



Web 2.0 and the Social Infrastructure of Learning - Results from the 2009 ECLF Survey

By Roland Deiser
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In an ongoing effort to take the pulse of some key issues in Corporate Learning and Development, the European Corporate Learning Forum (ECLF) conducted its 5th annual survey among the Chief Learning Officers of Europe's top 200 corporations.

This year's questions focused on the perspectives of Europe's global heads of Learning and Development on the Social Infrastructure of Learning, with special emphasis on the role of the emergence of social media and web 2.0 solutions that foster participant driven learning.

Survey Rationale

The topic is timely, but it is often discussed just as a technological issues. While technology remains an important driver and enabler (and also a major barrier in many corporations), the purpose of the 5th ECLF conference was to shed a light on the underlying dynamic that may have a sustainable impact on the overall paradigm of learning.

We all know that learning that happens in an instructor-led classroom or through carefully designed e-learning modules represents only a small part of our learning experiences - and not necessarily the most effective ones - both in terms of cost and ROI. Most learning happens in the context of everyday activities - at the shop floor, in customer encounters, in conversations at the water cooler. These contexts enable not only learning, they also shape the very fabric of organizational capability. Yet, corporate learning has little or no influence in designing these "natural spaces of learning" in a way that helps to harvest their potential.

Learning is at its heart a social process of interaction that happens in collaborative settings; settings that are hard to control and that lose their power when they get too formally structured. At the same time, the emergence of social networking software opens up a wide space of new learning opportunities, although we do not yet fully understand its implications. Some of the challenges are:

- how to design structures, systems, and cultures that enhance participative/interactive learning
- How to utilize social networking technologies that support and enhance the creation, distribution, and utilization of learner generated content
- How to deal with the delicate dynamics between informal/emerging learning activities, and the formal/deliberate alignment with the strategic goals of the corporation
- how can we justify investments, what are the economics of informal networked learning

As always, our survey is not so much a scientifically thorough investigation but rather a "quick and dirty" look into the attitudes and viewpoints of our constituency of CLOs. It is designed to foster dialogue and instigate further discussions, which may also lead to the creation of some focused projects among interested corporations.

¹ A PowerPoint summary of the survey's results is available upon request. Please contact rd@rolanddeiser.com.

Methodology and Sample

The survey was conducted in June 2009. An online questionnaire was sent to the Chief Learning Officers or Heads of Global Learning and Development of Europe's 200 largest corporations. It was deliberately kept short and simple, asking only 15 questions and using primarily multiple choice questions or questions with a rating scale.

As always, the sample was carefully selected to make sure the most senior Learning and Development executive of each company replied directly.

Response Rate and Demographics

25 email addresses were outdated as people had moved to new positions. From the remaining 175 companies, 66 Heads of Learning and Development responded – an unusually high response rate of almost 40%.

The companies are mostly large or very large players: more than two thirds employ more than 40,000 people, and more than three quarters operate on a global scale. Because of their size and geographical scope, virtually all companies face significant complexity in their learning and development challenges.

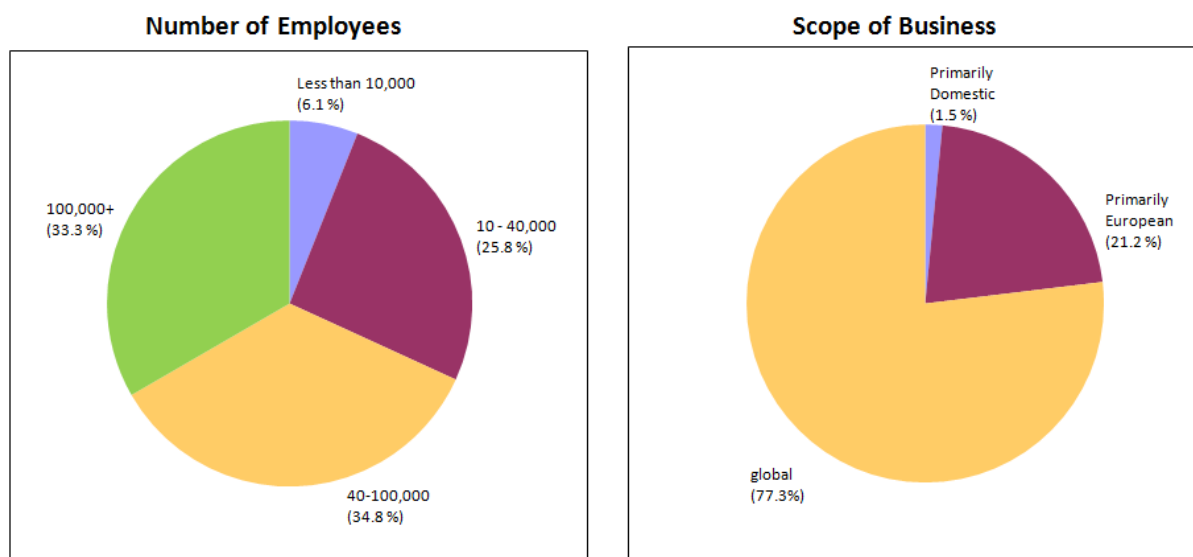


Exhibit 1: Size and geographical scope of respondents

Almost one quarter of the respondents is from the financial, services industry (banks, insurances). One explanation for this bias is that this industry has traditionally a strong focus on learning and usually spends significantly more per employee than the manufacturing sector. Banks and insurances are also prominently represented within ECLF, and ECLF members tend to return the online questionnaire to a higher degree than non members.

Exhibit 2 shows the distribution across various industry segments.

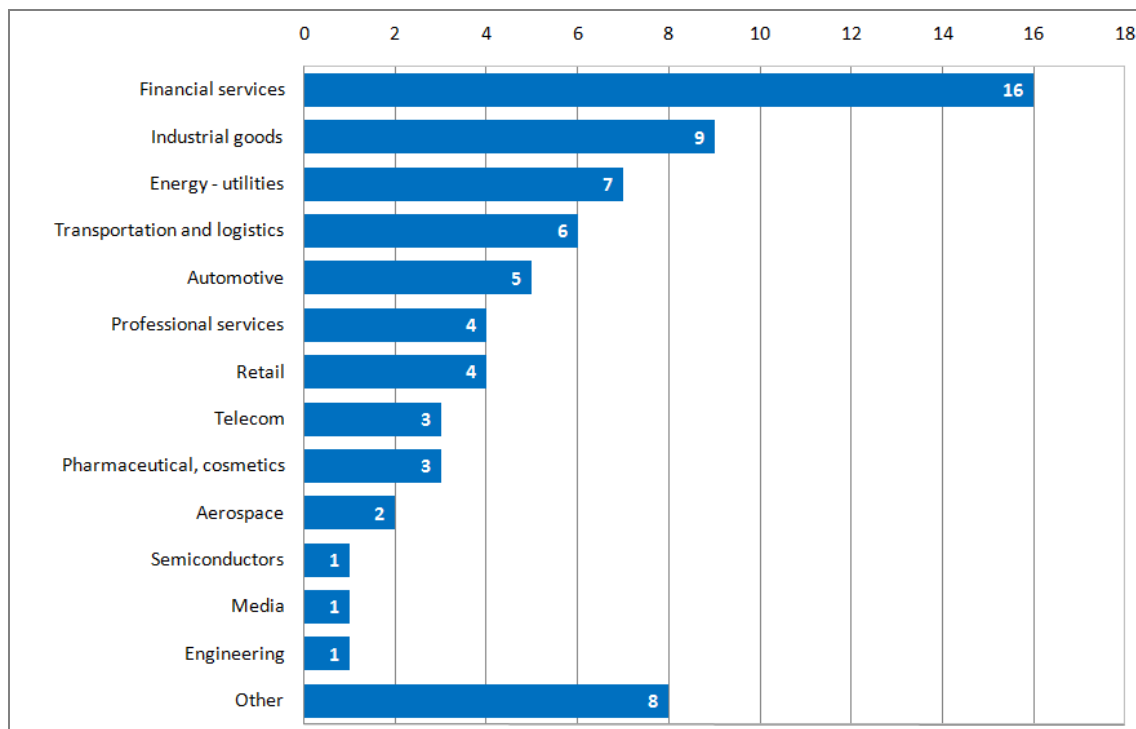


Exhibit 2: Scope of industries represented by respondents

The following pages summarize the results of the survey.

1. Cultural Values Are Not Particularly Supportive of Organizational Learning

The value set of a corporation plays an important role in shaping the overall organizational culture, which in return is an important fundament of the social infrastructure that enables or inhibits learning, and that is also a key variable for utilizing social media in an effective way.

The most important value that we find within the surveyed companies is *individual performance* – a clear testimonial to a culture that focuses on people talent. But almost as important rank values such as *collaboration and teamwork across boundaries, sharing and cooperation, and entrepreneurial initiative* - values that relate much to social learning which requires openness, sharing, and community.

However, *innovation and experimentation* ranks comparatively low, with less than half of the respondents saying their company valued it “to a high degree.” *Bottom-up initiative* ranks low as a cultural value, and only 15% of the surveyed executives perceive *reflection on success and failure* as a key value in their organization – a fact that is especially disconcerting as reflection is one of the most essential elements of a learning culture (exhibit 3).

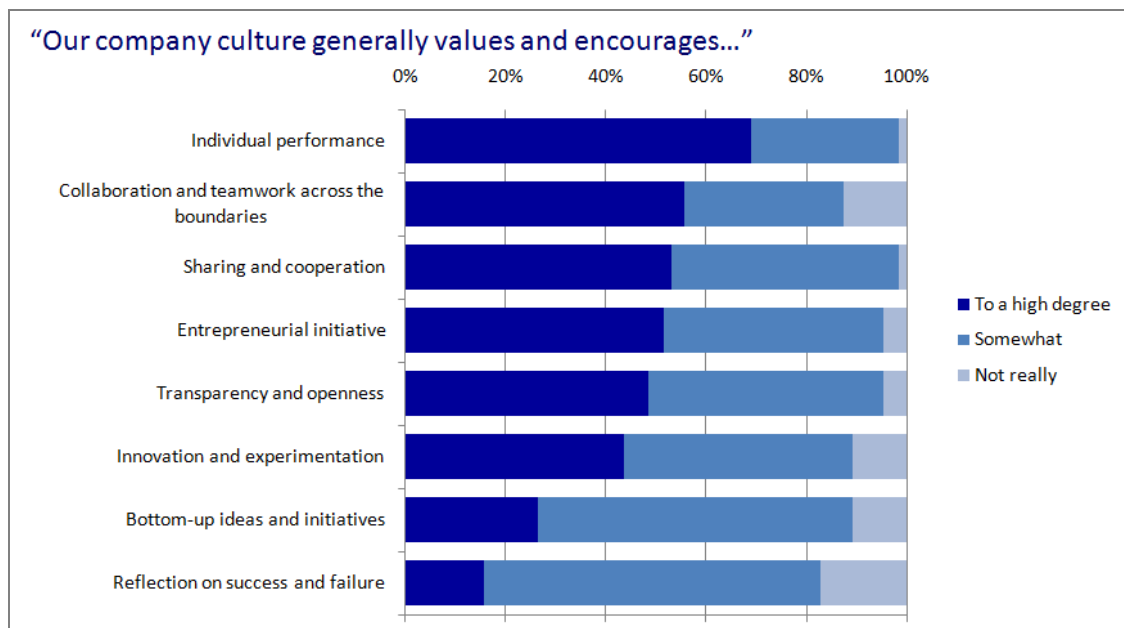


Exhibit 3: Cultural Values in Large European Organizations

2. Corporate Learning has no Say on Policies of Social Media Tool Usage.

We wanted to get a picture about the current activity portfolio of Corporate Learning and understand if the function plays a role in deploying social media solutions.

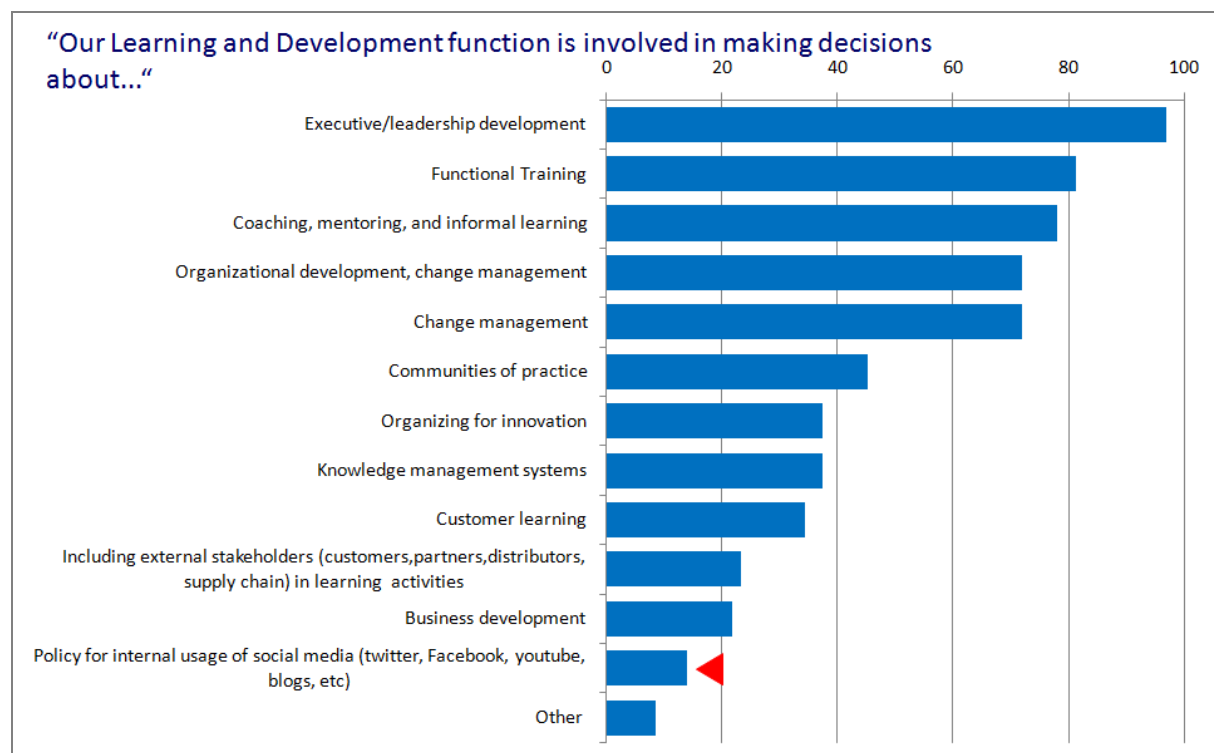


Exhibit 4: Activity Portfolio of L&D in large organizations

The responses reflected in exhibit 4 reveal a quite traditional and conventional picture: *executive development; functional training, coaching, and organizational development and change management* belong to the core of the learning portfolio of most corporations.

The picture changes when it comes to learning interventions that could foster innovation or enable horizontal networks. Less than half of our respondents are enabling *communities of practice, run knowledge management systems, organize for innovation, or get involved in customer learning*. And only a minority of 16% takes on the *responsibility for developing policy on the internal usage of social media* such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. It seems that corporate learning is not yet involved in this new trend.

3. BUT: Virtually Everybody Recognizes the Importance of the Social Learning Phenomenon.

Despite their rather conventional activity portfolios, nearly every corporate learning organization acknowledges the importance of social learning, at least to some degree.

In describing their current approach to informal / social learning and the use of social media technology (web 2.0), only about 5% (3 out of 65 companies) said that they are currently NOT interested in this domain.

However, few companies are actually acting on this sense of importance, with only about 15% (11 out of 65) indicating that they currently have a dedicated strategy in place to foster informal and social learning. Nearly half of the companies feels the importance of this topic but is not (yet) sure how to deal with it.

These results make social learning clearly an emerging topic and reinforce the choice of our theme for the 2009 ECLF conference.

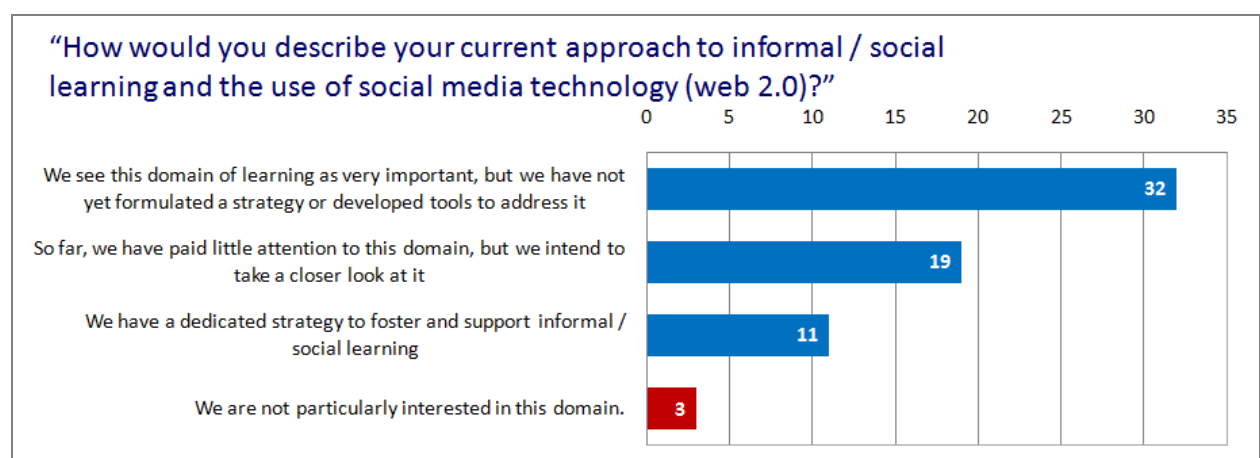


Exhibit 5: Attitude towards informal/social learning

4. Among the Growing Number of Social Media Tools, Only Discussion Forums Enjoy Wide Utilization.

With four out of five companies using internal discussion forums, this tool has become mainstream in organizations. Also the adoption of blogging and wiki-based collaboration is quite significant, with about half of the companies reporting their use.

However, very few companies use the newer computer based social media tools, such as virtual worlds, Face book, YouTube, or Twitter. All of these fall below 10% of respondents. It is fair to assume that the phenomenon is still new to the corporate world, and companies have still to develop a better understanding about how to integrate these tools in their specific learning context.

An interesting data point is the relatively avid adoption of self-produced video and audio (37% of respondents) which is a clear trend towards self-produced and self-organized learning that involves usually senior leaders and leading experts of an organization.

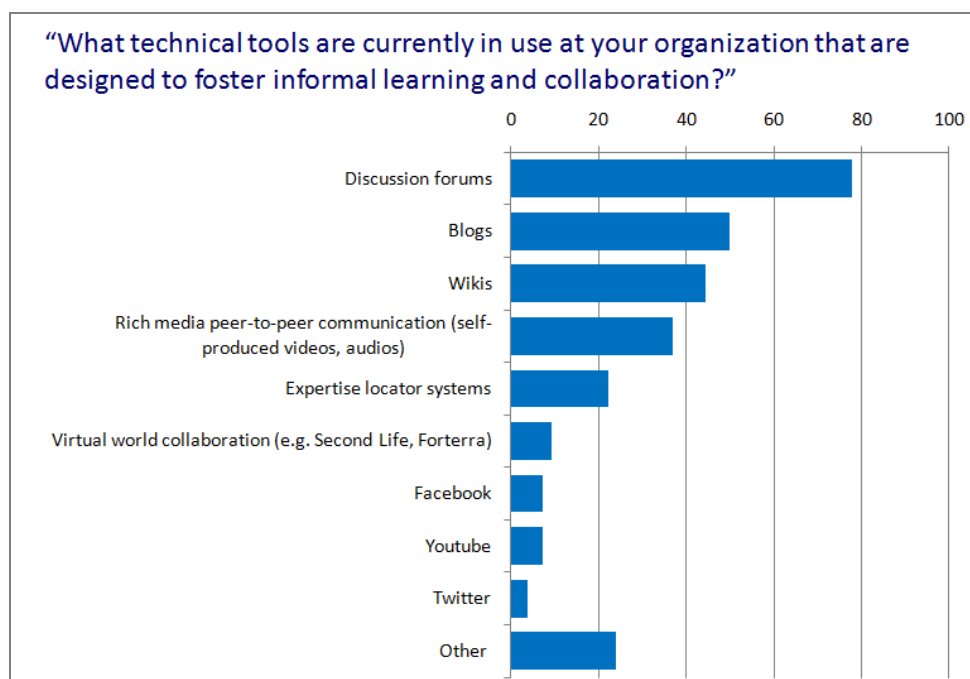


Exhibit 6: Utilization of online based social media tools

5. Social Tools for Informal Learning Play an Important Role.

The picture changes when it comes to the more traditional instruments for social learning and community development. It's maybe too strong to call it mainstream, but a significant number of companies uses social learning tools ghat go beyond the traditional classroom learning approach.

About 60% indicate that they have mentoring programs, cross-functional and cross-divisional strategic dialogs, and company-supported communities of practice. About 50% have alumni networks. But control still rules: Only one third have self-organized informal communities of practice that originate at the grassroots level.

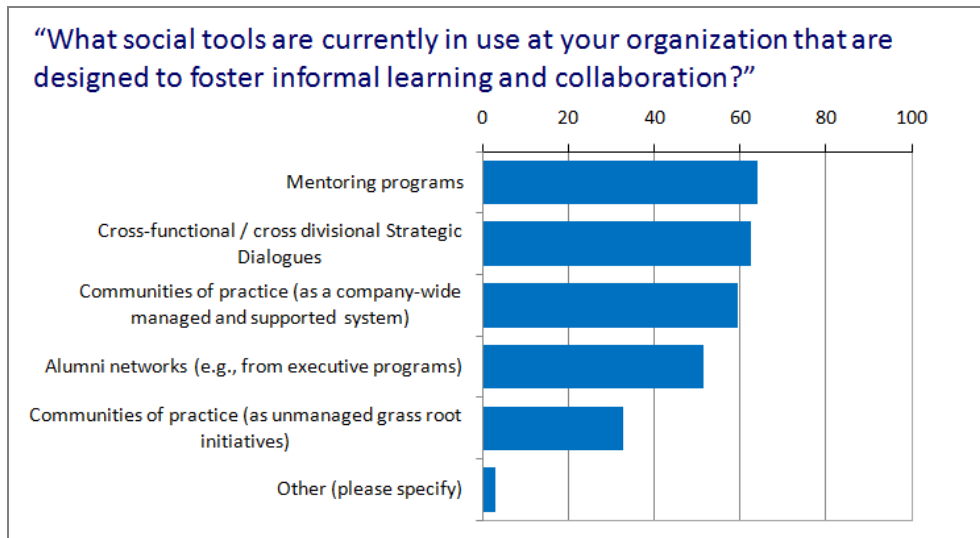


Exhibit 7: Utilization of traditional social learning tools

6. Few Stakeholders Have an Explicitly Negative Attitude Towards Web 2.0 Solutions, but Support is Still Limited.

We then asked our sample group of Chief Learning Officers and Heads of Learning and Development how they perceive the attitude of their various internal stakeholders towards web 2.0. solutions (exhibit 8).

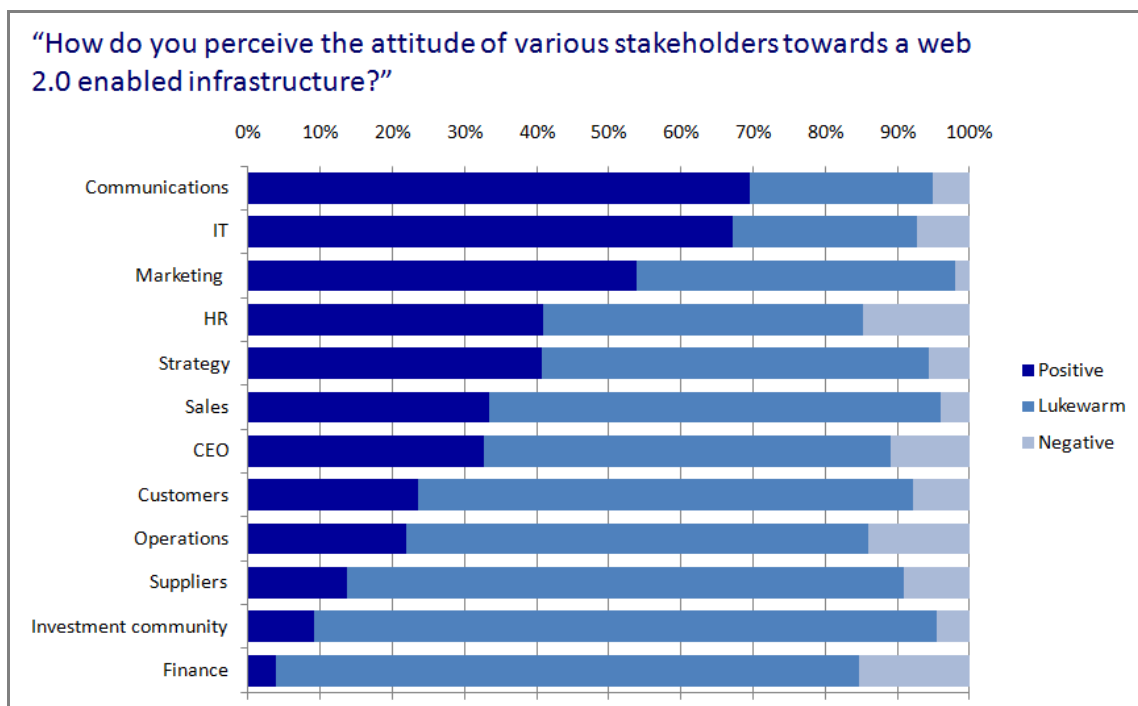


Exhibit 8: Perceived stakeholder attitudes towards the use of Web 2.0 in organizations

While it comes as little surprise that IT, Communication, and Marketing is seen as having the most positive attitudes, it is remarkable that our respondents think that no function truly has an explicitly negative perspective towards the topic. Most stakeholders are perceived as having a “lukewarm” view, which can be interpreted as a “wait and see” attitude – very consistent with the results of the question on the current approach to web 2.0 (exhibit 5).

Communication and Marketing’s positive view probably reflects their interest in what web 2.0 solutions will allow them to do with their constituencies (open innovation, collaborative development of products and services, social media marketing, and more).

It would be interesting to compare these projective data with real responses from the various stakeholders, but such research was not possible within the constraints of our survey.

7. Perceived Key Enablers for Creating an Informal Learning Environment...

When respondents were asked about what they perceive to be the key enablers for creating an informal learning environment, “openness and trust,” ranked highest on the list, with 90% marking it as *very important*. Next in line was “active senior management participation,” identified by about 70% of respondents. Both of these suggest that technology is not the barrier; it is cultural values and management commitment that must change.

Interestingly, one possible enabler that ranked low on the list were Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), although they are typically perceived to be a driver of behavior in most organizations.

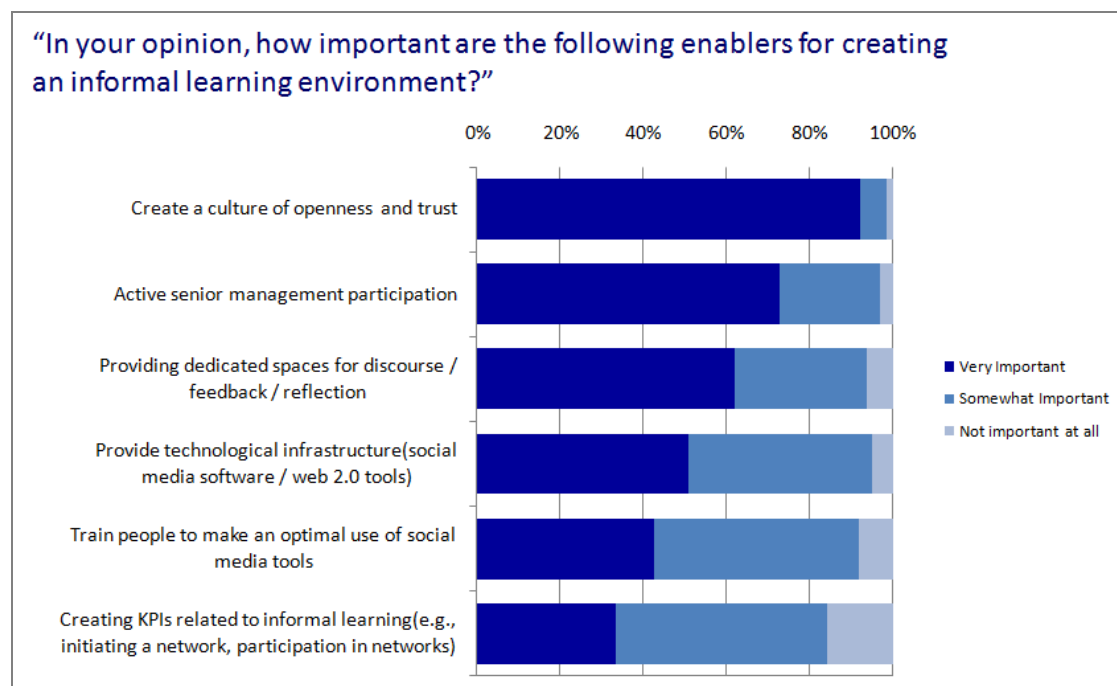


Exhibit 9: Enablers for Creating an Informal Learning Environment

8. ... and the Rather Sobering Reality in Organizations

When asked about the current existence of these enablers, the picture changes significantly. Only about 25% of respondents indicated that their organization creates a culture of openness and trust to a high extent, and only 10% confirmed the participation of senior management (Exhibit 10).

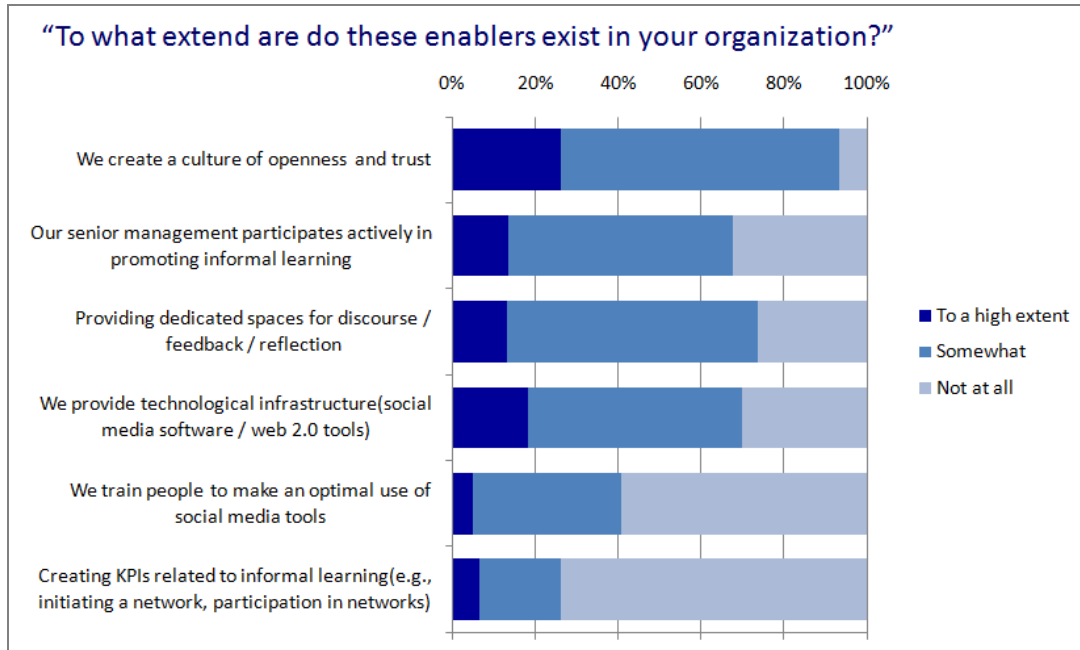


Exhibit 10

In fact, the gaps between all the enablers that were considered valuable in the above question versus the current reality of their existence within the company sheds a harsh light on the organizational commitment to support informal learning (exhibit 11). In other words: There is much work left on building the organizational foundation for an effective peer-to-peer learning culture – a tall challenge for the corporate learning profession.

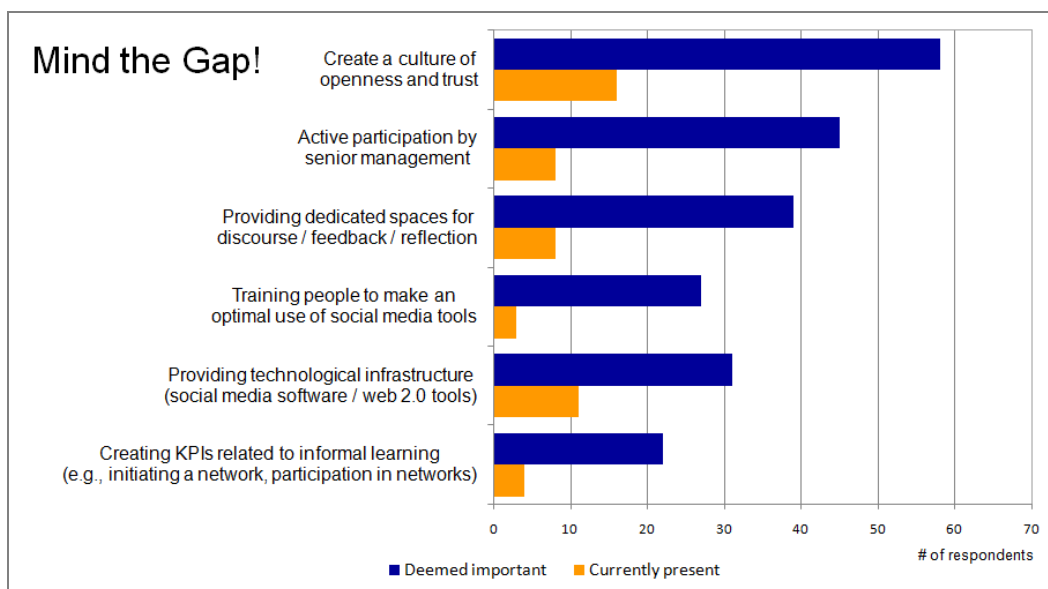


Exhibit 12: Gap Between Perceived Requirements for informal Learning and the Current Situation within Companies

9. Social Media Solutions Should Create a Positive Impact on Organizational Processes and Culture ...

When asked to identify the 5 top benefits that a web 2.0 infrastructure for learning can provide, our CLOs show a clear appreciation for the community and team value of social learning. They also show an appreciation for self-organized and participant driven learning.

However, I find it quite remarkable that the use of web 2.0 tools may be *fun and engaging* is ranked last as a potential benefit. While this is a sad reality, it is symptomatic for a culture that views fun and play as not belonging in the workplace, not even when it comes to learning (although we know that learning happens primarily through playfulness and exploration). This is consistent with the results from our research last year on the use of video games where so many view them as being just games and thus not appropriate for serious work.

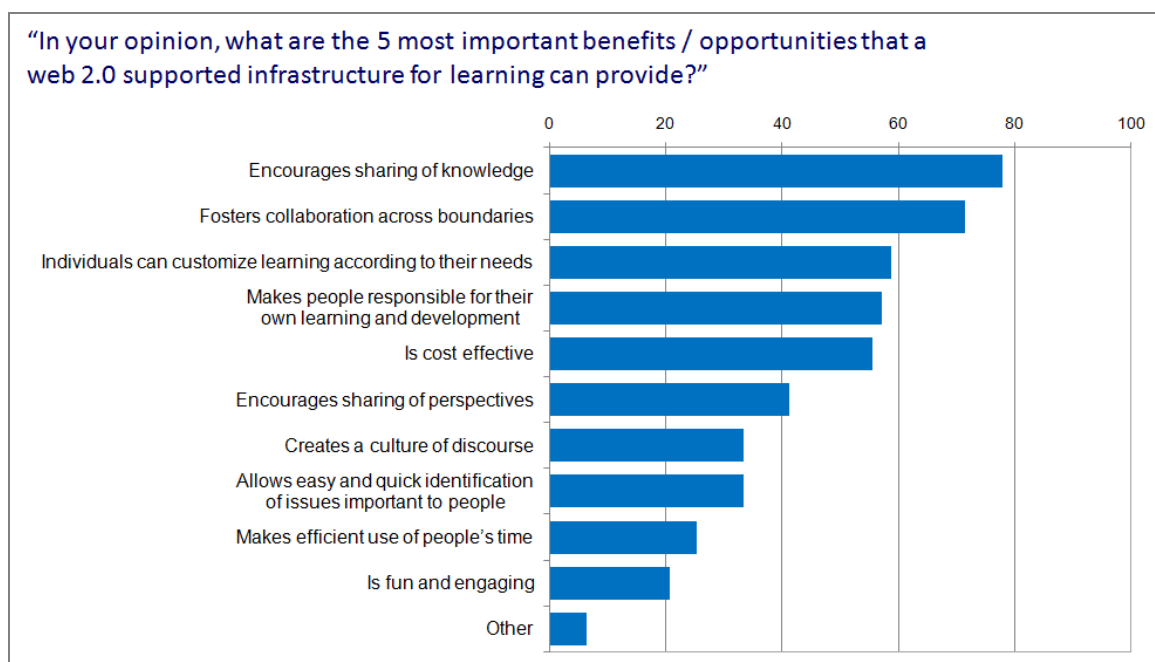


Exhibit 13: Perceived Benefits and Opportunities of Web 2.0 learning solutions

9. ... But There Is Wide-Spread Hesitation in Deploying and Utilizing a Web 2.0 Infrastructure

As for the top 5 risks and challenges that come with a web 2.0 infrastructure, respondents named *resistance from senior executives and an older work force, lack of social support interventions, security issues, privacy issues, and cost*. These barriers are to be expected, and will need to be dealt with moving forward (exhibit 14).

Interestingly, the results suggest that it is not technical issues holding us back, but rather cultural resistance and the need to develop the social infrastructures needed to have a blended solution to informal learning.

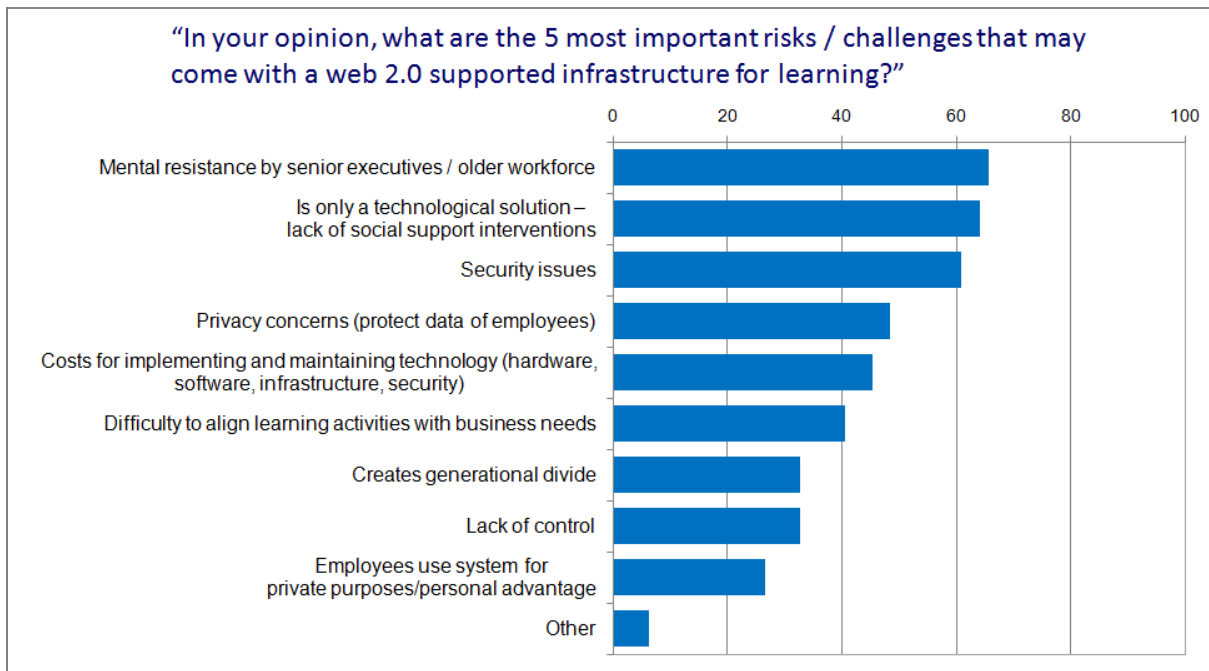


Exhibit 13: Perceived Risks and Challenges of Web 2.0 learning solutions

10. Cultural Issues and Cost Concerns are Key Inhibitors When it Comes to Implementing Solutions.

We provided our respondents an open-ended opportunity to comment on the challenges they are facing, and clustered their answer into categories. In line with the above results, the top cluster was “overcoming cultural differences and cultural resistance,” referring to attitudes and mental barriers. This was followed by “cost of implementation” which reflects the rising concerns many organizations have about costs today, given the lack of IT infrastructure in many companies and the expected costs of added security issues.



Exhibit 14: Implementation Barriers for Web 2.0 learning solutions

11. There is Strong Interest in Creating a Dedicated Working Group To Share Experiences and Further Explore the Issue

Despite of – or maybe because of – the ambiguous attitude towards the emerging web 2.0 technology, the topic is very close to the heart of the majority of the surveyed companies. A whopping 43 companies indicated interest to participate in a dedicated working group to jointly share experiences with Web 2.0 learning solutions. Three of them offered also to host or sponsor this effort, so please stay tuned for more focused activity in this space.

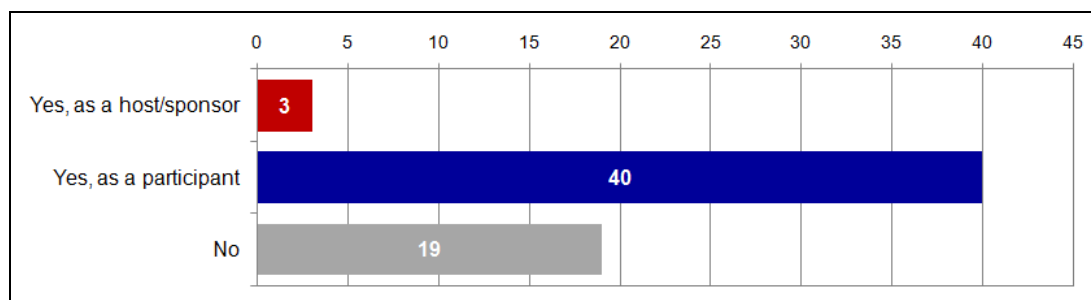


Exhibit 15: “Would you be interested in joining a dedicated ECLF working group that focuses on sharing experiences with web 2.0 learning solutions?”

CONCLUSION

As with all ECLF surveys, these results do not claim to meet strict scientific standards. Nevertheless, we believe they are indicative of the current status of informal social learning among European corporations. Overall, the results signify a rapidly growing awareness that informal social learning is a critical future requirement in organizations and they demonstrate that companies are slowly moving forward to implement some of the web 2.0 tools to support informal learning.

The results clearly show also that significant hurdles remain in the form of cultural resistance, lack of senior management support, and concerns about costs. Which drivers will finally cause companies to commit to implementing informal social learning tools as a key element of their learning architecture remains to be seen. At any rate, the issue will remain on the front burner of many corporations in the immediate future.

About the author



Roland Deiser is an internationally acclaimed expert on strategy, organizational change, and innovation, with a focus on building strategic capabilities into large-scale systems. His professional work is strongly rooted both in both academia and practice. He is the founder and the Executive Chairman of the European Corporate Learning Forum (ECLF), and he serves as a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Digital Future at the USC Annenberg School of Communication. (Los Angeles).

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About ECLF

The European Corporate Learning Forum (ECLF), is a consortium of the global Heads of Learning and Development of currently about 60 multinational corporations from more than 10 countries who have teamed up to share practices and shape the future of Corporate Learning and Development. More information about the Forum can be found at www.eclf.org.