The coming of age of communities
Communities and their role in the learning ecosystem

It has been almost 25 years since cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger [i] discussed the concept of communities of practice 'a group of people who share a craft and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally'.

Although adopted by many organisations, their success often relied on a few motivated individuals or an active knowledge management team. Typically, communities hadn't been regarded as part of the learning mix, so emerged in isolated pockets of the organisation. That's not to say they were not successful, despite perhaps not having mainstream status, organisations such as BP,

Oracle, Orange (now France Telecom), Masterfoods and Unilever attributed significant business impact from community activity.

For example, the Fraud and Revenue Assurance Community at Orange Group back in 2005 could directly link community activity (such as sharing of new fraud attempts across dispersed customer service centres and retail outlets, sharing of practice across purchasing and contract teams and refinements to billing process) to a cumulative cash-flow benefit of €337M in two years. So informal and social they may be, but that does not hinder their ability to have serious business impact.

Despite their age as a concept, communities have not gone away; in a bid to capitalise on the burgeoning adoption of the concept of informal learning and changes in learning technology, articles such as Eric Sauve's for Learning Solutions Magazine[ii] back in 2007 hailed communities as the key to the new model for informal learning 'When the goal posts move constantly, and situations change rapidly, formal learning once or twice a year doesn't provide the experience or knowledge that workers require.' Concepts such as 70:20:10, new pedagogical models applied to learning solutions that acknowledge and foster knowledge creation as well as consumption and the demand of social learning tools as part of the learning mix all help set the scene for the coming of age of communities.

> *'Formal training has been stretched to its limit when it comes to successfully supporting learning for workers facing non-routine and complex work. Organizations must address the need for informal learning systems that provide access to critical information and experience on-demand, while addressing the need for collective intelligence strategies.'*
>
> **Eric Sauve, 2007**

Explicit and tacit knowledge revisited: how the speed of change challenges traditional learning design

Often the subjects that are most critical to business performance are either complex, very specialised or specific to an organisation or profession. This can be referred to as domain knowledge and it is essentially what makes that organisation what it is. It's this intrinsic link with the context and culture of the organisation that make a formal learning approach to skills acquisition in these

environments so challenging: its difficult to make this knowledge explicit and capture it in a way that doesn't lose that all important context.

Challenging subjects benefit from an approach that supports time to mastery, supporting the learners throughout their journey from knowledge acquisition through practical experience and confident application of skills. Its this timeframe that also puts pressure on formal programmes – try to capture everything in e-learning, classroom sessions, e-books, interactive scenarios and games and by the time you've polished off the animations, fonts and images, the world has changed.

The best programmes include plenty of opportunities to connect with subject matter experts, assignments and challenges that encourage learners to try things out in the workplace and social learning tools to encourage learners to share reflections and use their experience to help bring context and practical insight. Alan Todd and George Siemens in a brief article on corporate MOOCS in Wired Magazine commented that "Corporations are inherently social; businesses, on average, reorganize every seven months, requiring new relationships be built and reporting structures developed."[iii] So if you want your learning strategy to deliver business impact, your approach needs to focus on real world application and keep pace with business change.

> "…foster not only the content knowledge of employees, but also the social skills they require to succeed"
>
> Alan Todd is CEO of CorpU. Dr. George Siemens, Executive Director of the LINK Lab at The University of Texas at Arlington

The end of formal learning – no, but it's time to reframe it

It has been interesting to observe how this growing understanding and body of research on the importance of informal or social learning has been interpreted. In some camps, it has led to a dramatic shift to social learning tools, platforms and approaches, a completely learning driven creation and curation of learning experiences. However there is a danger in an over-reaction to the 70:20:10 paradigm.

On his blog, Clive On Learning[iv], Clive Shepherd pitches the balance elegantly; 'Blended solutions do much more than provide variety or choice. When well designed, they apply the right strategies at the right point in each intervention and use the media that can most flexibly and efficiently deliver these strategies. Most importantly, they can cross the boundary from formal to informal, making sure that learning is embedded in real-work experience.' So it's not an either/or situation, it truly is all about the blend.

We'd take it one step further, that to benefit from informal learning opportunities in organisations, formal learning provides an important learning 'scaffold' that sets the scene for valuable interactions with others on topics important to personal development and the strategic goals of the organisation.

Taking Gilly Salmon's 5 stage model of learning design as an example, developed back in 2000 and published in her book 'E-tivites' in 2002[v], it has been widely adopted as one of the most popular frameworks for learning design. The reason for this is that it recognises the learner journey and road to learner independence through a building of knowledge and confidence in the subject matter.

A blend of formal and informal also better represent the realities of organisational strategy and their business goals. When we look at the learning ecosystem as a whole, we can quickly identify why this blended approach is needed:

Role of learning ecosystem
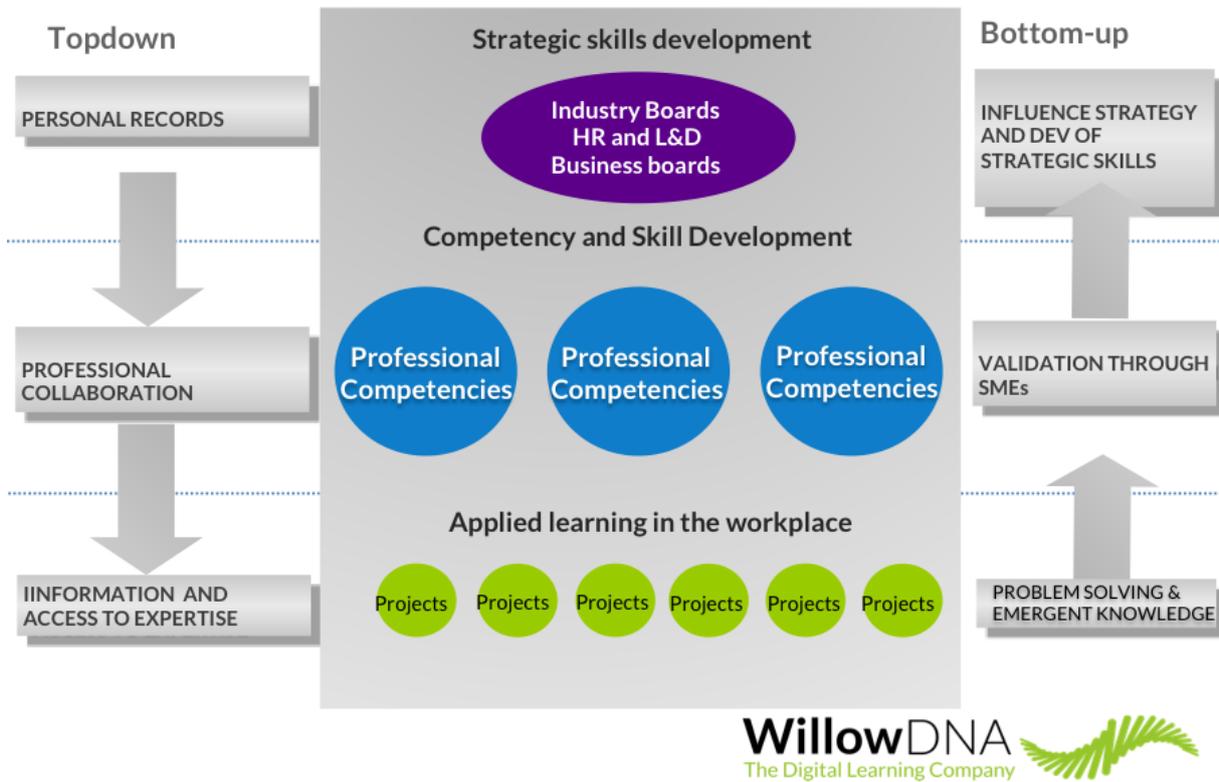
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There are strategic skills vital to the operation, quality and delivery of an organisations products and services. However the successful application of these skills are intertwined with the context in which they are applied in the workplace. This is where we see the interplay between formal skills acquisition and informal learning. It's also not just one way, formal learning enables the scene to be set for rich dialogue, collaboration and innovation, with the insights gleaned from this activity feeding back to improve formal programmes.

However for organisations, a step into a more unstructured landscape can feel like a step into the Wild West - To deliver the ideal blend of formal and informal learning can be challenging, especially when seeking to quantify the business results of learning interventions. It's why organisations can be tempted to revert back to a more 'controlled' learning experience. It also challenges the role of the learning professional, as described by Meghan M. Biro[vi] for Forbes

back in 2012 who suggests the best communities 'are built to allow people to forge relationships with others as well as 'faculty' 'experts' 'leaders' who may or may not be professional educators.' So all these factors can lead to a degree of discomfort and concern about communities, but these fears can be allayed by investment in thoughtful community design and framing them as part of the learning mix.

Design for success: investing in community design and support

By leveraging the power of communities as part of the learning design, it's possible to create a social and structured environment built against real business metrics. WillowDNA have provided Community Design services to organisations such as Oracle, Cisco, ConocoPhilips and Unilever, delivering programmes that up skill learning professionals and subject matter experts throughout the organisation to build and sustain successful communities.

Although communities are often best rolled out through viral adoption, the most successful have active facilitation, are well curated and are designed to link to business metrics in a meaningful way for both learners and the organisation. Investment in the skills of community design and facilitation yields significant results. At France Telecom, global product managers were invited to participate in community skills development programmes to encourage these global leaders to adopt a more facilitative rather than commend and control approach to product management. In just one case, the voicemail community reported that thanks to the adoption of this approach, over €10m of additional revenue was generated simply by that manager acting as the facilitator between sharing of practice in implementation of voicemail menu services between two European countries.

Communities tap into practical, actionable insights that are difficult to codify but with the right skills and technology, are easy to share. From these insights, formal programmes are enhanced, especially in the context of on-boarding and people new into role or after promotion. It's these real work tips and tricks that can then become the practice that is adopted and rolled out through formal programmes. Models are tested, case studies uncovered and real evidence found.

Quick case study: IPG Mediabrands

In the new book by Clive Shepherd 'More Than Blended Learning' WillowDNA's work with IPG Mediarbrands is featured as an example of how to supercharge formal learning through the community.
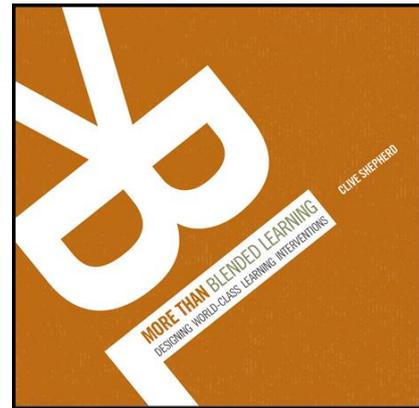
The programme and supporting community centre around a tool called Matrix. Matrix is a key definer in achieving new business for this company as it is unique and embodies core capability within the organisation in realising benefit for their clients. Matrix is sophisticated and requires considerable insight. The challenge was to create confidence in this critical business tool both for new joiners and also for existing analysts to achieve high performance for their clients, quickly!

Working together, Initiative and WillowDNA created an integrated approach to this key business need. The value of Matrix is all about its application to real campaigns, so whilst understanding on a practical level how to use this complex tool was of real importance, knowing what to do with the data you obtain in context is where the value is realised. Therefore, a series of formal learning paths were developed by WillowDNA to give people the core knowledge they needed in use of the tool, comprising e-learning , interactive walkthroughs, e-books, videos, case studies, quick guides and discussions.   However this formal learning programme was owned by the Matrix community.. It was acknowledged early in the learning design stage that uptake of Matrix depended upon a number of factors, including access to the experts via a user community site as well as access to highly-crafted learning.

The course itself is reached via the tool itself as online help. It is a performance learning tool, working as a just in time approach as well as a method of inducting new people.

This approach has proved immensely popular by this demanding group. Feedback has been excellent and the overall confidence level within the company is much higher. A growing number of internal case studies illustrate the value of this confidence in terms of business value. Sue Moseley, who was

Global Chief of Research & Analytics at Initiative during the programme's rollout said 'Initiative has recently won a global media contract for an e-commerce giant with an estimated global ad spending of $500 million. The e-learning platform was credited for its supporting role in improving the network's capability and helping implement Initiative's culture – Fast, Brave, Decisive and Simple.'

With over 500 people in the community and over 1000 people have experienced the learning, this case study demonstrates the value of aligning formal and informal learning to achieve business results.

Some final thoughts

So when designing an effective learning ecosystem, communities often play a vital role in the facilitation of social learning, innovation and problem solving, whilst aiding the curation of materials and experts that can enhance the formal programmes offered by the organisation. Communities can move at least as fast as the pace of the organisation, they are context sensitive and flexible in design, so suit the diversity of skills, cultures and drivers across even the most complex organisations. They help identify talent, drive adoption of formal programmes through their innate quality control of them and can help identify practices that give an organisation its competitive edge. These are the things learning professionals seek to nurture and deliver, it's why they are important part of strategic learning and the learning ecosystem.

WillowDNA Community Services

WillowDNA provide a range of practical services to ensure the successful design, rollout and nurturing of communities, including:

- Community planning, design and management training
- Community facilitator training
- Learning ecosystem design to integrate informal and formal learning
- Learning portals to aggregate community generated content, formal learning programmes and complimentary resources.

To find out more, please contact Lisa Minogue-White on +44 117 3707735 or mail lisa.minogue-white@willowdna.com

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WillowDNA
Bristol & Bath Science Park
Dirac Crescent
Emersons Green
Bristol
BS16 7FR
Tel: +44 (0)117 370 7735
Email: info@willowdna.com
Web: www.willowdna.com

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