Social Learning in the Insurance sector

Interview by Ann Le Roy and Goele Didden , Kenniscoördinatoren KBC Verzekeringen (08/2014)

with Jane Bozarth, expert in social learning

Social learning means learning together, means creating common knowledge together. Collaborative learning is another way of putting it. It is a hot topic in organizations, because it let people and businesses grow and develop.

We, Fopas, are very glad to share with you the interview Ann & Goele, colleagues from KBC, had with an expert on this topic, Jane Bozarth. In a social learning way, Jane gave the interviewers the opportunity to interview her on the subject. The interviewers focused on **how implementing social learning into a company, like KBC.** And in that sense it is useful for all of us.

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After setting up the basics of social learning in a company - where you introduce the possibilities, show examples of new learning benefits and start to take several initiatives to promote social learning - what are the next steps a company can take to grow to the ideal social learning environment?

The next thing that occurs to me is to get rid of the old technologies and technologies that are not useful anymore. We still have a lot of people that rely on email for instance, but it is an old technology now where knowledge goes to die. It is just communication between two people, nobody else sees it and sees what can be useful to them. You need to start pulling those knowledge out of places where it is getting buried.

So my advice is to look at ways to get rid of the old technologies and stop enabling behaviors like calling people to see if they have checked their email or send an email to inform a group about a new topic on the community.

The same thing goes for other communication strategies like having a lot of staff meetings. Make people teach each other something there or choose someone at each meeting who has to demonstrate how they learned something. Get rid of the old habits, look at where you are spending time on inefficient communication and change this habit.

And a next step can be : not only sharing with internal colleagues, but also with the outer world. Social learning with clients, suppliers and other companies on those subjects that are not company-linked. Therefor a company needs to formulate instructions on what can be shared and what not. E.g. why not sharing info about how to use SharePoint in an efficient way?

If we look at Wikipedia , which is a knowledge platform, and communities , which are interaction platforms, they have very different functions and possibilities. Will those two continue to live next to each other ? Or is it necessary to have both integrated in one system to be able to integrate social learning as a part of the daily work (and no longer as a separate extra thing to do on top of the work) ?

When selecting or buying tools we have to be sure people are going to use it and that is right in front of them.

For example Yammer has some fabulous success stories in companies, on the other hand you can also find a lot of cases where Yammer does not work. All companies need a strategy and a good plan to start implementing these things. If the employees do not find what they need on the internal channel, it will not be successful and the tool will not be used. Besides it is not about the tool, it's about sharing and finding the info needed to do the work. Social learning will help and spare time by finding what you need quicker than through the old communication channels.

So it is hard to answer the question, it depends on what the employees need and where they are going to get it.

Another question you have to ask, is whether your workforce only needs to interact with each other or if they need to engage with customers and the public. If you give people time and space, and you help them to find other people that have similar interests or concerns, they are much more likely to develop a healthy, growing and productive community. When you start managing your community it stops being one.

Will everyone share information?
Is there something we can do to stimulate people to share as much as possible?

I think that is basic psychology that all behavior has a purpose. If people are feeling somehow that they have been rewarded, that they have been recognized as a big community contributor or as a top commentator or that management recognizes that their sharing is more valuable than when they are not sharing, they will do it.

If people do not share because they get a lot of personal satisfaction of being the one that has the knowledge, just make sure the people who share get recognition and are being noticed.

Some people are motivated to share and help because they know how much they have struggled in the past with something, other people want to share because they want to be thanked or because they know something other people do not know.

One of the things that concerns me the most in all the conversations about working out loud and about showing your work, is that we have a lot of invisible heroes in our organizations. They know how to do everything, but they do not get nearly the credit that their bosses took, so helping the management notice them, might be a motivator as well.

A spirit of 'let help each other' and not so much 'let outshine each other' might help.

I see companies spending way too much time and energy worrying about the three people that will not share or do not get on Facebook or that keep using email. Focus on the people who are sharing and who are doing it well, use them as the examples and leave the ones who does not want to share behind, I'm sure they will follow eventually.

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Another thing that fascinates us as well is that you have push and pull in learning. On one hand you see more independent self-study to become a professional and on the other hand you see much more control for instance from the government to check and proof that people really have the knowledge and competences. It seems the opposite on one hand you are more free and on the other hand something else is controlling. Have you an idea which way we are going in the future?

I think we are still trying too hard to have one perfect answer for every person. I'm a very good self-directed learner when it is something I really want to learn, but I'm not a very good self-directed learner if it is something that I have to do.

We need to be realistic that not everyone is going to get up in the morning motivated to get out and teach themselves. We also need to be realistic that we don't want doctors teaching themselves doctoring and not having any certification. I would like to see a world where we have fewer formal training *programs. Learners can figure out if they need to know something and they get it through YouTube most of the time. In ten minutes they find what they need and they can do it at all moments during the day or night, they don't have to drive to a class or have money. Whether the world is going to recognizing this as legitimate learning, I don't know.*

We need to recognize that different people need different things at different times *and be able to give them more customized experience for what they need at that moment. But as I hate things like formal tests, again I also don't want my doctor to say that he has learned surgery from YouTube.*

Thank you, Ann, Goele and Jane, for the interesting interview and for sharing