

# SOCIAL LEARNING IN CANADA



A white paper by Danielle Wallace



**Beyond the Sky**  
Custom Learning

## Executive Summary ■■■

In our ever-changing workforce, modern learners have the opportunity to harness the power of on-demand, informal learning from co-workers that is powered by technology-enabled platforms and tools. The benefits of employees learning from their peers are numerous, and pockets within some organizations are effectively using social enterprise network (SEN) tools for this type of learning and development (L&D).

Workplaces can benefit from a new type of informal social collaboration that is employee and business (not L&D) led. With this new mandate for more self-paced and just-in-time learning, L&D professionals can expand their repertoire beyond “training” to providing an ecosystem that enhances employees’ abilities. And social learning is one component of the ecosystem.

Progressive companies view social learning as technology-enabled collaboration. These organizations see social learning as the natural component of the 70% in 70/20/10 and anticipate a future of increased collaboration and productivity.



This need for informal learning is not a new concept, but the technology to enable it has now emerged and is slowly being refined. We’re still early in the days of having an SEN that’s truly “perfect” for learning. Those interviewed realize the ideal state is having a seamless platform embedded into employees’ daily routines that is right-at-hand when they need it.

## The path to get there, however, isn't currently effective.



Firstly, although everyone interviewed could articulate the advantages of social learning, few could execute this benefit on a large scale with technology.



Secondly, most of the people I interviewed have social learning programs confined to small scale social learning and collaboration efforts within a small group.



Thirdly, organizations that launched corporate SEN tools saw an initial peak in use, but it was followed by a decline. As a result, they never fully utilized the learning capabilities that can be gleaned from social learning.

Simply put, most social learning initiatives have failed. Employees are too busy to have yet another tool to “check.”

This has led to the slow death of many social enterprise collaboration tools that could have given birth to their use in learning and development.

Meanwhile, most business units simply see social learning as the way employees learn from their co-workers or industry peers. They don't view it as “learning” at all. This brings the possibility that the future paradigm of effective social learning will replace the work of L&D or run without involvement from L&D.



Net, there are opportunities for “social learning,” in its existing form, to be the early base from which other future collaboration initiatives can learn from. These future initiatives will not be L&D led but organically flow from business use. With streamlining of collaboration tools (e.g. Microsoft Teams, further Slack integration and other platforms) and forced disuse of other less effective collaboration means (e.g. Skype for Business), there will be a resurgence in social collaboration use from which L&D can then piggyback from and harness for social learning.

# Introduction ■ ■ ■

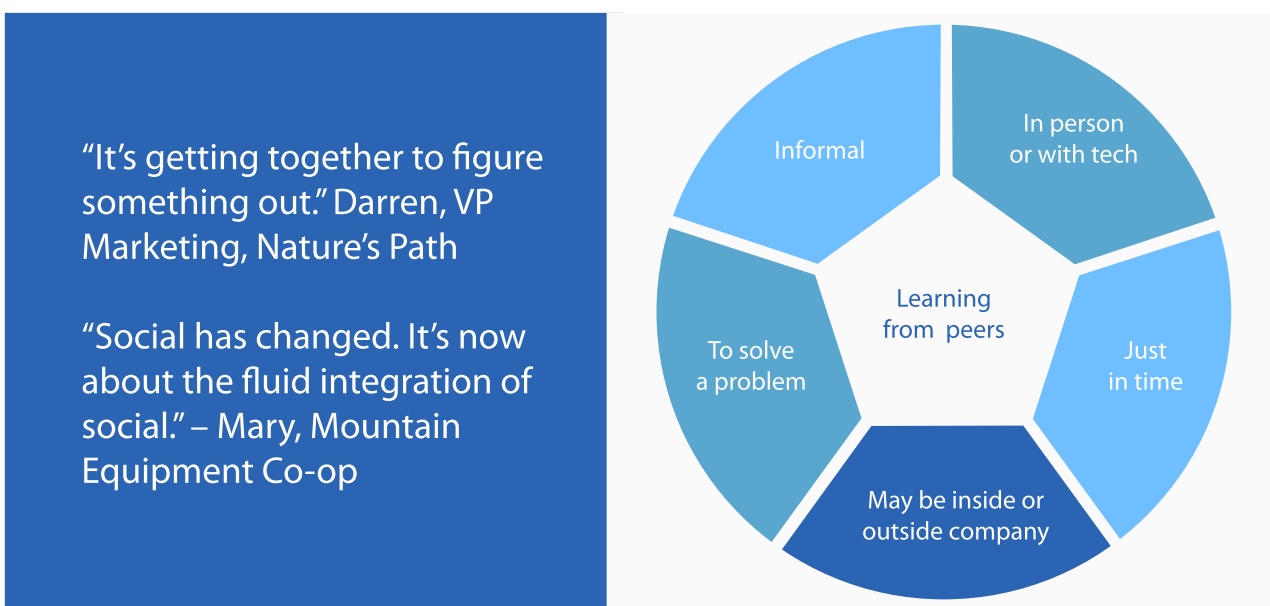
The focus of this paper is social learning and collaboration through technology, as derived from interviews of mid-to-upper-level managers from small-to-large enterprises with L&D and line of business managers. While the intent was to gather best practices, what became more apparent is that the Canadian workplace is simply not ready for social learning in its current form.

## Methodology

I interviewed 25 individuals in industries ranging from professional services to government to retail from 2017 to 2019. About 70% of the respondents were in L&D, and the remaining were in various business units.

## Social learning and collaboration defined as peer learning

Respondents viewed social collaboration as the everyday interactions employees have with their peers to solve a specific business problem. Organizations with strong learning cultures take it a step further and consider that it includes *proactive knowledge* sharing so the entire organization benefits from employees' knowledge. This is often enabled through technology.



**Modern social learning** is the formalized adoption of social collaboration tools for learning. Meanwhile, **modern social collaboration** is learning through virtual interactions with peers. That said, 90% of respondents used the terms interchangeably, as I will in this paper.

Respondents in L&D consider that social learning includes both the structured and unstructured aspects of social learning, while respondents in business units only focus on the unstructured informal learning.

	What it is	Example	Benefit/Drawback
Structured	<p><b>Structured social learning and collaboration</b> is formal and planned.</p> <p>It is clearly defined in desired outcome, membership, tasks, roles, rules, scope, timeframes, and processes.</p>	<p>An online course with social components.</p> <p>A virtual project team.</p>	<p><b>Benefit:</b> We know our roles, tasks, deadlines, etc.</p> <p><b>Drawback:</b> We focus on our own narrow tasks; no mutual support.</p>
Informal	<p><b>Informal social learning and collaboration</b> is unstructured, flexible, and often spontaneous.</p> <p>Leadership, participants, accountabilities, processes, tasks, and outcomes emerge as the collaboration progresses.</p>	<p>A community of practice.</p> <p>A social enterprise network whereby participants proactively seek help or information from others.</p>	<p><b>Benefit:</b> We tap into expertise across the organization.</p> <p><b>Drawback:</b> We create a gossip network with no added value.</p>

(Adapted from Borderless Collaboration: Brough Leadership Institute 2017)

## Findings ■■■

### There is a theoretical desire for social learning

Everyone interviewed saw the need for social learning, but few were able to articulate good examples of social learning with technology. What's more, those who were able to state examples often didn't have management support or the full support of the organization.

A US study revealed that the top L&D priority, at almost half of all organizations (48%), is exploring new technologies. Of those respondents, the top targets for technology exploration are social/collaborative tools (43%) and mobile delivery (41%).<sup>1</sup>

However, spending on social learning is low, as is satisfaction with the current tools. While learning management systems are typically 39% of the learning technology budget, organizations spend only 4.7% and 4.3%<sup>1</sup> on social and mobile technologies, respectively. Furthermore, most people interviewed found the added steps of using the social networking tools to be cumbersome in their routines. Net, people like the idea of social learning but aren't yet convinced the current tools to enable it will work.

<sup>1</sup> Source: 2016 Brandon Hall Group Learning Technology Study



## Insight #1 – It means something different to everyone

**What is social learning?** There isn't an agreed-upon definition of social learning; it's too fluid to develop a systematic method of focusing what people informally learn. That said, people in the industry agree that social learning is informal learning from others.<sup>2</sup>

**What happens in social learning?** Most state that social learning and collaboration means that people solve a specific problem together, jointly work on a project together, and/or gain insights from a conversation or other unstructured means that they apply to a situation.

"I get my best ideas when I work with others." – Michelle, Flight Centre

This collaboration includes "lessons learned" from one's own mistakes as a proven way to accelerate learning and application.

"We share the successes and failures. As a by-product, we all learn informally." – Mike, Maple Leaf Foods

There's the common idea that people learn in every moment by picking up cues and subconsciously filtering and organizing the information.

- Only one person mentioned that social learning was sharing relevant articles, and no one mentioned that it was taking a structured course through a social networking channel. This is likely because these structured social learning programs are both rare and not "hitting the mark" when they do occur.
- Infact, most of the formal learning programs that were delivered through social collaboration were not successful.

**Who is involved in social learning?** Social learning involves co-workers, inter-department employees, and occasionally those outside the organization.

- Interestingly, 80% of L&D professionals interviewed (including everyone working at medium-to-large companies) felt that social learning occurred within their organizations. This is probably because there is a lot of untapped knowledge within their companies.
- Line of business leaders, however, were more likely to mention learning from outside their companies (versus L&D professionals), especially if they were in a smaller organization.

"It's the ability to connect inter-departmentally and think through problems with other learners."  
– Don, Loblaw Companies Limited

"Being a part of the executive roundtable with non-competitive industry peers helps us gain additional perspectives." – Darren, VP Marketing, Nature's Path



<sup>2</sup>Borderless Collaboration: Brough Leadership Institute 2017

**When does it occur?** It happens in every moment, both online and offline, in a spontaneous and unstructured way. It may happen as part of a scheduled virtual meeting, a structured course, a pre-planned call, or the everyday process of working.

- The lines blur between “working” and “social learning” because it’s informal learning. Nonetheless, the benefits to employees are significant.

“In a just-in-time environment, the learning happens all the time. Things change fast, and what’s more, everyone has something to contribute.” – Dwayne, Samsung L&D

**Where does it occur?** The unanimous agreement was that social learning happens both online and offline.

- Some said it occurs on LinkedIn, Facebook, or virtual classes, others considered it as occurring on Yammer, Jostle and Jive. Overall, there was wide variance in responses based on the level of digital sophistication already present in the organization.

“It’s vehicle agnostic.” – Dianne, Senior Learning Manager, Unilever

**How does it occur?** Social learning occurs through interactions that are circular and non-sequential. In its best form, it flows effortlessly. A key consideration in this is the ability to work with others.

“Social learning is the white space between every letter and punctuation. It’s where the music happens – in the spaces between the notes.” – Matt White, Sleep Country



## Insight #2 – “It's not learning. It's just doing my job.”

Many business leaders were actively engaged in social learning through informal and formal organizations already, but they didn’t connect their participation to social learning.

“I curate and share with my colleagues what competitors are doing. I skim about 10 articles a day and share about three a week to friends and co-workers. I don’t get how social learning differs from just searching on Google.” – Dana, Babytel

“We get together to figure something out.” – Maria, Professional services firm

“We have cross-functional teams where people learn from each other. What’s more, everyone is encouraged to share their thinking, and the junior people learn from this.” – Darren, VP Marketing, Nature’s Path

The concept of social learning is intertwined with informal learning, which may lead organizations to downplay the role of L&D in this channel of informal learning.

All the L&D respondents discussed social learning as a vehicle that L&D could contribute to, support, or control, whether this was moderating groups on Yammer, organizing “meet-ups” to continue classroom conversations, setting up conference calls, or scheduling when the informal groups would meet. And while the businesses may not have realized it was happening, it all supported the adoption of social learning and informal learning.

“We scaffold the learning. We put out small chunks of information to get groups to talk.”  
– Dwayne, Samsung L&D

### **Insight #3 – Social collaboration offline is required for social learning with technology**

Social collaboration was the expected norm in high-performing organizations, and their cultures supported this. The level of social collaboration through technology was directly proportional to the company’s culture of collaboration and was even evidenced in all aspects of the organization (work environment, organization mandate, leadership, etc.).

“It feels ‘locked down’ here. Egos get in the way as people may feel threatened because they don’t get the credit. ... And then how to manage the politics of whose ideas to adopt and whose not to adopt? I think [social learning] could be a complete failure.”– Vanessa, government employee

As a result, when social collaboration through basic means (e.g., telephone, email, and social media) was already infused in the culture right from onboarding, these same employees were more likely to adopt social learning techniques through informal digital channels.

“Our culture is strong, and people are willing to participate. In fact, anyone can post on the site.”  
– Mary, MEC

“There’s still a stigma attached to social media. Like you’re not doing your real job.”  
– Don, Loblaw Companies Limited

This collaboration leads to diversity of thought because the information flow is lateral and natural. Without it, there are organizational silos, and individuals get stuck in their own paradigms. So if this is foundational in the high-performing companies I talked to, the challenge is for employees to consistently share so they are learning everyday.





# Successful Examples ■■■

Respondents shared many examples of social learning, ranging from no-tech to blended learning to intranet-based or to SharePoint-based to formal learning programs run on a social enterprise platform (e.g., Jive, Slack, Workplace).

## Business-embraced, L&D-supported examples

Some of the most successful on-going examples are ones that the business unit (not L&D) owns.

These include a web-ex community of practice at a credit union that meets monthly via web-ex and quarterly in person to share best practices and common challenges. Because the business owns it and L&D champions it, the success of the program is based on the topics the business selects and how engaged their own people are in the session. Close geographical proximity of the managers in attendance allows them to come together physically, which helps cement the virtual sessions.



An example in a low-tech environment at a retail furniture chain is product-knowledge videos that the sales department proactively created. These were then formalized via the Sr. Vice President of Sales. The organic creation of the videos, which were posted on a private YouTube channel for peer-sharing, turned into a formalized learning piece.

A travel company effectively used Workplace (Facebook at work) with their millennial, socially savvy distributed workforce. Using Workplace to solicit input to their issues (quick answers on product knowledge and local knowledge of certain cities), they were able to get accurate first-hand responses in a timely fashion. The platform met the needs of the workforce that was already sharing information. It provided a means to better filter and funnel the needed information.

The common themes among the successful initiatives were that they fulfilled a core business need, had management support and use, and served a particular purpose.

# Implications ■■■

In order to embrace social learning, ensure your organization reflects these best practices.

## #1 Adopt the characteristics of organizations ready for social learning

Ensure the collaboration technology is already integrated into the work

There is a strong correlation between the adoption of technology overall and how likely an organization is to use a digital platform like an SEN for social learning. Companies ready to embrace social learning are already using social collaboration tools – whether Slack, Jostle, Yammer, Telegram, or Google Hangouts.

In contrast, organizations I interviewed that were married to “old communication means like the phone” were reluctant to consider social learning, given that their workforce probably wouldn’t adopt “new technology fads.” Interestingly, these organizations wouldn’t consider themselves “slow” and, in fact, they may be industry leaders in their field. But if the leadership team and the culture weren’t committed to communication through digital means, then social collaboration and finally social learning were impossible.

Some of these established organizations had actually decided to launch elements of a social learning program (e.g., use Twitter to share your top learning), but unsurprisingly, there was low uptake.

“The Twitter chat session didn’t work. You can’t force people to use a new technology.”  
– Matt, Sleep Country

### Consistently embrace informal learning

High-performing companies were already living “70/20/10” in that all learning programs included an on-the-job component, coaching activation, action learning, and communities of practice. Instructor-led training (ILT) was only 1/3 of a learning program. These cultures that had already adopted informal learning were more likely to embrace social learning.

“Social learning is a natural extension of our already collaborative culture and dispersed workforce”  
– Nazish, consulting firm

### Have a long-standing collaborative culture

Every company that successfully used social learning in some form already had a strong culture of collaboration. Extending this collaboration via digital means was a natural evolution.

“Teams want to learn from other teams – whether it’s face-to-face or with Yammer or even SharePoint.”  
– Vanessa, Blue Shore Financial



## #2 Proactively plan for the adoption challenges

### Difficult to give up control

It is hard for managers to give up control, although this is an essential aspect of social learning. In particular, management needs to forego control of the learning outcome, which is at odds with the traditional hierarchical model of the workforce.

For L&D this means doesn't trying to maintain the role of learning gatekeeper. Nor does it mean being the “learning police” – banning access to anything that hasn't been created by them. What's more, beliefs like “our people don't know what to learn” or “we can't trust them to learn the right things” are no longer appropriate.

A “we-know-best” attitude doesn't work! In fact, the recent Towards Maturity Learner's Voice report showed that employees like to be in charge of how they learn, with 91% wanting to learn at their own pace and 82% knowing what they need to learn in order to do their jobs<sup>3</sup>. Laura Overton, Founder of Towards Maturity, commented “The message is clear: L&D teams must adapt to the needs of colleagues rather than force them to do what L&D wants them to do.”

### Stigma with social tools

If a modality is unknown and unproven, it can be difficult to make the business case and justify the expense. There is also a stigma still associated with social media in the classroom. Consider the fabled “guy on his phone in the back of the class tweeting and only half paying attention.” In addition, there's the ongoing reluctance of employees to embrace something new.

### Too much information

This reluctance is further exacerbated by the sheer amount of data that employees receive through social collaboration and social media tools at work and at home. Quite simply, there's too much information already there for social learning to be effective.

“We need a content diet as there's information overload!” (Dana uses Twitter, filtered sites for search, and other community-based platforms to pare down and see what is relevant.)– Dana, Babytel

### Not another tool

Finally, even with single sign-on, the added step of going to yet another platform for messages is still onerous. Despite the drawbacks, email continues to be the preferred method of communication, and breaking the habit to use a social collaboration tool for certain types of communication or to seek informal learning opportunities has been slow.

“I have SharePoint, OneDrive, the company's intranet, email, and now I'm supposed to check Yammer too? When am I supposed to have time to slack off for Yammer when I have work to do?”  
– Dwayne Rookwood – Samsung



<sup>3</sup> Towards Maturity Learner's Voice 2018

## #3 Implement the best practices

Despite the challenges, there were a number of successful social learning initiatives and tests that were used. When organizations find the right approach for social learning, these best practices will help ensure the learning experience is smooth.

### Carefully plan for successful organizational change

- Create a strong change management program with key stakeholders, change agents, and the business units involved. Successful adoption of social learning and the related tools is a big endeavour that should not be minimized.
- Communicate the benefits to individuals, not just the organization.
- Adjust reward and recognition systems; stress the need to share, not just the need to know.
- Develop measures based on business objectives.

“Having management support was a key ingredient to make our social learning initiative effective. Plus we tracked results and proved we could meet stakeholder needs.” -Cameron, Rogers Media

### Incorporate social learning into existing plans

- Elements of a social learning program need to be part of a bigger strategy and **cannot** be used in isolation.
- Connect social collaboration with the overall business strategy and critical processes.
- Ensure social learning initiatives are planned in advance and interwoven through a learning path along with a strong “What’s in it for me?” (WIIFM) up front.

### Encourage adoption

- Encourage communication from everyone. Embrace that each employee has unique experiences to share, regardless of their level. Communicate that contributions from up, down, and across the organization are expected.
- Offer a voluntary program with a clear WIIFM. Use influence – not coercion – to bring people into the network with complimentary ideas and skills.
- Model ideal behaviour. Take the fear out of participating; be collegial with those involved.
- Demonstrate transparency – think and work out loud; pass on information quickly; share personal experience and expertise.
- Have visible management encouragement to use the social tools and management adoption.

### Cultivate a learning culture of empowered self-discovery

- Foster a company culture that embraces self-discovery and improvement with motivated employees who want to help each other.
- The business needs to already believe in a learning culture, carefully planned learning on the job, and the benefits of planned informal learning (as opposed to an organization without any training where all training becomes on the job by default).

### Plan for an ideal employee experience

- Think about the user experience as well as solution features.
- Make collaboration tools accessible in existing workflows; avoid additional logins or multiple window switching.



## Summary ■■■

There are many benefits to social learning and collaboration that the companies interviewed experienced or imagined would be possible. One such benefit, as previously stated, is diversity of thought because ideas and information flows are positive and lateral. Without it, organizations are stuck in their own paradigms.

Benefits are best realized when people consistently share and thus enable learning everyday through this virtuous cycle. However, the essential precursor is having a carefully crafted culture where people are happy to share their perspectives and knowledge and are hired intentionally to be good at developing others.

In this growing age of information, social learning is used to help filter the myriad of content.

“I absolutely need to learn from others – it’s more effective than a google search, and the person has real experience to back it up.” – Dana, Babytel

The benefits of social learning are clear and undisputable. What is yet to be determined, however, is the best technology and approach to enable this. There is the opportunity for development of a new informal social collaboration that is employee (not L&D!) led and that will organically morph into a blend of employee and Artificial Intelligence curated content, with problem/solution and information sharing throughout.

Strong business ownership and leadership adoption will spearhead this movement. The key is to ready your organization to be poised to seize this future opportunity for effective workplace development.



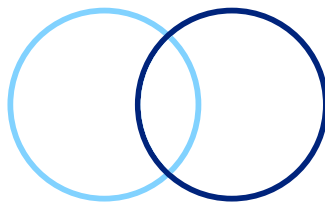
# BEYOND THE SKY

Never think the sky's the limit  
when there are footprints on the moon

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