

Chief Learning Officer Magazine

Effectiveness - Jay Cross

Published April 2009

Internet Culture

The Internet is so pervasive that Internet values are blowing back into real life.

For example, I have no qualms about walking out of a boring presentation, even if I've been sitting in the front row. The Web trained me to click past unrewarding pages and spend my time where it will do me the most good.

I expect attitudes like Internet values to underpin exemplary corporate learning in the future. Here are nine more to ponder.

Peer power: Networks subvert hierarchy. When information abounds, peers take over. In a knowledge era, workers are the means of production. To prosper in this world, forget command and control. Encourage bottom-up peer production. Knowledge workers do their best when challenged to figure things out for themselves. Management needs to set the direction and then get out of the way. Think of learning as a partnership with learners, not "delivery."

Authenticity: Simpler is better. The spirit of the Net is to tell is like it is, to peel away the facade. "Be who you are!" wrote Nietzsche. It's easier than faking it. In learning, being authentic means admitting we don't have all the answers. It's recognition that we're all in this together. It's hooking people up so they may learn from and with one another.

Transparency: Seeing the inside of an organization enables us to collaborate with it to make things better. People who hoard information shoot themselves in the foot: Nobody will know who they are. You've got to know an organization or person to form a relationship. You cannot make friends with someone hidden behind a garden wall.

Perpetual beta: Nothing is ever finished. Hence, it's better to put an unfinished offering out there before the concrete sets. He who hesitates for typos is lost. Do it, try it, fix it. Drive changes with feedback from learners themselves. More frequent reviews translate into less time invested in going down the wrong path. If someone says a project is finished, it is.

The long tail: When it comes to learning opportunities, small businesses, esoteric specialists and fast-moving teams traditionally have been short-changed. It wasn't worth the effort. You couldn't reach critical mass. Now you can. Web technology scales. Five-

person companies use Salesforce.com for customer relationship management. Expect to see a learning equivalent soon. As for the esoterica, distance no longer keeps specialists from talking with one another. Rich niches imply a need to assess upside opportunities more closely than out-of-pocket costs.

Connections: Connections are everything. If your learning plans don't embrace the power of networks, go back the drawing board. Learning occurs through conversations, collaboration, knowledge transfer and other network phenomena. Learning leaders will seek out ways to increase the throughput of personal network connections with instant messages, higher bandwidth, searchable directories, optimized organizational channels and easily accessible watercoolers, both virtual and real.

Asymmetrical productivity: Twenty years ago, training departments prided themselves on consistency: providing precisely the same training experience to everyone in the organization. That's no longer a good strategy for making money. In the old days, a highly proficient worker might outperform the average by 20 or 30 percent. Now that products are intangible, productivity knows no limits. Google figures a superlative engineer creates 200 times as much value as his middle-tier peer. Back the superlative worker, the wild ideas and the weirdness of the new. Experiment continuously. As IBM's Tom Watson said, "If you want to succeed, double your failure rate."

Loose coupling: Think "small pieces, loosely joined." I am astounded how the ability to work with small chunks improves my productivity. What once took a rewrite now requires simply changing a link. No learning environment need resist improvements until it bites the dust. What we once thought of as maintenance is becoming more important than the initial deliverable. Changing a small item does not require unpacking the whole apparatus.

Ambient find-ability: Before the Net put the world's knowledge at everyone's fingertips, a lot of what passed for learning was rote memorization. Now you need to learn the big picture, not the little details.

Don't bet against the Internet.