

## Learning from Others in the Digital Age

Don't overlook the importance of vicarious learning for sharing critical knowledge at work

By Christopher G. Myers, PhD

People today have access to more information than at any point in human history. A 2014 report estimated the size of the internet at 1 billion unique websites, and by 2021, global internet traffic is expected to reach 3.3 zettabytes. That is 3.3 trillion gigabytes of information moving around online – enough, by my rough estimate, to fill 12.9 billion iPhones (the 256GB iPhone X, to be specific).

It's no surprise, then, that one of the most common ways we seek out and learn new things is by going online — embodying the 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning mantra “I don't know... hang on, I'll Google it.” However, because of this volume of readily available information and knowledge, we risk forgetting one of the most important ways people learn, particularly at work — by learning from the experiences of others, or *vicarious learning*.

Though we have long recognized the benefits of not repeating others' mistakes or “reinventing the wheel,” the emphasis of many modern organizations on self-directed learning and more autonomous, independent work means that employees are often turning to Google for answers, rather than learning vicariously from a colleague's knowledge and experience.

This is a costly trend. Recent reports estimate the annual business cost of failing to share knowledge effectively to be in the millions of dollars, even for smaller organizations, and potentially totaling billions of dollars per year in collective losses for the companies in the Fortune 500.

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Failing to learn from others' experiences at work is a concern for several reasons. Despite the plethora of hits returned on any given Google search, not all information is available online. The knowledge needed to succeed in many organizations relies on unique or sometimes proprietary information (such as patented designs or procedures). In addition, differences in the way knowledge is captured and retained can make it difficult to find certain pieces of information through online searches, even within an organization's own digital archives. For instance, differences in terminology or document “tagging” practices can impede individuals' efforts to search their companies' online knowledge databases, leaving them unable to find important information simply because they searched the wrong keyword.

Most importantly, though, much of the knowledge needed for employees to learn and thrive at work is not the kind of formal, codified information that is typically documented in online repositories or knowledge-management systems. Instead, what is often critical for success is mastery of the *tacit* knowledge of the organization – the complex, interpretive knowledge that is difficult to capture or write down.

This need to learn vicariously from others' tacit knowledge and experience pervades most organizations, particularly as the world of work continues to become more adaptive, complex, and knowledge-based. As it does, we will have to ask ourselves how we can harness the power of technology to support, rather than replace, these key interpersonal learning interactions.

For instance, in our executive education courses at the Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, we prioritize cohort-based learning experiences in which participants can learn from in-depth discussion and interaction with faculty and peers. These interactions are often supported with technological tools (including simulations, online readings, and web modules), but the core experience always centers around rich, face-to-face learning interactions. This learning experience arms participants with research-based



ideas and the nuance necessary to go back to their day-to-day work and adapt knowledge to meet their dynamic demands, rather than just trying to implement a boilerplate solution they found in a document online.

Balancing the growth of technological tools with the benefit of in-person learning and tacit knowledge sharing will continue to be a critical challenge for human resources managers, and raises a plethora of questions and possibilities. How can we use technology, for instance, to enable greater vicarious learning between members of geographically dispersed teams? How might

the availability of information online be used to provide a “foundation” of codified knowledge that can be expanded by learning from stories of others’ experiences? And what role could social media play in facilitating the sharing of more tacit knowledge across teams, organizations, or even industries?

Hang on, I’ll try Googling it and see what I find out.

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