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Guest column: What do you know? Creating environments that fosters learning and improvement

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Imagine a customer call-centre that answers 90 per cent of its calls within 20 seconds, provides support through voice, chat or email, and is always available. Now think about having the ability to increase capacity during a busy time, like a new product launch, reduce capacity when it isn't needed, and only pay for what is used. Are we talking about tech support from robots? Think again.

These customer service representatives are real people, providing excellent support. One call-centre provider is delivering high-quality, human customer support for companies around the world from over 20,000 independent agents around the United States. This is no small feat, and it demonstrates how technology can be used to accelerate on-the-job learning and performance improvement.

Talent holds the key to company performance. From business units to Finance to IT, getting the right skills to the right place at the right time is a constant challenge. Now consider that workplace technologies are becoming obsolete faster, and the useful life of many skills is shorter. Workers at all levels need to be able to learn and relearn rapidly to adapt to and anticipate changing demands. Recruitment and retention initiatives can't address the need, nor can standardised training programs and knowledge management.

New technologies offer an opportunity to rethink both talent development and traditional knowledge management and integrate learning directly into the daily work experience. Virtual platforms enable workers to connect with each other to solve problems across distributed work settings and beyond organisational boundaries.

The preponderance of sensors and advanced analytics today make it more possible than ever to collect and share individual's real-time performance in a variety of settings. Sensors and the integration of social platforms into work allows for knowledge and experiences to be captured automatically, as they occur, rather than depending on compliance and coerced participation to populate reputation profiles and knowledge management databases. These technologies support rich, context-specific learning and participation driven by momentum as users discover and create value.

Training programs and knowledge management have a place, but they may not deliver the skilled workers needed to the right place and time in a rapidly changing environment. Pre-developed content quickly becomes obsolete or lacks the context to make it relevant to the individual. Perhaps more importantly, classroom training and knowledge databases tend to focus on the commonalities between work, the standard processes and practices, when in fact workers spend most of their days dealing with the exceptions that don't fit into the

standard processes and systems, whether it's a one-off shipping request or a customer who can't make your software work with their hardware. Workers typically get better at handling the non-standard aspects of their work through on-the-job experience.

Today, technology, including virtual platforms, provides new ways to connect individuals to each other and to relevant knowledge to accelerate learning in the workplace. Virtual platforms can be used to promote learning, not just for a subset of "knowledge workers" or "creative" talent but for workers at all levels of the organisation. Technology can help focus workers on learning by helping them more effectively connect with the challenges that they need to learn and the resources that they need to succeed.

In a recent paper, we detailed nine principles that help to create the type of environment that fosters learning and improvement. The following three principles demonstrate how technology can play an important role in enabling this on-the-job learning and in amplifying the learning, especially across a virtual workforce.

Real-time feedback for individuals and teams. For workers to improve performance and learn what works or doesn't work, they need to have a context-specific understanding of what is expected and how they are doing relative to others, in the moment rather than three- or six-months down the line.

At virtual call-centre LiveOps, the independent agents see customer and program-specific metrics on an online dashboard. These metrics define the level of performance necessary for agents to remain eligible to take calls for a program and are continuously updated, providing real-time feedback after each call so that agents can see how they are doing relative to their peer group and where they can improve. This level of performance data transparency creates a meritocracy, as agents are compared to their peers and rewarded based on their relative performance.

Smart capture and share. In any work setting, a great deal of information is generated and exchanged in meetings, conversations, instant messages, and email. Easy access to that information helps foster collaboration, solve problems, and improve business processes. At SAP Community Network (SCN), intelligent cataloguing of insights from discussion forums, tagged for searchability, helps make the right information available at the right time to those who need it without requiring the burdensome documentation associated with typical knowledge management. Other users can search for solutions in the context of the original problem posed, as well as through related discussions that may have led to an ultimate solution. Instead of days of internal debate or experimentation, the typical time to receive a response is 17 minutes.

Helping workers make relevant connections. In a typical organisation, physical or virtual, it can be difficult to know who everyone is and what their experience, expertise, and interests are, and the typical knowledge and resource management tools that require individuals to maintain profiles rarely see the level of continuing compliance and participation to make them useful. Instead, workers tend to fall back on relationships. They seek help and learn from those already known to them.

Now, virtual platforms, such as the one used by Odesk, a global online workplace, automatically generate detailed, up-to-date profiles. These profiles include the contractor's cumulative and historical ratings and hourly wages for each completed project as well as the scores for any tests or certifications. The same type of automatic, action-based reputation profiles can be used internally to facilitate assessing and connecting with the right co-workers for the job at hand.

Of course, the real opportunity isn't just the technology (it never is). There are other dimensions, like physical space and management practices, where thoughtful decisions can

improve on-the-job learning and integration of technology can amplify the impact. The real opportunity is to focus on using the new generation of technologies to help people learn from their daily work, from themselves, from each other.

How can you use the rapid change of technologies to enhance the efforts and learning of your work force rather than impede them?

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