# Social learning
# in the workplace:

How collaborative activities
grow strong teams

**talent lms**

# CONTENTS

# Introduction

If you're an HR or L&D professional, a team leader, or an external trainer, you'll have experienced two major changes to the L&D landscape in recent years. On the one hand, there's the rise in community-centric (social) learning. But on the other hand, workforces are now more dispersed than they've ever been, thanks to rapid growth in digitization and an increasingly remote-first mindset.

Virtual working and social learning both bring big benefits. But on the surface, they appear to contradict one another. How can you develop a group approach to learning if most of your employees are rarely ever in the same physical space?

To make it work you need to craft social learning into a training strategy so that it caters to a disparate and potentially disconnected workforce. (Just as well as it does for one where employees exist together in the same place at the same time.)

In this guide, we delve deep into social learning. We'll explore the theory behind it, but also share practical ways to incorporate it into your training. We'll highlight the benefits. And look at ways to measure the ROI for your business and your investment. But (busting a few myths along the way) we'll also tackle some of the collaborative learning challenges.

To address the all-important shift in the learning landscape, we'll also pinpoint the tools and tech you can use to organize social learning activities that all of your employees can access, wherever they're based. Answering that question: how can you make social learning work in a remote-first world?

And, most importantly, we'll demonstrate how by using a collaborative learning approach you can grow strong, powerful, and productive teams.

**But first, a bit of background.**

**Chapter 1.**

# What is collaborative learning?

> "*Learning is an experience, everything else is just information.*"

The value Albert Einstein places on experiential education, is at the heart of **social and collaborative learning.** But what is collaborative learning? Put simply, social or collaborative learning supports the theory that people learn better when they learn together. Actively creating collective experiences is more effective than a simple one-way download of data if you want to promote long-lasting and effective learning.

But social learning isn't new. In fact, people (particularly children) have been learning informally, by observing each other and modeling behavior, for as long as they've existed. But the theory behind social learning, and its application in the formal world of L&D, was first introduced in the 1950s/60s. It's now an established learning and teaching strategy, supported by cognitive scientists around the world.

**And it all started with a snake.**

While helping people overcome their fear of reptiles, Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist, made an interesting discovery.

He found that his patients overcame their fear of snakes more quickly and more convincingly after observing other "cured" patients in action. Being able to see other people conquer their phobias by handling snakes, proved far more powerful than using theory, persuasion, or logic.

**And out of this discovery, social learning was born.**

Working in partnership with his doctoral student, Richard Walters, Bandura began experimenting with the theory that people develop themselves by instinctively mirroring the behavior of others. And he soon came to the conclusion that **observation, imitation, and modeling are powerful drivers of human learning.**

*"Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling,"* he wrote. *"From observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action."*

Through social learning, students don't just absorb knowledge, they apply it. They use knowledge to drive a change in behavior. And adopt a different and more effective approach to tasks and activities.

But, Bandura and Walters note, that learning isn't always behavioral. Rather it's a cognitive process that takes place in a social context.

But how do you replicate a social context in the workplace? Isn't the corporate world one step removed from what we understand by "being social"?

Looking at it from a business point of view, social learning is a form of personal development that extends beyond the instructor-led training sessions you might traditionally build your L&D strategy around. It's about providing employees with the means and the motivation to interact with their peers, **outside of those more formal L&D environments.** Working together, learners can grow their understanding of a particular subject and develop their proficiency around a specific skill.

Practically speaking, there are lots of ways you can go about this. Discussions, workshops, communities of interest, messaging boards, live chats, forums, or other group activities are just a few examples. And, thanks to eLearning tech, these collaborative activities can take place either in-person or online, in real-time or asynchronously.

On their own, each of these activities performs an important role. But together they create something even more powerful. Worth more than just the sum of their parts, they don't just make connections possible. They help create and sustain a culture of social learning across your organization.

Yes, how you connect is important. And we'll dig deeper into all of those individual activities and ways to incorporate them into your training a little later on. But before we leap ahead to examine 'how' you deliver social learning, it's important to understand why you're doing what you're doing. Why creating a culture of social learning matters. And what it brings to your business, your employees, and you.

## Chapter 1.
## Let's recap this chapter:

*What is collaborative learning? Social or collaborative learning is a training strategy based on the principle that people learn better when they learn together. The concept isn't new. But it was developed and formalized by psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1950s whose experiments proved that observation, imitation, and modeling are powerful drivers of human learning.*

*Through social learning, students don't just absorb knowledge, they apply it and use it to drive a change in behavior. And, backed by other cognitive scientists, it has since become a successful model for learning in the workplace.*

**Chapter 2.**

# Benefits of collaborative learning in the workplace

We've touched upon the successes Albert Bandura achieved with his phobia patients by adopting a social learning approach. But how does this translate to the corporate world?

Let's look at some of the main **benefits of collaborative learning,** and how they impact your employees and your teams.
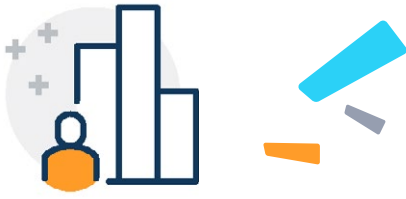
## 1. Increase ROI

Course completion and pass rates are key indicators of a course's success. And important ROI measurements. Social learning activities (particularly discussion boards and messaging forums) have good success rates in both these areas.

Course completion rates rose by 85% when HBX (Harvard Business School Online) introduced social learning into their program. A figure reinforced by the Association for Talent Development (ATD). Taking into account metrics such as usage, investment, and content quality, the ADT reported on a social learning initiative (SLI) at a technology company in the US. The headline stat? Social learning approaches delivered a 75:1 ROI ratio compared to formal web-based training, equating to a net gain of $29.5 million. Which brings us to cost. Social learning has the potential to bring savings to your bottom line, offering a cheaper alternative to the more expensive instructor-led and web-based training.

## 2. Appeal to millennials

For millennials, social media power both their professional and their personal lives. When it comes to learning, they typically have short attention spans, moving swiftly from one form of learning to another. Social learning offers them the flexibility to control their training and the dynamism to prevent distractions.

You don't, of course, want to design a learning strategy purely around one segment of your workforce. But, given that millennials are on course to dominate the global workforce in the coming years, it's sensible to use the power of social learning to get them on board and keep them there.

And, besides, according to the stats, most of the other generations in your organization are also social learning advocates. Over 50% of each group (from Boomers to Gen Z) view collaboration (forums, groups, or Q&A sessions, for example) as a positive part of any training program.

## 3. Build trust

Openness and transparency build trust. Social learning supports an open approach to communication between peers and leads to higher levels of trust between colleagues. And this, in turn, reflects back on your organization.

Why does trust matter? According to a report by the Neuroscience of Trust, people at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% increase in energy levels, and 50% higher productivity.

## 4. Foster engagement

When it comes to training, engagement refers to the levels of investment an individual has in their learning process. In short, people are more engaged in their learning if they feel:

- More actively involved and in control of their training
- That the training content is unique and current
- Motivated and clear of the end goal
- They're being given the right knowledge to help them develop

Here's where social learning comes in. An active and "living" process, powered by employees, not management teams or third-party providers, social learning gives employees a personal stake in their own learning. It increases a sense of ownership because learners are active drivers of their training journey. And, thanks to a direct personal investment in the process, they're more likely to want it to succeed.

Collaborative learning is immediate. Which means knowledge acquired feels relevant and designed to support development. And the emphasis on collaboration fosters a sense of connection and belonging within the organization.

## 5. Raise performance and boost productivity

Linking social learning in the workplace to tangible business outcomes can be a challenge. Some of the metrics are not so easy to align with business results, and there may be variables influencing success.

Where numbers are hard to find, common sense can be used to justify success. For example, when people ask questions and test solutions in real-time (or without having to wait for a formal training session), they can get immediate clarity on critical content. And act on it there and then.

Similarly, when people learn together, they cover more ground, faster. Onboarding is another good example. If employees can access guidance from day one, they don't have to wait for their formal induction process to be complete before they can start being productive. All of which, logic would suggest, drives performance.
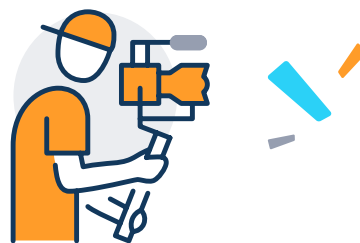
## 6. Grow additional skills

When people learn with and from each other, they acquire more than the hard skills

they're focusing on at the time. They develop soft skills, too.

For example, when they work on group projects during their training, they practice teamwork. Likewise, social learning helps grow communication, diplomacy, problem-solving, respect, adaptability, and tact.

## 7. Improve overall company culture and community

Culture and community are terms that are often interchangeable in the business world. Both indicate a sense of unity, and both are symbols of strength. Emphasizing mentorship, teamwork, a horizontal structure, and collaboration, a people-focused organization effectively combines the two. And it's this type of culture that social learning can help create.

Including everyone (senior leaders, managers, and team members) in the social aspects of learning builds solid, emotional connections. It helps form strong individual and team bonds, develop better leaders, and nurture a positive community feeling.

## 8. Give employees a voice

*"There's zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas,"*

says author Susan Cain in her book "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking". Cain then goes on to link this observation with something she calls the "extrovert bias".

Even if you haven't heard of the "extrovert bias", you'll probably have experienced it. It's the assumption, woven into many traditional, "live" classroom-based training methods that the only way to contribute is to be bold. To stand out, to put your hand up, to shout out the answer, and to make your voice heard.

Social learning says otherwise. By using collaborative learning channels and communication tools such as discussion boards, messaging apps, and wikis, for example, employees who are shy or more introverted can still contribute to a conversation. They can share ideas, ask questions, provide answers, and practice what they've learned in comfort and with confidence.

## 9. Bring people together

Whether you've got high numbers of remote workers, or lots of globally-distributed teams, studying at a distance can lead to people feeling isolated and disengaged.

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One of the big benefits of collaborative learning is that it helps dissolve the transactional distance between learners and teams, making them feel more connected, supported, and an active and important part of the process.

interaction to the mix. Why? Well, as the saying goes, "show me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn."

Involving students in the learning process turns learners from passive recipients into active participants. It gives them the chance to practice what they've learned, aids recall, and helps them hold onto the information that they've just internalized.

## 10. Increase knowledge retention

On average, people retain only 5% of what they hear and 10% of what they read. Not a great deal, right? The good news is, that figure rises significantly (up to about 50%) when you add active discussion and

## Chapter 2.
## Let's recap this chapter:

*Social learning future-proofs L&D and organizations, by appealing to the next generation of employees, and by serving a remote-first mindset. Collaborative learning benefits various groups within the organization including:*

- ### Employees:

  *Social learning benefits individual learners by supporting knowledge retention, engagement, and personal development. It promotes accessibility and diversity by giving different learning types, particularly introverts, a voice.*

- ### Employers:

  *Social learning benefits businesses by providing a low-cost (yet still effective) alternative to more cost-intensive training models. And by cultivating a supportive and community-minded culture, underpinned by trust.*

- ### L&D professionals:

  *Collaborative learning drives a positive training and development strategy by raising course completion and pass rates. And by reinforcing the development of soft skills.*

# 10 social learning activities and how to apply them

So far, we've talked a lot about the theory of social learning. But what does it look like in practice? Well, social learning isn't passive. It requires participation from at least two people for it to take place. And it's centered around activities, both formal and informal.

Here, we list some of the most impactful social learning examples and elaborate on ways to bring them alive in your organization:

## 1. Lunch and learn sessions

Lunch and learns are a great way to share knowledge and network in an informal, social setting. And they're relatively easy to organize from a facilitator's perspective. Sessions are usually themed around a particular topic. And they should include opportunities for all of the participants to ask questions and discuss issues.

### HOW TO USE:

A versatile format, lunch and learn sessions can be used for a range of different training types, such as:

**INTERDEPARTMENTAL TRAINING**
When you work in a large or dispersed organi- zation, it's easy for silos to form. Lunch and learn cross-training sessions are a good way of breaking down barriers, providing transparency across different teams, aiding understanding, and boosting cohesion. Use them to:

- Provide insights into an individual's daily responsibilities
- Demonstrate new job-related skills to colleagues in other departments
- Offer a review or preview of a project
- Celebrate a team or individual achievement

**PRODUCT OR SERVICE TRAINING**
If your business is product-focused, it's important all of your employees (not just your sales reps) know what that product does. And that they're aware of new features and services. Lunch-and-learns are a good way to deliver ongoing product training to your whole company, giving them the knowledge and the confidence to deliver a meaningful "elevator pitch" should they need to. Relaxed and informal, delivered first-hand by the people who develop your products, sessions like these are often more compelling than an intranet update or formal online training program.

**MOTIVATIONAL TALKS**
Your employees have skills and interests that extend beyond their day-to-day job. And being able to share these with colleagues is inspiring and can increase motivation, and enthusiasm about L&D, across your organization. Friendly, employee-led lunch and learn sessions provide just the right atmosphere for this kind of TEDx Talk-style training workshop.

**SOFT SKILLS SUPPORT**
With a focus on keeping it light, lunch and learns provide the right forum for discussing topics such as diversity, wellness, time management, and leadership.

**SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT (SME) WORKSHOPS**
There's critical knowledge that's buried away in the minds of individuals in every organization. Lunch and learn sessions are a good way for this knowledge to transition from one mind to many.

## WHAT TO REMEMBER:

**Don't forget your remote employees.**
Use conferencing tools and messaging apps to keep everyone involved. And remember to cater to different time zones as well as locations.

**Be proactive.**
Promote this kind of training. And make it easy for employees to put themselves forward.

**Stay focused.**
Make sure each session has a clear objective.

## 2. Social media channels and messaging apps

The clue is in the name. Social media's made for social learning. Most, if not all of your employees, will feel at home communicating through social media. Which makes channels such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn useful tools in your social learning kit. Messaging apps perform much the same function.

## HOW TO USE:

For social media and messaging apps to be effective in a social learning environment, there needs to be a focus. Creating closed groups prevents distraction, which can be a risk with this form of communication.

So, divide your learners up, assign them to a group, and then give each group a project, task, or question to collaborate on using your chosen channel/s. Group collaboration projects give learners opportunities to

communicate and collaborate with others they might not normally have come into contact with. Giving structure through a task or question facilitates the conversation. And the team approach encourages each individual to assume a role that they feel comfortable in. Inviting each group to then share their findings with other groups is a nice way to conclude the activities and bring everyone back together under one common purpose.

## WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Create a competitive spirit across groups through gamification (badges, points, or leaderboards, for example).

- Include simple assignments that encourage people to work together to come up with a solution or idea.

- Provide guidelines and best-practice tips for using social media and messaging apps for training.

## 3. Forums and discussion boards

Social learning's about sharing ideas and learning from others, in an active and live environment. Discussion boards or forums tick both of these boxes, providing opportunities for people to talk and listen, in an informal, but structured and moderated setting.

## HOW TO USE:

Each of your training courses will have a different objective. To ensure learners have clarity and the same learning intention underpinning their training, you'll need to create separate discussion forums for them all. Once in place, get people talking by posting topic-focused questions or provoking statements. Or by sharing a video (YouTube is a good place to go for this) and asking group members to discuss their thoughts and impressions.

Discussion groups are ideal for tackling potentially complex subjects that may require thought, objectivity, and consideration such as change in the workplace, mental health, diversity and inclusion, communication, and emotional intelligence.

## WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Use a moderator or facilitator to keep learners focused
- Prevent trolling and ensure content shared is appropriate and respectful
- Publish user guidelines to set standards of behavior and define purpose.
- If time and server storage are issues, keep discussions text-based



## 4. Mentorships

It only takes two people for social learning to take place. And one-to-one mentorships offer both mentors and their mentees a chance to grow. Social learning at its most personalized, intimate, and informal, mentees get the nurturing support they need to develop, while mentors have the chance to develop their coaching skills.

## HOW TO USE:

Chances are you won't be able to allocate each of your employees their own professional tutor. But that doesn't mean you can't provide personalized mentoring as part of your collaborative learning program.

Pair experienced employees with newer employees or employees who are looking to move into new areas of your business. Send out online questionnaires for people who are interested in being mentors and record their skill sets and interests. And do the same for people who are interested in being mentored. Use this information to match mentors up with the right mentees.

For example, an employee interested in communication skills, with established persuasion, negotiation, and presentation skills, would make a good match for an employee wanting to move into sales.

## WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Use training contracts to clarify expectations and set mutual outcomes.
- Make sure both parties know what tools they should use to communicate.
- Only use mentors who are genuinely interested in the role and willing to participate.
- Encourage mentees to be proactive, too, by coming to each session with specific questions or topics they'd like to cover.

## 5. Employee-owned blog posts

Much of social learning is informal. And it's the mix of informality, in a wider group setting, that means it's often more creative than other forms of training. Employee blog posts are a good example of this creativity in action.

### HOW TO USE:

Give individuals the opportunity to write about a topic and share it publicly, inviting comments and feedback. This produces different ideas, perspectives, and unplanned discussions. Engaging in a topic in this way helps comprehension and retention for both the blog post writer and the respondents.

Easy to implement and access, employee-led blog posts create a sense of pace and immediacy to learning.

### WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Give learners templates they can use to structure their blog posts.
- Create a schedule of topics your employees can work from.
- Promote your eLearning blog through internal communications channels and encourage employees to interact with the posts by leaving comments.
- Use the information from the blog posts to gain insights into possible areas of future training.

- Support employees to collaborate on a post if they feel unsure about working alone.
- Accept alternatives to text, where possible (such as videos, podcasts, graphic or narrative-based contributions).

## 6. Webinars

Usually targeting up to 100 or so employees, webinars bring larger groups of learners together in a social and interactive setting.

### HOW TO USE:

A common form of synchronous learning, their social element is supported by "live", interactive elements. So make sure to use surveys, polls, online chats, breakout groups, and Q&A sessions. These increase engagement with a remote audience that can be easily distracted and prone to multi-tasking.

Consider scheduling monthly webinars, and sending participants a list of topics or questions in advance.

### WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Your webinar must be accessible to all participants. With this in mind, you should provide a live transcript or closed captions, audio descriptions for all key content, format presentations (text and images) using accessibility design guidelines, and make a recording so participants can refer

back and catch up on anything they've missed.

- Check whether your video conferencing tool supports your invited number of participants.
- Plan the backbone of the presentation o it stays focused.
- Factor in time for questions and discussions, and include interactivity to ensure your webinar is "social" rather than an instructor-led broadcast.
- Associate the webinar with a social media hashtag to drive post-course discussion.

## 7. Virtual classrooms and workshops

Organized around collaborative learning, virtual classrooms use technology to give all participants an engaging and interactive learning experience.

### HOW TO USE:

Whiteboards, document sharing, Q&A or interview sessions, and breakout rooms all add to the social element. Familiar social media engagement features (ranking and rating icons, waving and raised hands emojis), plus surveys and polling, are also good ways to create a sense of community. Virtual workshops don't differ greatly from virtual classrooms. Only that their remit is to deliver group or collective outcomes rather than individual ones.

### WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Rather than choosing everything, select the features and tools that match well with the subject of your training.
- Make sure you have an engaging,

confident, and credible facilitator guiding the session.

- Limit attendees to 12–15 people and keep sessions short (ideally under 90 minutes).
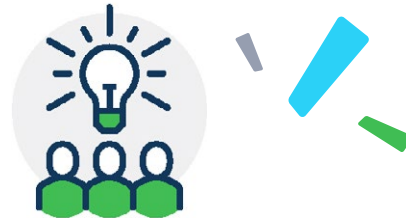
## 8. Cohorts and communities of practice

Using narrative, storytelling, and shared experiences, cohorts or communities of practice are smaller groups of learners who collaborate together on a continuous learning journey.  And suitable for longer courses that require more in-depth and progressive studying.

### HOW TO USE:

Using a shared space, "owned and managed" by the learners themselves, cohort and community group members can test and try different approaches. And learn from each other over a period of time. The continuous and open nature of this type of experiential learning builds trust among participants, as well as enhances the understanding of a topic.

### WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Keep these "action learning groups" small (6–8 individuals is ideal).
- Scaffold learning into chunks and use a roadmap to plot the different stages.
- Use success stories to encourage learners to engage with their cohort or community space.

## 9. Employee-driven training videos

Videos are a great way to train. They keep people learning and remembering for longer. They're easy to share, engaging and familiar. And, combined with a social learning approach, they enrich your L&D toolkit.

### HOW TO USE:

Challenge your employees to work together to produce online training videos of their own. These could be demonstrations, walkthroughs, how-to guides, demos, or simulations. Then get them to publish them on a dedicated YouTube channel. This will produce a rich repository of videos your employees can access as and when in a "moment of need".

But, just as importantly, passing the baton onto your learners to produce the videos reinforces learning and cements knowledge. A win-win.

### WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Provide simple advice to learners on how to go about this. It should be straightforward, but some of your employees may need a little help.
- You may need an element of quality control here. Give feedback and extra support where needed.

## 10. Team games

Gamification works when learners are motivated. But the nature of that motivation doesn't have to be on an individual level. Using meaningful group and social interaction, your learners can work together to reach a common goal.

### HOW TO USE:

Devise a game centered around teams of participants winning or "collecting" feedback instead of points. Tasking them to build enough social connections to graduate to "the next level." Prompt them to work collaboratively to solve a mystery that links with your training topic. Or, challenge them to solve the right number of clues to pass a specific course.

### WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- Keep it friendly and fun to encourage participation.
- Keep the scope of the game focused on your training objective.

# Chapter 3.
# Let's recap this chapter:

*Social learning isn't passive. It relies on groups of participants engaging with each other and being active. Size doesn't matter. From small, personalized one-to-one coaching sessions to webinars or workshops with 100+ participants, collaborative learning examples come in many different guises.*

*And there's a range of diverse activities, both formal and informal, that you can incorporate into your training program. The key to success is to match each different activity to the right learning intention or outcome.*

**Chapter 4.**

# The role of technology in social learning

When we think of social interaction, particularly collaboration and teamwork, it's natural to picture these taking place in person. But this isn't necessarily the case with social learning.

With larger numbers of people working in remote or hybrid environments, in-person contact can be more challenging to organize. And, besides, it might not always be the best approach for every different learning objective. Which is where technology comes in.

## The benefits of social learning technology

With the right tools and platforms in place, you can organize and implement social learning activities that all of your employees can access—wherever they are.

Technology also improves access. Instead of waiting for a scheduled training session, your employees can use social learning tech to get "just-in-time" advice and information.

It's also a great leveler. By handing control over to learners themselves, social learning technology changes learning from being predominantly top-down and driven by management to bottom-up and powered by your people. And this control, in turn, elevates your employees to become subject matter experts.

Not only that, but by using social learning technology your learners can personalize their L&D, filtering out what they need and what they don't. And, of course, social learning technology makes content ultimately shareable.

So, social learning technology has lots of benefits. But that's not to say there isn't a place for in-person training. Rather, having the right technology means you're able to adapt and blend your approach to suit your employees, your organization, and your learning objective.

To help, we've gathered together a list of different tools and platforms that can help you do this.

## Tools to support social learning

Without the right tools, your social learning strategy won't take off. The good news is, getting the right tools in place isn't difficult. And there are lots of free options to explore. The challenge is syncing everything up so it all works seamlessly for all of your employees. Providing a consistent and clear user experience can make the difference between a social learning program your employees will engage with and one they won't.

Below is a list of individual tools to consider. As well as options for a more holistic and integrated approach.

### 1. Communication tools

**Messaging apps:**
Internal, instant messaging tools such as Slack provide options for immediate and informal, yet structured conversations. By creating different channels you can organize your social learning into more formal groups and target different courses, teams, or projects.  And empower users to communicate informally either one-to-one, or by creating their own smaller channels and communities of interest.

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For example, Slack, or the messaging functionality in collaboration apps like Teams suit general use. But for specialized teams (e.g., developers), look into industry-specific platforms like Stack Overflow. These also come with rating functionality so you and your learners can assess questions and answers with the highest value.

## Social media platforms:

Hugely popular, and reassuringly familiar, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter offer lots of different ways to enhance social learning.

### Facebook

With Facebook you can:

- Create open or closed groups learners can use to chat, access, and share resources.
- Use Messenger to encourage direct, personal contact between individual learners or your L&D team.
- Share video content, articles, and images to provoke discussion among groups.

### Instagram

Great for practical training, use Instagram to create pages for different courses or groups. And encourage learners to share their progress through posts, stories, and reels.

### YouTube

Versatility (being able to post videos practically anywhere) is the main advantage of YouTube. Your learners can record a presentation, guide, or demo and share it with others using any of the other tools you have available (Facebook or Instagram, for example). If you've got a YouTube channel,

you can create a repository of training tips and advice.

### LinkedIn

The place to go for networking and professional development, LinkedIn offers a number of useful social learning functions. You can use it to set up internal groups for employees on different courses. And also encourage employees to join external groups that might support their development.

It's also a good platform your learners can use to publish articles or share insights about what they're learning. This will usually lead to comments and feedback. Encourage learners to share these with others in their group.

### Twitter

Hashtags that support specific topics, retweets, learning lists (groups of users), chat events, and a powerful search all make Twitter a useful tool to support social learning.

## Online discussion forums:

Discussion boards or forums are one of the best examples of social learning in action. And their concept's beautifully simple. Create discussions on different topics and invite other users to join, view, and comment.

Discussion forums can cover a lot of ground. From enabling ice-breakers and introductions to providing mid-course support and post-course reinforcement, you can set up forums for each stage of your learning lifecycle. And add in groups structured around specific activities such as Q&As and peer-to-peer review.
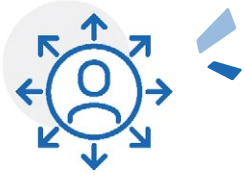
## 2. Knowledge sharing platforms

### Corporate wikis:

Having a corporate wiki makes it easier for your teams to collaborate and share knowledge efficiently. So it's worth looking into a tool that can help you build and manage your own. A good source of information, wikis do require some management to make sure they're up-to-date and accurate. Use role functionality within your tool to support this.

### Corporate blogs:

We touched upon the social learning benefits of employee-owned blog posts earlier. So it makes sense to include a blogging platform in your social learning toolkit. Choose one that's intuitive or you run the risk of alienating users.

## 3. Group learning software

### Web conferencing platforms

Whether it's webinars or workshops, web conferencing tools such as Zoom,  Microsoft Teams, GotoMeeting, and BigBlueButton bring big groups of disparate learners together. Many also come with enhanced functionality (messaging break-out groups, and comments) learners can use to connect during the event.

## 4. Holistic training solutions

### Learning management systems (LMS):

In today's tech-enabled world, you'll never be short of individual tools you can use to support social learning in the workplace. But using them in a way that guarantees engagement is more of a challenge. Having lots of different platforms sounds good in theory. But unless you make it easy for your learners to use and find them all, they won't get involved.

Here's where a feature-rich learning management system can help. A good LMS will integrate with third-party platforms (many of which we've mentioned here). But more than that, it also provides its own native applications to support social learning. Which means you and your learners can use online discussion boards, gamification tools, messaging functionality, web conferencing facilities, video-sharing, and customizable user groups, all from one central portal. And because everything's centralized, your learners only have to remember one login, and become familiar with one interface. All of which drive user engagement.

## Chapter 4.
## Let's recap this chapter:

*Social learning technologies bring disparate teams together. They help employees work and learn at the same time. They level up learning and offer immediate access to users. And they help organize and structure social learning.*

*From social media platforms to knowledge-sharing tools, the market is packed with different technologies you can use. But to grow engagement, it pays to look to a more integrated and centralized approach. Learning management systems come complete with their own native social learning tools. And also integrate with third-party platforms. Which makes it easier for your learners and for you.*

**Chapter 5.**

# How to grow a social learning culture

You've got the right tools in place and you've made it easy for your learners to access them. But why should they? What's going to encourage them to make time in their busy, working day for social learning?

Embedding a culture of collaborative learning across your organization helps. A lot. And will go a long way to making your social learning strategy a success. Here are a few ways you can nurture one.

## 1. Go mobile

Your employees use their phones to keep connected in their social lives. And that makes mobile devices a natural fit for social learning. If your social learning content is optimized for mobile, it becomes portable. Which means your employees can dip in and out when they have a free slot.

## 2. Start as you mean to go on

You can reinforce your social learning messaging at different stages in an employee's lifecycle. But the onboarding stage is arguably the most powerful. Show your new hires how highly you value social learning by referring to it during onboarding. And by giving them opportunities to explore resources, share knowledge, and connect with others from the very start.

## 3. Make learning a part of working

Use internal communications channels to reinforce the messaging around social learning. Whether it's on your intranet, in all-staff newsletters, team or departmental emails, or senior leader updates, talking about social learning in ongoing campaigns

will keep the topic front of mind. It will remind employees that it's important, and make them feel like it's part of their day-to-day culture.

## 4. Create opportunities for teamwork

Without teams (however big or small) social learning won't work. Create opportunities for teamwork wherever you can so that reaching out to others feels natural. Rather than giving projects to individuals, allocate them to small groups, if possible. And mix those groups up so you have representatives from different departments and teams.

## 5. Celebrate champions

Building trust and credibility in a brand or product, endorsements are big in social media circles. Social learning may not attract the same level of stardom, but using well-respected, popular figures within your own organization to "champion" it can increase buy-in.

## 6. Make it official

Formalizing social learning by including social learning activities in job descriptions and social learning objectives in appraisals sends out a powerful message. It says that social learning is important, that it's valued, and encouraged, and an essential part of what makes people and teams a success.

## 7. Lead by example

Your managers have a direct impact on the culture of their team. If they use and advocate social learning, their team members are more likely to follow. The same goes for your L&D professionals. It's not good enough to create a social learning strategy or design social learning experiences. They need to be social learners themselves.

## 8. Make meetings social

Weekly team meetings are a good opportunity to blend social learning into your team dynamic. With everyone gathered together, make social learning a regular feature on your agenda (if you have one). Using a rota, ask individuals to present something new each week or groups working collaboratively on projects to share something they've learned.

## Chapter 5.
## Let's recap this chapter:

*Embedding a culture of social learning within your organization will encourage employees to become active participants. How can you do this? Show employees collaborative learning is valued. Make it part of their day-to-day work life, lead by example, create advocates, and reinforce teamwork.*

# The dark side of social learning:

## *Myths, limitations, and challenges*

So far, our narrative about social learning has been positive. But, like everything, there are two sides to every story.

In this chapter, we assume a different perspective. We'll look at some of the myths surrounding social learning. But also tackle some of the very real challenges and limitations.

## 10 social learning myths

The success of social learning as a training model is well-documented and based on a wealth of research. But there are still myths and misconceptions that surround it. Time to unravel them...

### 1. It's all about social media

Yes, social media is a natural fit with social learning. But networking sites alone won't drive a successful learning program. Knowledge sharing platforms (wikis and blogs), group learning tools (web and video conferencing) and standalone messaging and discussion board apps are equally as important.

### 2. You can't measure engagement or success

Just because a lot of social media is informal, doesn't mean it can't be measured. LMS metrics, social media reports, evaluation surveys, and learner feedback can all be used to analyze engagement and source actionable insights.

### 3. Only tech geeks will benefit

As long as you choose well-designed, intuitive tools your learners won't need any technical knowledge or skills to participate in, and benefit from, social learning. In fact, get it right and your users won't notice the tools at all. Particularly if you're using an LMS that brings all of your tech and tools together under one roof.

### 4. There's no formal structure

Social learning is, er, social. But that doesn't mean it's always informal or impromptu. Yes, there are elements of this. But as well as being organic and natural, it can also involve activities that are planned and organized. Webinars, demo videos, scheduled live events, instructor-led workshops, and peer coaching groups or mentoring sessions are good examples of more formal social learning activities .

### 5. It's another new, digital fad

Social learning isn't new and it isn't a "phase". The practice of social learning is, in fact, as old as time. Humans have always learned socially, following their primitive human instincts of observation, interpretation, and modeling. The theory behind social learning is comparatively more recent, dating back to the 70s and the work of Albert Bandura. But cognitive/behavioral learning theories have been around for much longer. So, no, social learning isn't linked to recent developments in technology. Technology just made it more accessible.

### 6. It's just about "copying"

There's more to social learning than simply replicating or repeating information. It's also a cognitive process that requires learners to attribute meaning to what they're experiencing. How individuals are

feeling at the time (their frame of mind), preconceptions and assumptions, will all influence their response to social learning stimuli.

## 7. No one else uses social learning, just L&D teams

While social learning is big in the corporate eLearning world, educational institutions (schools and universities) also use it heavily in their approach to teaching.

## 8. Social learning makes L&D redundant

Some of social learning is organic and self-driven. But L&D professionals still play a major role in making it a success. They provide structure, create conversations and content, set up groups and teams, analyze input and evaluation success, cultivate a positive social learning culture, organize formal social learning events, establish goals and learning objectives, keep discussions on track, (and so much more). Without L&D

input social learning would just be a series of random and disconnected interactions.

## 9. It's not "serious" learning

The phrase "social" is often associated with "fun" and informal catch-ups. But "social learning" isn't just about being social. It's about learning, too (the clue's in the name). So, while it may feel more relaxed and enjoyable because it involves people more than presentations, it should always be underpinned by a learning objective.

## 10. You won't benefit if you're not outwardly "sociable"

Rather than excluding introverts, social learning presents more opportunities for them to participate. Discussion boards, messaging apps, wikis, and blog posts all give employees who would never put their hand up to ask a question in a live webinar or workshop, a safe and supportive environment to contribute to a conversation.
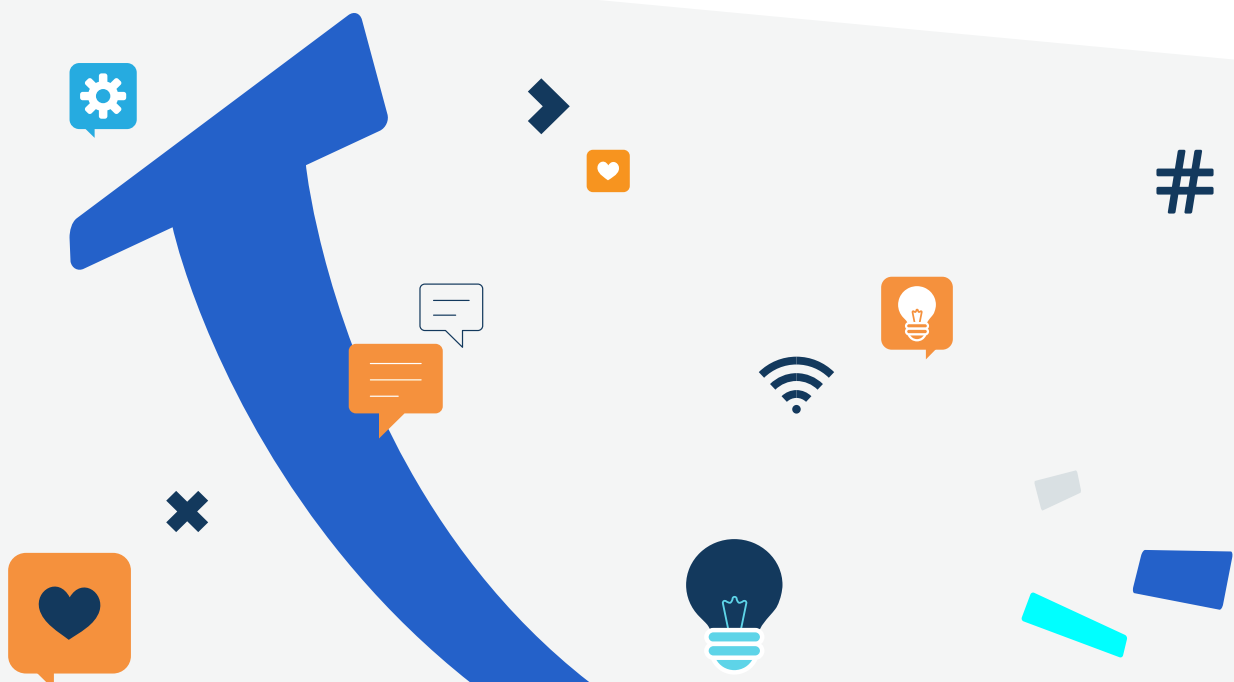
## Social learning challenges and solutions

So, the most common myths around social learning are now debunked. But there are genuine challenges associated with a collaborative learning approach. Let's take a look at how to approach them.

**CHALLENGE 1:**
**Getting management buy-in**
Influenced by many of the myths we've just exposed, senior leaders may view social learning as ineffective, a fun and meaningless distraction from their employees' day-to-day work, and the poor cousin to formal training.

**Solution:** *Use statistics, research, real-life examples, case studies, and employee feedback to support your case.*

**CHALLENGE 2:**
**Motivating employees to engage**
Your employees are busy people. Many will be trying to hit targets, others meeting project deadlines and large operational teams faced with in-the-minute demands. For all of these reasons and more, they may not feel inclined to take an active role in social learning.

**Solution:** *Make it easy by using an LMS to streamline and centralize training, reinforce a social learning culture, and optimize social learning for mobile.*

**CHALLENGE 3:**
**Struggling to measure results**
Some social learning interactions are intangible and because they're not documented, hard to measure. Colleagues chatting in an elevator about a particular technical problem and ways around it, for example.

**Solution:** *Appreciate that, although some forms of social learning might slip outside of your evaluation strategy, they're still valuable. Concentrate instead on using LMS metrics, social media reports, evaluation surveys, and learner feedback to document the aspects of social learning you can record and analyze.*

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## CHALLENGE 4:
### Staying secure

Firewalls, perceived threats to information assets, and security protocols within your organization may stand in the way of access to social learning channels and resources, particularly if you're organizing an enterprise-wide social learning migration.

**Solution:** *Using an LMS with single sign-on functionality can overcome many of these issues.*

## CHALLENGE 5:
### Beating bandwidth restrictions

Corporate networks are often built to prioritize transactional systems and may struggle with the extra pressure placed on bandwidth by some social learning activities, videos and web conferencing, for example.

**Solution:** *Talk through your requirements with your tech experts and test out capacity first. Adopting a distributed hosting model can help balance the load, particularly in case of a large organization.*

## CHALLENGE 6:
### Performing quality control

A common criticism of social learning is that, without formal checks and under the pressure of time, employees might pass on inaccurate or misleading information.

**Solution:** *Use L&D facilitators to moderate and monitor discussions and run spot-checks on content shared through wikis, blog posts, and videos. And don't underestimate the power of self-regulation. Social learning activities encourage debate and group interaction and more often than not members are good at spotting and calling out errors or inaccuracies.*
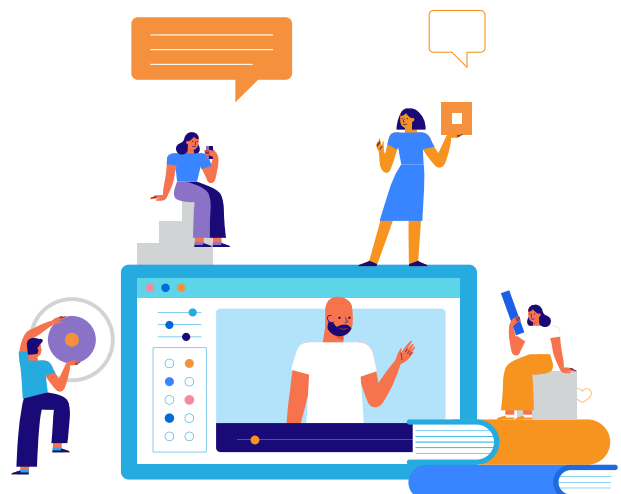
## CHALLENGE 7:
### Eliminating distractions

Because it feels informal, employees may be more easily distracted from social learning activities. Particularly, when using social media platforms that are full of other types of content and forms of entertainment.

**Solution:** *Create closed groups when using social media, making content as meaningful, personal, and absorbing as possible. Also, use facilitators to keep conversations on-topic and set codes of conduct.*

## CHALLENGE 8:
### Knowing when to say "no"

Not every kind of learning intention can be met by social learning. For example, uncompromising, factually-based training (legislation or compliance, for example), critical technical skills, or tasks that are audited.

**Solution:** *Match content and learning intentions to the most appropriate learning model.*

## Chapter 6.
## Let's recap this chapter:

Social learning's not the answer to all L&D training requirements. There are inherent challenges, and it doesn't suit every type of learning intention. But most of the myths surrounding it are just that—myths.

And for (nearly) every challenge, there's a practical solution. The key is to know what those challenges are and to address them before you roll out your training.

# Are your social learning activities successful?

Gathering and responding to feedback's an important part of any L&D training program. And social learning's no exception. Using feedback from learners, other sources of data, and methods of evaluation, you can see what's working and what's not. And then make changes based on your findings.

You'll also need evaluation data (qualitative and quantitative) to be able to assess the ROI of your social learning initiative and produce reports for your senior stakeholders.

Despite being predominantly informal, it is possible to measure the success of social learning. But your approach takes planning and creativity. Before you start, you'll need to define what you mean by "success". Course completion rates could be your main concern. You may be more interested in general engagement levels. In which case, the number of comments or discussion threads on a particular topic would be more insightful. Or, you might be focused on a change in behavior. Either way, define your success criteria from the start. And work your evaluation methods around this.

Below are three of the most common measurements of "success". Pick and choose, depending on your criteria.
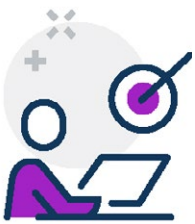
## Measuring engagement

The term "engagement" means different things to different people. But in the context of a social learning program, it's mostly about interaction. And it's usually assessed using metrics such as course completion rates, content views, contributions (comments, posts, discussion threads), reactions (likes and shares), and questions asked and answered. These metrics provide a clear outline of how many people your learning experience reached. How your workers engaged with the range of learning materials available. And which resources or channels were more popular.

However, it doesn't go much deeper than that. You may know that a discussion thread sparked 40 comments. And that 90% of learners attended a live, web conference. But you don't know if those comments were pertinent. Or, how many of the 90% of web conference attendees really engaged during the live session. To find out if any learning actually took place. do that you need to dig deeper.

## Measuring quality

Your statistical data sketched an outline of how your learners interacted with your social learning activities. Now you need to fill in the detail and add color to the picture to establish what they learned and what they did with that learning.

To do that you need to source additional feedback and insights. There are a number of ways to do this. Surveys, polls, quizzes, tests, interviews, self-assessments and skills assessments, process portfolios, and questionnaires (with free text as well as fixed value fields) are good ways to **assess what individual employees have learned.** And many of these will be built into your LMS, if you're using one. These approaches work and will be familiar to you, but they take time and require a significant amount of effort and investment on your part.

The good news is there are additional tools that can help analyze qualitative data as well as quantitative data. Google's Natural

Language API, for example, has the ability to analyze what people are saying while using your social learning channels. By identifying certain phrases and terms, it can report on how many people extracted value from an interaction, and also those who've gone on to put their new learning into practice in the workplace. Something to bear in mind as you plan future social learning programs.

## Measuring change
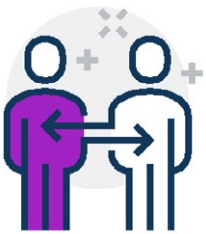
Linking business change or strategic outcomes with a social learning initiative isn't easy. Social learning doesn't happen in isolation. And there are a number of factors that might influence your company's bottom line. But having mutually supportive evidence (such as quality and engagement metrics) and some solid benchmarks in place, you can put forward a powerful case for social learning success. Having a baseline also helps. And if you want to compare like-for-like, using an A/B approach is a good place to start. If you've got two teams with very similar working environments, tools, resources, and structures, why not test out a social learning experience with one and avoid it with another. And then use the same evaluation method and criteria to compare "success".

Take your sales team (if you've got one). Their outputs are directly linked to the bottom line. So, you could, for example, create specific discussion forums around product knowledge or persuasion. And share these with one group but not another. And then use a metric such as an increase in upsells to compare the two approaches.

## Chapter 5.
## Let's recap this chapter:

*Contrary to popular belief you can evaluate social learning. But you need to establish your success criteria (goals and outcomes) first. With these in place, you'll know what data you need to gather and how you need to gather it.*

*Whether it's levels of engagement, how your learners applied the information they absorbed, or what it meant to your business's bottom line, feedback and evaluation matter. They grow credibility, drive improvements, and provide insights into learning behavior. And there's a range of ways you can do this, from using in-built reporting functionality in your LMS or through individual social learning platforms.*

# Conclusion

Social learning's a flexible and effective way to maximize the power of your richest training assets: your people. And you've probably been using it as part of your eLearning program without even knowing it. But to get the most out of it, it takes a formal steer from your L&D team and a clear, forward-thinking strategy.

It requires coordinated social learning activities organized around specific outcomes. A success criteria that's linked to that, and that can be measured. A culture that makes social learning a positive and practical part of your employees' day-to-day experience. And, most importantly, the tools and technology to make it all happen. Technology that brings your employees together, wherever they're based and whatever they're working on.

Having a rich toolkit to support social learning is important. But just as important is the usability of each tool. And your employees' experience with those tools. If they're hard to find, feel disjointed, clunky, and tricky to log into, they'll soon become unusable and feel, well, anti-social! And engagement in your social learning activities will drop off.

Which is why having an LMS that provides its own native social learning tools, and the option to integrate with external third-party apps, is a real game-changer. If you're not already using an LMS for your eLearning, it could be a small change that makes a big difference to your social learning success. And a successful social learning strategy means that training is a natural thing in your organization, rather than a mandatory chore.

# The LMS designed for your **success**

**TalentLMS** is the LMS built for success, enabling organizations to create a culture of continuous learning by delivering training designed with adoption in mind. With an experience that's fully customizable, easy to manage and a joy to use, teams embrace training while feeling right at home.

TalentLMS makes it easy to provide the right training for any team and context while giving expert guidance and support every step of the way. Backed by Epignosis, a global leader in learning technologies, TalentLMS is on a mission to democratize training, serving over 70,000 organizations worldwide.

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