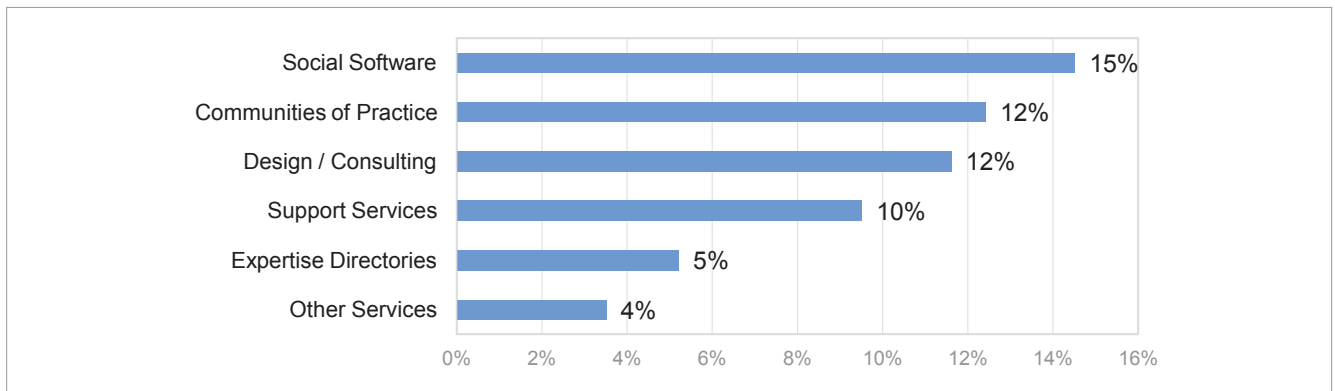
Source: Advanced Micro Devices, 2012.



Social Learning Support Services

In addition to the social learning tools previously described, our research shows that organizations are increasingly investing in design and consulting services, as well as other support services. This was particularly true in the insurance industry, which invested highly in both tools and services in 2011 (see Figure 2, repeated in this section). In general, investment is higher in design / consulting services than in support services, suggesting that most organizations are still beginning their investments in social learning.

Figure 2: Percent of Companies Spending Money on Informal Learning by Category 2011 – U.S. Total



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2012.

The investment in services related to social learning reflects the increasingly sophisticated nature of social learning tools, especially when they are integrated into existing enterprise systems. This also reflects the realization that the effective implementation of social learning solutions needs to be part of a concerted learning strategy which clearly outlines learning goals, audience needs and governance processes.

This next AMD case in point showcases how different learning tools can be used in combination to support learning needs. However, AMD notes that it would have been unable to meet these needs without a strong social LMS and strong partnership with social LMS provider Kenexa to help the company make the most of the available social features.



Case in Point: AMD Maximizes Organizational Expertise

As noted in the previous case in point, one of the business challenges facing AMD is the quickly changing market landscape for technology products. In this business context, the knowledge and expertise that the salesforce learns while working with customers and with AMD products is an important company asset.

However, early on, the sales enablement group recognized that, while there was a significant amount of expertise being generated by the salesforce, there were few avenues for sharing it across existing networks. Further, there was concern that the lack of sharing across product lines or geographic regions was resulting in duplicated effort and missed opportunities. In response to this, the group began to leverage several of the social learning capabilities in the company's LMS in order to facilitate knowledge-sharing across the sales organization.

One part of the group's strategy was in connecting the members of the salesforce with designated experts when they had questions, and then publishing the questions and answers on the portal site for open viewing. By "seeding" the expertise exchange site with vetted questions and answers by recognized experts, AMD established that the information was trustworthy and relevant. However, the company found that the top-down process can impact the timeliness of the information, so AMD continues to work to build the grassroots participation in the expertise exchange. The hope is that, by increasing the flow of information, answers to questions can be generated more quickly. In order to motivate participation, the company allows questions and answers to be rated – having a high rating becomes a badge of honor within the community. Further, when participants ask or answer a question in the system, AMD staff will call and thank them for contributing, a high-touch strategy that reinforces the value of knowledge-sharing.

Case in Point: AMD Maximizes Organizational Expertise (cont'd)

In addition to the expertise exchange, the sales enablement group capitalizes on the knowledge of its audience by allowing every learning asset in the collection to be rated and reviewed. For example, someone may rate how well a job-aid answered a question, or provide an example of how product collateral was used effectively with a customer. Later, someone searching for similar information can quickly see what tools have been most helpful to others. This strategy enables all of the users to be expert contributors and allows learners to make more refined decisions regarding on which assets to spend their time.

A third way that AMD harnesses expertise is by providing blog space to subject-matter experts (SMEs) and other company experts. This opportunity allows for the spread of important information that may cross product lines or customers, and allows for direct interaction between the salesforce and business partners.


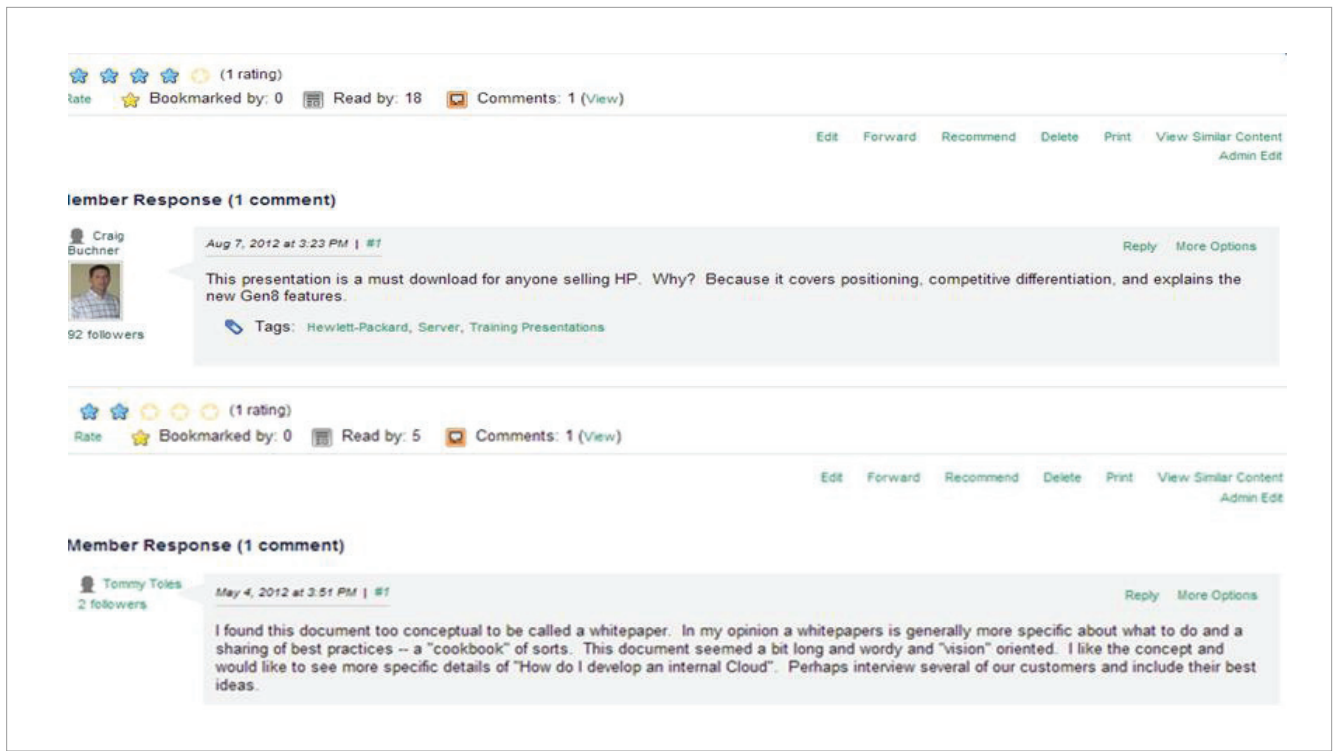
AMD's multipoint strategy for connecting expertise goes beyond the traditional expertise directories by allowing for both traditional top-down designation of experts and SMEs, as well as in allowing the community to designate its own experts and SMEs organically. The company is continuing to promote a social learning community by identifying ambassadors who can promote the social learning aspects of the portal site to their peers – fellow employees who understand that, for the site to be successful, the information needs to be timely and relevant to the users. 

Figure 4: Expertise Exchange – User Commentary



The screenshot displays two user comments on a platform. The first comment is from Craig Buchner, dated August 7, 2012, at 3:23 PM. It has a 1-star rating, 0 bookmarks, 18 reads, and 1 comment. The comment text is: "This presentation is a must download for anyone selling HP. Why? Because it covers positioning, competitive differentiation, and explains the new Gen8 features." It includes tags for Hewlett-Packard, Server, and Training Presentations. The second comment is from Tommy Toles, dated May 4, 2012, at 3:51 PM. It also has a 1-star rating, 0 bookmarks, 5 reads, and 1 comment. The comment text is: "I found this document too conceptual to be called a whitepaper. In my opinion a whitepapers is generally more specific about what to do and a sharing of best practices -- a 'cookbook' of sorts. This document seemed a bit long and wordy and 'vision' oriented. I like the concept and would like to see more specific details of 'How do I develop an internal Cloud'. Perhaps interview several of our customers and include their best ideas."

Source: *Advanced Micro Devices, 2012.*



KEY POINT

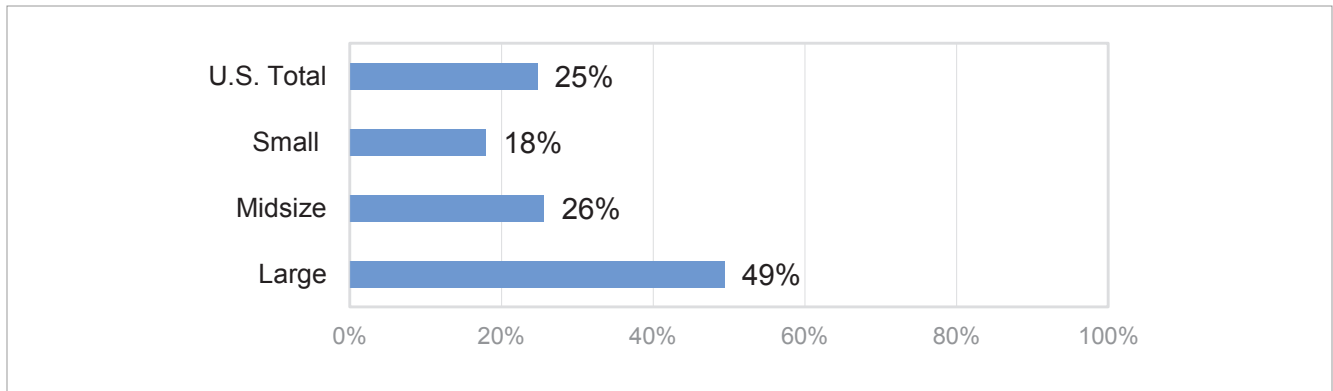
Spending on informal learning is up for large businesses, which more than doubled their expenditures in 2011.

Understanding Spending on Social Learning

As shown in the preceding sections, many organizations have already incorporated social learning tools into their learning environments – and a great many more are wondering how to get there. Just how much are companies willing to spend on informal learning?

2010 was the first year that we captured spending data on informal learning, including social learning tools. In that year, 30 percent of U.S. companies said they spent money on learning tools or services. In 2011, twenty-five percent of companies invested in informal learning (see Figure 5.)

Figure 5: Percent of Companies Spending Money on Informal Learning Tools and Services 2011 – U.S. Total and by Company Size



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2012.

The landscape for investment in these tools is changing, as well. In 2010, business services and consulting firms were investing the most; however, in 2011, retail and insurance companies lead the way (see Figure 6). Not only are these companies investing in social tools, they are also investing in design services as well, which suggests that they are looking to create more sophisticated social learning strategies.

Figure 6: Percent of Companies Spending Money on Informal Learning by Category 2011 – By Industry

	Social Software	Expertise Directories	Communities of Practice	Design / Consulting	Support Services
Banking / Financial Services	10%	2%	10%	6%	6%
Business Services / Consulting	18%	9%	9%	7%	3%
Government	2%	0%	2%	5%	2%
Healthcare	16%	2%	13%	7%	9%
Insurance	17%	17%	28%	25%	7%
Manufacturing	17%	2%	13%	11%	6%
Retail	24%	10%	10%	17%	14%
Technology	12%	3%	12%	3%	6%

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2012.



KEY POINT

As our personal lives become increasingly more social, our standards for interaction and accessibility at the workplace will increase as well.

The fact that large companies are ramping up their investments in social learning tools, while small companies seem to be scaling back, highlights the primary role of these tools – to actively connect people who might not otherwise have an opportunity to connect. In small companies, these connections can happen more naturally, but large companies have to work harder to foster them.

It would be a mistake, however, for small and midsize companies to think that they do not need social learning tools. As our personal lives become increasingly social, employees will come to expect a similar standard of interaction and accessibility of information. Further, as the next AMD case in point highlights, an effective social strategy, built upon an integrated social platform, can create feedback loops that help the entire organization to work more effectively.

Case in Point: The Implications of Social Learning for AMD's Learning and Development Function

When AMD's sales enablement group was formed in 2009, it began where most learning and development (L&D) organizations begin – by creating a large catalog of courses. However, as layers of informal and social learning have been added to its base of training, the group has found that the knowledge and skills required to support learning have changed – further, the definition of learning success has changed, as well.

One of the most significant changes can be seen in the team's name – sales enablement group. This name highlights that the scope of the group's work is beyond traditional training and performance support, encompassing all of the information needs of the salesforce. This can also be seen in the inclusion of both learning assets and work-related tools (e.g., product collateral) in the SalesEdge portal, such that the line between working and learning is blurred.

Case in Point: The Implications of Social Learning (cont'd)

The sales enablement group views this blurring as the result of its focus on providing information “at the moment of need.” This focus means that typical measures of L&D success, such as number of courses taken per learner, are less meaningful as a measure of effectiveness. Instead, the ranking of assets by the learning audience provides a real-time understanding of the value and timeliness of each item. AMD plans to provide those analytics to the marketing department and other business partners, creating a feedback loop on the products which are provided to the salesforce.

In terms of the knowledge and skills needed in the L&D function, AMD has found that, while formal instructional design is still needed, the focus has shifted from designing online content to more application-based learning. In fact, as the company empowers its community of learners to create a knowledge base of its own, it is expected that the need for formal training will decrease. In addition to instructional design skills, AMD has discovered a need for data analytics to understand how people use, find and apply information, and knowledge coaches to help learners quickly find the right information at the right time. ↻

Looking Ahead

The current focus on social and informal learning is somewhat akin to the mad rush to e-learning 10 years ago. At that point in time (around 2000), organizations rushed toward online instruction to replace classroom training. We learned over the years that e-learning plays a role, but it is really only one channel – and successful programs blend e-learning with a variety of other approaches to drive learning success.

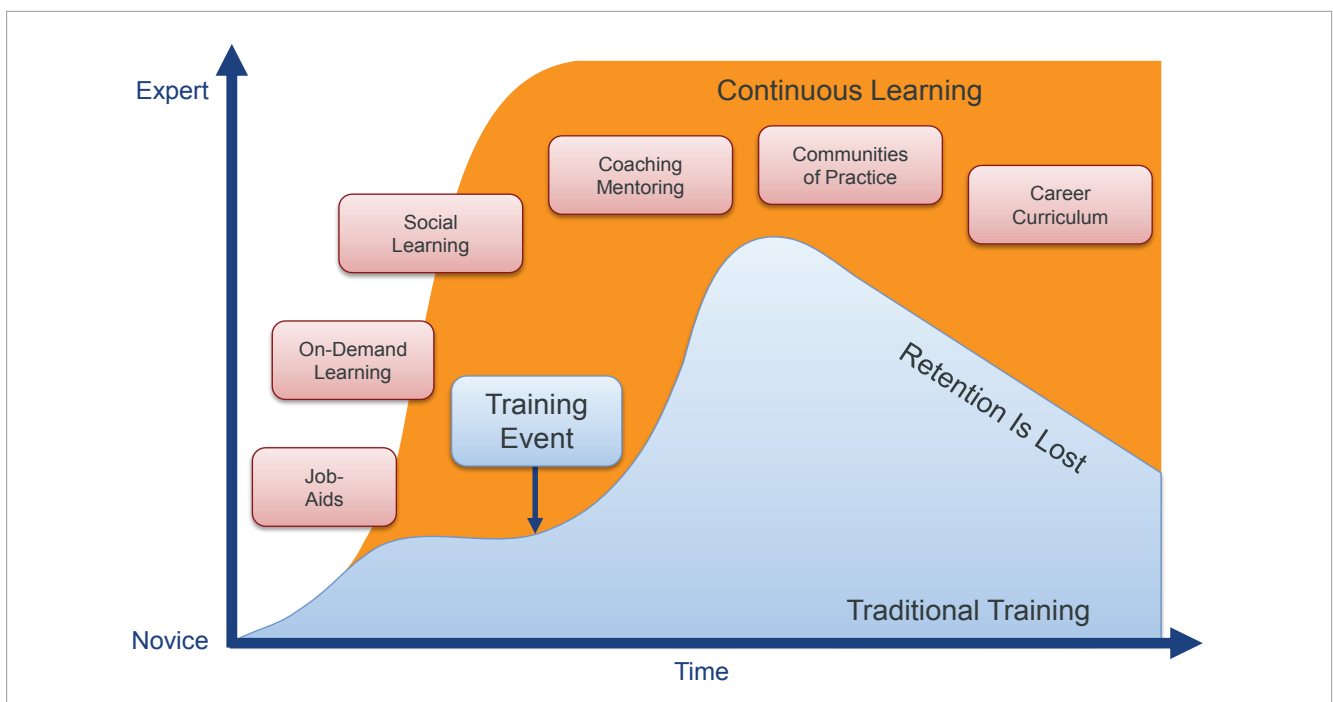
With the multitude of new social learning tools available, we have entered a new era in learning environments – one that will likely drive the next 10 years of change in L&D. However, as AMD’s experience highlights, effectively adding social learning is more than providing a tool and hoping learners will use it. It requires a strong strategic vision

that encompasses content and governance, as well as technology, such as the social LMS it deployed with Kenexa.

As Figure 7 shows, in today's L&D environment organizations must look at all approaches to learning as complementary and interconnected. Individuals are learning all the time – and we must reengineer our L&D strategies to create a continuous learning environment comprised of formal and informal components.

In 2013, this trend will accelerate – and will force all L&D professionals to rethink their internal skills, to continue to revamp their tools and technology, and to build what we call a “learning architecture”¹¹ that makes continuous learning a regular part of all learning solutions.

Figure 7: The Continuous Learning Model



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2010.

¹¹ A “learning architecture” is an organization’s unique map of agreed-upon learning needs, learning strategies and delivery strategies for all of its training. This gives designers, trainers and managers a clear view of what types of problems the organization will solve, how they will solve them, what tools they need and which approaches the organization will take. It deliberately limits the organization’s options by deciding how and where the training organization will focus its efforts – and it builds upon the organization’s culture and history of learning.



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- **IMPACT® Conference: *The Business Of Talent*** – Attendance at special sessions of our annual, best-practices IMPACT® conference; and,
- **Workshops** – Bersin & Associates analysts and advisors conduct onsite workshops on a wide range of topics to educate, inform and inspire HR and L&D professionals and leaders.

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