

**A POWERFUL FORCE—UNLIKE ANY
IN HISTORY—IS ALTERING THE
LEARNING PROFESSION'S LANDSCAPE**

LEARNING GETS SOCIAL

By Tony Bingham

The learning profession has a history of dancing around the subject of informal learning. You might think, "We've been talking about it forever and have even dabbled in it. Our worlds aren't crumbling. I am really busy and don't have the time or the energy to get involved in informal learning." But if we don't respond or take action now, we risk becoming irrelevant.

In the May issue of *T+D*, Tony Karrer, an e-learning technologist and CEO of TechEmpower, encouraged companies to start adapting to the current trend in

informal learning because otherwise, they will find themselves *marginalized in the business*.

Our job, our focus, and our creative energy must include getting our hands around informal learning.

To really understand the power of informal learning, we have to learn more about a key driver for it: the Millennial generation, born between 1977 and 1997. To understand this generation, let's look at the themes in one of Don Tapscott's books, *Grown Up Digital*.

Understanding Net Gen'ers

Tapscott refers to the Millennials or Gen Yers as the Net Generation or "Net Gens" based on their defining characteristic: the network. In his book, he explains that technology is like air to them. That's a critical point to remember as we learn how they work, learn, collaborate, and live.

The Net Gens are the largest generation ever. And the eldest in this generation are 32 years old, so we're already seeing the impact in the workplace. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the size of the workforce in the United States in 2014 will be roughly 162 million. Estimates suggest that the Net Gens will make up a whopping 47 percent of the workforce in 2014—that's less than five years away!

We're all aware of the stereotypes of this generation: they can't make a decision, don't want to "pay their dues," ignore hours and dress codes, need constant feedback, their parents are involved in everything, and so on.

But as Tapscott notes in his book, "The evidence is strong that they are the smartest generation ever. Raw IQ scores are climbing by three points a decade since World War II, and they have been increasing across racial, income, and regional boundaries."

He continues, "This generation thinks it's cool to be smart, and they see themselves as an essential part of the world's future success. When he asked his global sample of thousands of Net Gens, "Which would you rather be: smart or good looking?" seven out of 10 chose having smarts.

When it comes to the workplace, Tapscott notes: "As employees and managers, the Net Generation is approaching work collaboratively, collapsing the rigid hierarchy and forcing organizations to rethink how they recruit, compensate, develop, and supervise talent." He believes that the very idea of management is changing with Net Gens. In education, they are forcing a change in the model, from a teacher-focused approach based on instruction, to a student-focused model based on collaboration.

Tapscott asserts: "The bottom line is this: if you understand the Net Generation, you will understand the future. You will also understand how our institutions and society need to change today." That is very compelling.

Let's look at another source of data on the impact of technology. In their book, *Groundswell*, authors Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff provide this example: "More than a million viewers have watched a YouTube video posted by law student Brian Finkelstein, who filmed a Comcast technician who fell asleep on his couch in 2006, waiting on hold for help from the Comcast home office to fix an Internet problem..."

"What happened to these companies will happen to you," they state. "Your company's customers are talking about your brand right now on MySpace, probably in ways you haven't approved. Your support representatives' conversations with customers will



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RESOURCES ON THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION AND THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL LEARNING AND NETWORKING

Grown Up Digital by Don Tapscott

Groundswell by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff

Driving Results Through Social Networks by Rob Cross and Robert J. Thomas

ASTD Research Study: "Tapping the Potential of Informal Learning"

ASTD Research Study: "Transforming Learning with Web 2.0 Technologies"

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show up on YouTube, and so will your TV commercials, intercut with sarcastic commentary. If your CEO has any hair left, he or she is going to tear it out and then ask for your help in taming this torrent of people expressing themselves."

Li and Bernoff go on to warn, "But this movement can't be tamed. It comes from a thousand sources and washes over traditional business like a flood. And, like a flood, it can't be stopped in any one place. Often it can't be stopped at all."

The authors see a fundamental change in behavior, and they define a groundswell as, "A social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations." They also add that "the groundswell trend is not a flash in the pan. This is an important, irreversible, completely different way for people to relate to companies and to each other."

The groundswell trend also includes social networks like MySpace and Facebook. "And, while you can't stop it, you can understand it," Li and Bernoff assert. "You can not only live with it, you can thrive in it. That's the point of this book."

Those are some powerful statements, and ones that have huge potential implications for learning. But, as Li and Bernoff say, you can not only live with this, you can thrive in it.

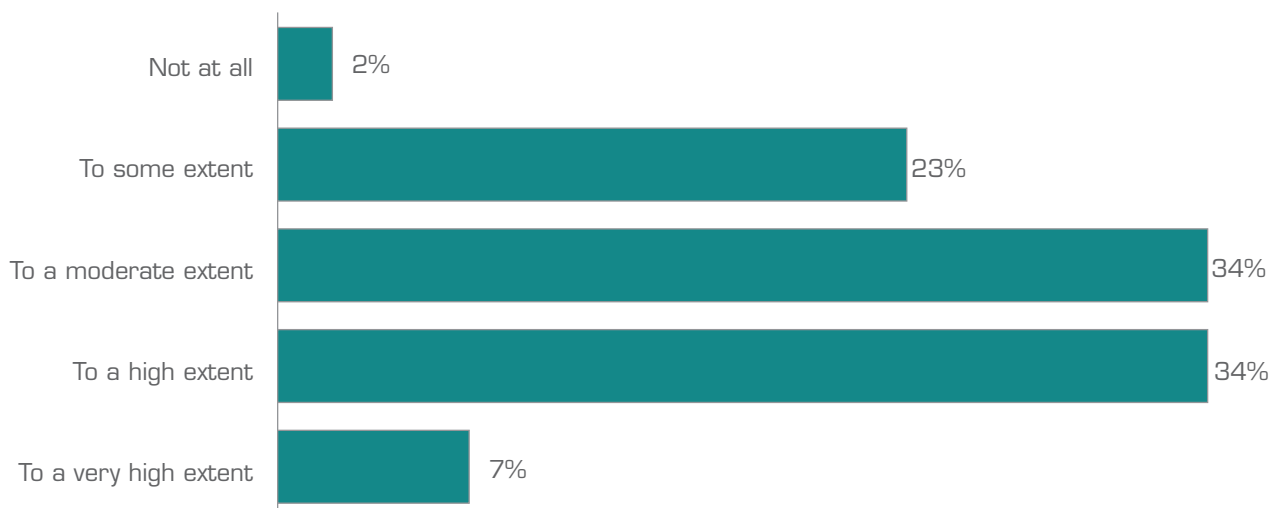
So why is this happening now? The authors see the collision of three forces—people, technology, and economics—and they see these trends (people's desire to connect, new interactive technologies, and online economics) as creating a new era. We also have a generation of people entering the workforce who don't know any other way; this is the way they've always done it. Are you ready for them?

Let's look at their expectations for work and how that affects you and your organizations. Tapscott writes, "In this war for talent, employers are going to have to understand the key Net Gen norms if they want to hire them, and keep them. They want the freedom to work when and where they want, and the freedom to enjoy work and family life ... the Net Gens mix work with their personal lives." I think we're seeing this for just about all workers today. The line between work and personal is very gray.

Tapscott discusses other expectations of Net Gens in his book *Grown Up Digital*:

- They want customization—this is what they're used to.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, TO WHAT EXTENT IS INFORMAL LEARNING OCCURRING WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION?



Source: "Tapping the Potential of Informal Learning," an ASTD research report

- They want to be managed as individuals, not as a big group. This means individualized learning and development opportunities, project-based role descriptions, a lot of feedback on their performance, and open and regular dialogues with their manager.
- Integrity and transparency are essential to this generation. This is how their virtual communities operate.
- They value collaboration. They are not turned on by climbing the corporate ladder. They demand challenging work and want to achieve with other people. This is how they get things done.
- Entertainment is very important. They want work to be fun, and they see work and fun as the same thing.

(More information about Tapscott's other norms can be found in *Grown Up Digital*.)

Was there a Net Gen norm about classroom training on that list? No. Is formal learning dead? Of course not. Informal learning will not eliminate traditional formal learning. Certification, compliance, and deep learning will continue to be formal because the structure is required.

In the May 2009 issue of this magazine, Josh Bersin of Bersin and Associates said it well: "It's not informal learning taking over everything; it's a modernization of the learning function."

Karie Willyerd, vice president and chief learning officer for Sun Microsystems explains the huge opportunity the profession has in informal learning: "One of the things that has happened is that we have focused so much on the 10 percent [formal learning] that we abdicated the 70 percent [informal learning]. If the learning organization doesn't get into that 70 percent and use social media, they're going to get left behind. They're going to become irrelevant because people are going to be able to post and share knowledge with one another without the learning function. It's a call to action for learning to become really involved in social media in order to facilitate and enable informal learning. And that's a really exciting place for the learning profession to be because what you are capturing, then, is the performance of an organization."

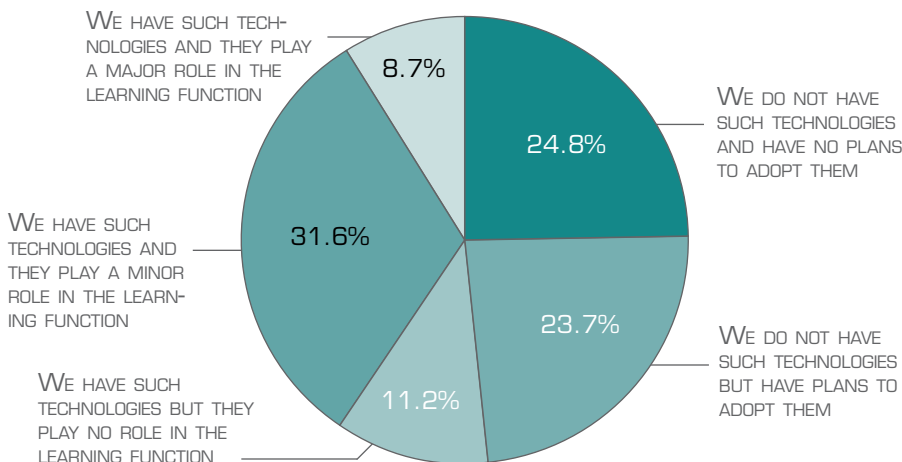
Doesn't it seem reasonable that if most of the learning occurring within an organization is informal, you should be involved?

IN THE APRIL 2009 REPORT, "GET SERIOUS ABOUT INFORMAL LEARNING," CLAIRE SCHOOLEY OF FORRESTER RESEARCH DISCUSSES EFFECTIVE WAYS TO INCLUDE INFORMAL LEARNING IN YOUR ORGANIZATION'S TRAINING:

- "Examine how you conduct employee training. Take stock of your present training and determine the components that lend themselves to more informal approaches. Provide the tools and resources for learners to find content easily when they need them."
- "Collaborate with business units to develop the most effective learning strategies." This applies to both formal and informal learning and is one practice ASTD has been encouraging for quite some time.
- "Use employee performance results as a measure of successful learning experiences. LMS vendors have assessment questionnaires to survey the employees' managers regularly after the course to determine the impact on employee performance." To do this, you will need to collaborate with these managers to determine how you will identify changes in employee performance.
- "Keep track of how people rate informal and formal content." These ratings will help employees find the best content, and help you to weed out the poor content and identify where additional formal or informal learning development is required.

More information: www.forrester.com

WHICH BEST DESCRIBES WHERE YOUR ORGANIZATION IS IN TERMS OF WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES?



Source: "Transforming Learning with Web 2.0 Technologies," an ASTD research report

In the learning profession, we've never had the opportunity to broaden our impact as we do today through informal learning. People are demanding it, the technology is driving it, and the economy is requiring it.

Potential of informal learning and Web 2.0

Let's look deeper at informal learning. Are we tapping its real potential?

ASTD and i4cp (Institute for Corporate Productivity) conducted research on informal learning to answer that question. To start, we wanted to know how much informal learning was actually occurring in organizations:

- 98 percent of the respondents saw that it was occurring to some extent, 34 percent said to a high extent, and 2 percent said that it wasn't occurring.
- More than 56 percent expect it to increase over the next three years.
- 98 percent of those surveyed say that informal learning enhances employee performance, and 39 percent of respondents said it is enhancing employee performance to a high extent.

When we asked what percentage of the training budget is allocated to informal learning, 36 percent dedicate no money to informal learning, and 78 percent dedicate 10 percent or less of the training budget to it.

This statistic is frightening to me because between 70 and 90 percent

of learning occurring in organizations is informal, yet most of the money is allocated to formal learning. This must change if we are to be successful in the future.

Do you think that having the learning function driving informal learning would be good for you professionally and for your organization? Absolutely. This research shows that the learning profession has a great opportunity to make an impact with informal learning.

Let's talk about Web 2.0 technologies, how the Net Gens are using those technologies, and the impact those technologies are having within organizations. Web 2.0 technologies are enablers. They are the tools that support collaboration and social learning, but they don't cause it to automatically happen.

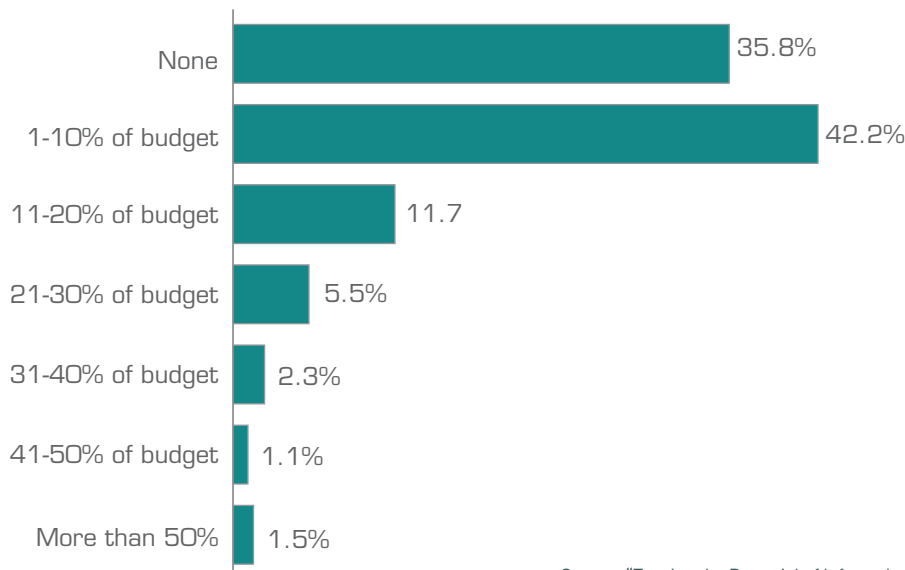
Working in partnership with i4cp, ASTD commissioned a Web 2.0 study, which was sponsored by Booz Allen Hamilton. The purpose of the study was to determine how, why, to what degree, and with what success organizations are using Web 2.0 technologies in learning functions.

Reasons for adopting Web 2.0 include

- improving knowledge sharing
- fostering learning
- providing more informal learning opportunities
- improving communication
- finding resources more easily
- boosting collaboration
- building organizational relationships.

Data from the study revealed that only a small minority of companies are using Web 2.0 technologies in learning. And this is not the first study to find that Web 2.0 technologies are not yet widely adopted in organizations. Eighty-seven percent of respondents predicted that during the next three years, their organizations will be more likely to use Web 2.0 technologies in the learning function.

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR ORGANIZATION'S TRAINING BUDGET IS ALLOCATED TO INFORMAL LEARNING?



Source: "Tapping the Potential of Informal Learning," an ASTD research report

A driver for this may be explained by a 2008 AIIM survey. It found that among the 441 IT, executive, C-level, and other respondents, less than half said that they fully understood technologies such as RSS, podcasting, social networking, and mash-ups. It also found that 59 percent of the respondents considered a lack of understanding to be the primary impediment to implementing Web 2.0 technologies.

Let's look at the effectiveness of Web 2.0 in the ASTD study. Ninety-five percent of those surveyed indicate that the technology is effective, though the highest marks for it are not really that high. I think this is a reflection of not knowing how to use the technologies, and the associated fear of them.

The Net Gens are driving informal learning, which, as we've seen through the research, does not have the financial commitment nor the appropriate involvement of the learning organization, at least not yet.

There has been an enormous increase in people who want to share their expertise, opinions, and time through collaborative technologies, and these technologies are being adopted by

society on a global scale as well as within our individual learning organizations. It is a groundswell as Li and Bernoff have described, and it's unstoppable, with huge opportunities available to those who know how to leverage it.

The use of collaborative technologies also has a huge impact on organizations' ability to recruit and retain talent. As Walt McFarland, vice president at Booz Allen Hamilton, notes, "I see the impact of social learning increasing in the future in a couple of important ways. First, there is an expectation that in order to attract the staff that we want to have—the very best people—you must use social media, so it's part of our employee value proposition. Secondly, the environment is going to demand it. The problems are just too big for any one person or team. And being able to leverage the knowledge that all of us have is a real competitive advantage."

Mike McDermott, vice president of learning and organization development at T. Rowe Price, agrees: "Social media has a great ability to retain talent. We know that one of the greatest factors around retention is feeling connected to people at work and feeling

that you're part of the team, or a larger social group or cause."

The next level

This is the learning profession's opportunity to be a game-changer—a paradigm shifter—and in the process, successfully position our organizations and ourselves for future success.

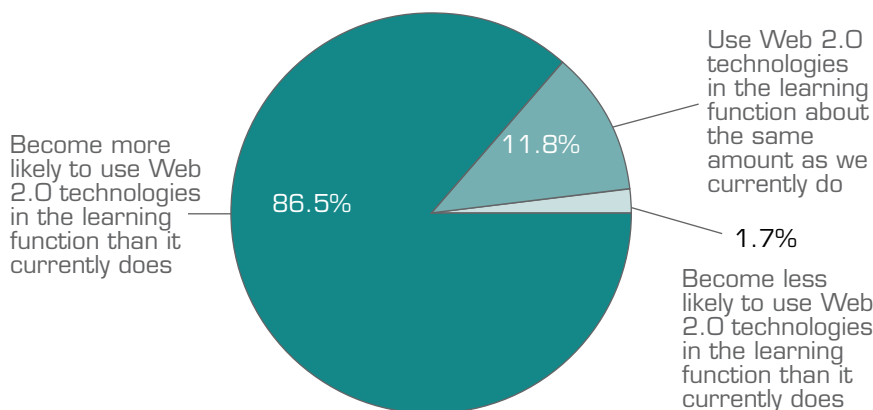
Web 2.0 technologies and the Net Gens are gifts that will catalyze us to drive informal learning: the most elusive, yet the most prevalent and potentially the most important learning in our organizations now and for years to come. It's clear that social learning is critical to being able to attract, engage, collaborate with, and retain talent. And, as importantly, they encourage us to create the structures that support accessing and retaining the information shared for learning.

In the learning profession, we've never had the opportunity to broaden our impact as we do today through informal learning. People are demanding it, the technology is driving it, and the economy is requiring it. The pieces are there, and now is the time to connect those pieces to create a learning masterpiece that meaningfully demonstrates the critical importance of each and every one of your roles.

There are tremendous resources available from ASTD, and from many others to help you on this journey, regardless of your level of expertise. We are all in this together, and now we have the catalyst to take our careers, our profession, and our organizations to the next level. **T+D**

Tony Bingham is president and CEO of ASTD; tony@astd.org.

OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS, I THINK MY ORGANIZATION WILL...



Source: "Transforming Learning with Web 2.0 Technologies," an ASTD research report



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