

# **SOCIAL MEDIA AS A HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT TOOL IN AN ORGANIZATION**

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## **Abstract**

Employee development is one of the key activities constituting human resources management in an organization. The technological progress and social change which have occurred in the recent decades have led to transferring part of human activity to the virtual world. Currently certain aspects of life (both social and professional) are realized parallelly in the real space and social media.

Employee development is a multi-dimensional process. It may be executed both formally (e.g. through trainings and education), and informally (e.g. through self-education or social learning). Due to the expectations of a significant part of modern employees and the technological development, you can observe numerous attempts at transferring employee development activities to the virtual world, and a tendency to choose less formal development techniques.

The author of this article attempts to analyse the way in which social media are used as a tool supporting employee development. The aim of this paper is to present arguments justifying the use of social media in employee development. The first part of the article is devoted to theoretical considerations, and the other presents the results of the research conducted by the author.

## **Introduction**

Employee competence development, although it has not always been referred to by that name, has existed since the moment when first 'enterprises' came to be – as early as in the ancient times. Initially the process focused mainly on passing on knowledge about running a family business or training an apprentice for a given profession from generation to generation. With time, when in subsequent centuries enterprises grew, thus hiring increasing numbers of employees from whom they expected an increasingly higher level of knowledge and skills, also the methods for employee development crystallized.

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the dominant method of employee competence development were training courses. With time alongside the technological advances and the appearance on the job market employees belonging to subsequent generation groups the trends regarding employee development underwent an evolution as well. With the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century methods using the internet, social media and self-education gained popularity.

Progress which makes use of new technologies should be perceived through the prism of providing training contents when the employee really needs it and in such quantity, quality and form as the learner currently needs. One of the most popular, though still often undervalued, tools allowing to learn in that way are social media.

The above factors and the author's personal interests connected with the use of ICT and social media in employee development processes in an organization were the reason to devote this study to the use of social media in employee development.

The purpose of this article is to present the ways in which social media can be used in human resources development. During his work on this article, the author analyzed previously published book, magazine and internet publications about social media and human resources development. The literature study also comprised papers connected with new trends regarding training implementation.

The article consists of three parts. The first is devoted to human resources development, the second focuses on social media as a tool for human resources development, and the third part presents the results of the research conducted by the author.

## **Human resources development**

People are one of the critical resources of an organization. It is on them that the undertakings of an organization depend. That is why human resources development is one of the key subprocesses of management. One of the main areas of interest of human resources management is human resources development, i.e. a combination of activities aimed at increasing the level of knowledge and skills of employees, and shaping the employees' expected attitudes and behaviors. It must be noted here that human development should be perceived holistically, noticing

both the professional and private perspective (which translates into the way a person functions in the workplace). From such a perspective what we can call development is the wholeness of changes of the level of knowledge and skills, as well as the changes in attitudes and behaviors of employees.

Employee development can be implemented in different ways – both formal (e.g. education, trainings), and informal (e.g. self-education). The choice of method should depend on the needs and possibilities of the organization as well as the predispositions and preferences of the employee. What is also significant is the scope of topics of the curriculum. Currently the market of training services offers a wide variety of formal employee development methods; however it needs to be considered together with informal methods (also those using the internet).

Due to a large number of employee development methods available and their significant differentiation (connected with the ways of using them by an organization), tens of various classifications of training techniques can be found in literature. In the table below the author proposes a division of training techniques into three groups due to the level of use of new technologies and the technological complexity level of the training techniques.

Tab.1. A division of training techniques due to the complexity level of the used technologies

Name of group	Description	Learning and teaching with the use of:
Group 1	Traditional training techniques and computer-aided techniques or techniques supported by teleconferencing devices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating in a lecture</li> <li>• Doing exercise</li> <li>• Participating in a workshop</li> <li>• Participating in a conference</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Independent reading</li> <li>• Required reading</li> <li>• Watching movies on video cassettes, CDs, DVDs and Blu-ray</li> <li>• Listening to audio recordings on cassettes, CDs and DVDs</li> <li>• Software on CDs, DVDs and Blu-ray</li> </ul>
Group 2	Training techniques based on web 1.0 applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Browsing through static websites (where no interaction takes place with the user in real time)</li> <li>• Internet search engines</li> <li>• Becoming familiar with the contents of databases and knowledge bases</li> <li>• Reading e-books</li> <li>• Watching interactive television</li> <li>• Participating in a teleconference, videoconference</li> <li>• Becoming familiar with the contents of FAQ (frequently asked questions) bases</li> </ul>
Group 3	Training techniques based on web 2.0 and web 3.0 applications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Browsing through dynamic websites (where interaction takes place with the user in real time)</li> <li>• Discussion on chats</li> <li>• Discussion on discussion forums</li> <li>• Using social and business networking (Facebook, GoldenLine, LinkedIn, etc.)</li> <li>• Participating in online courses</li> <li>• Participating in webinars</li> <li>• Cooperation via the internet</li> </ul>

Source: own elaboration

The techniques gathered in the area of the first group are often described as ‘analogue’ techniques, whereas those included in group 2 should be associated mainly with the first phase of internet development – that is 1.0 – a static network, where one-way communication was dominant. It can be easily noticed that the tools gathered in the area of group 3 can be codified under the name social media.

### Social media as a tool for human resources development

According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, the percentage of social network users in the USA among adults increased from 7% in the year 2005 to 65% in the year 2015. A similar trend (although slightly

less dynamic) can be observed in other research conducted on the European market. Social media are becoming an important element of most spheres of human life – they also regard the professional sphere. Thus, it was only natural to make an attempt at using their benefits in employee development.

The term employee development with the use of social media is inextricably linked with self-education. Self-education can be executed in various ways, both by means of traditional sources of knowledge (books, publications gathered in libraries) and modern methods, including social media – by many perceived as the most powerful tool of the information society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The main advantage of using self-education is transferring the responsibility for the development process on the employee, which enhances their involvement to a great extent. The role of the employer is transforming, evolving from the organizer of the competence development process (who is responsible for all phases of the undertaking – planning, execution, assessment of the results) to an entity who is in charge of providing the employee with key resources that will enable them undisturbed development.

Education with the use of social media does not mean a change in the educational tools used, but a change in the perception of the concept of learning in general. Nowadays the waiting time for access to knowledge and the competence development that accompanies it in the case of traditional training methods is often measured in weeks or months (from the moment when the need arises to the execution of the training in the lecture hall), while in the case of using social media the learner is able to gain access to knowledge incredibly fast, in fact in real time.

Learning with the use of social media may be realized in two ways: social bookmarks, wisdom of crowds (e.g. Digg, Yahoo Buzz), question & answer pages (e.g. answer.com), collaboration websites (e.g. Office Live, Google), blog and blog platforms (e.g. WordPress), discussion boards and forums, social networks (e.g. Facebook, Myspace, Nasza Klasa), attention and communication dashboards (e.g. Wykop, CoTweet), business networking (e.g. GoldenLine, LinkedIn), audios, videos and podcasts (YouTube, Vimeo, Apple podcasts), internet encyclopedia (basing on the Wiki engine), virtual worlds (e.g. SecondLife, Entropia), livecasting and pictures (Flickr, Picasa).

It is worth noting that social learning executed by means of social media transfers the responsibility for obtaining and selection of knowledge that they want to gain onto the learner. The selection may be made by the learner (when they become familiar with, for instance, the contents of blogs), or by a community (e.g. Wikipedia). It is thus largely reliant on self-education. It requires independence in the area of education and initiating the learning process. What also needs highlighting is what part of the authors draw attention to that in the new era every participant of the training process realized via the internet will be decreasingly a passive recipient of knowledge, but instead will become its full-fledged creator. This way of perceiving a training process corresponds with the visible technological changes connected with the internet, which gradually evolves, each day increasingly becoming a medium basing on the involvement and creation of contents by all members of the community.

It is also worth stressing that employee development with the use of social media is tightly bound with notions such as ‘wikinomia’ or crowdsourcing. These notions (which to a large extent can be identified with education using social media), in general, describe the cooperation between members of a particular community that is based on openness, partnership and co-sharing, and that can be used to solve specific problems or challenges. This cooperation gives everyone the right to co-participate in the process both from the perspective of a person gaining knowledge, and a co-author of the contents.

In summary, pointing at the same time at certain characteristics of social media as a tool for the development of human resources of an organization, it needs to be highlighted that:

- Social learning executed via social media is strictly connected with creating virtual communities that form a network of interwoven relations;
- Learning with the use of social media resigns from researchers and people responsible for supplying any substantive contents in favor of individually searching and individually creating and providing training contents by all members of the community;
- Employee development with the use of social media is based on building a modern ‘architecture’ of information and functions basing on a ‘cloud’ of interlinked tags, categories and subject areas.
- In social media we can observe a departure from the traditionally executed classifying and ordering of information;
- Social learning executed via social media is characterized by flexibility, free choice of the time and place of learning, and the choice of content. What is also significant is the large number of forms, techniques and impact sources and their unpredictability;
- Social learning reduces the role of the computer and meetings in the real world in favor of mobile technology in a broad sense;

- Learning via social media allows to depart from the traditional perception of science as a cycle taking place within a specific timeframe in favor of learning conducted continually in the form of subscribing new contents.

### Results of the research

The author conducted free-form interviews with a group of 20 people. The participants were selected in a purposive way, and the criteria were: professional activity, active use of the computer and the internet, and consent to the interview. The table below presents the basic demographic data regarding the respondents.

Tab.2. Demographic structure of the respondents

No.	Respondent code	Sex	Age	Education	Work experience in years
1	A	female	29	higher	4
2	B	female	33	higher	8
3	C	female	38	higher	14
4	D	male	26	higher	1
5	E	female	28	higher	7
6	F	male	29	higher	10
7	G	female	26	higher	1
8	H	female	58	higher	32
9	I	female	23	secondary	2
10	J	female	61	higher	38
11	K	female	63	higher	39
12	L	female	33	secondary	14
13	M	male	19	secondary	1
14	N	male	24	secondary	2
15	O	male	25	secondary	5
16	P	female	54	secondary	30
17	Q	female	54	secondary	20
18	R	male	58	secondary	20
19	S	female	78	secondary	60
20	T	female	61	higher	34

Source: own elaboration

Nearly 60% of the respondents, after the purpose and subject of the interview were explained to them, admitted to being a user of Facebook or other social network. All of them unanimously claimed that they log in on their profiles at least every other day. Initially only 3 respondents spontaneously indicated that they use social media in order to broaden their theoretical knowledge and acquire new skills that they could use in daily practice at their workplace, and what is more the forums on social networks are their first choice when they look for solutions to difficult and unusual problems. After a detailed explanation of the notion of social media and asking the respondents additional questions to guide them what the researcher understands by the word development, another 9 respondents admitted that they use social networks, forums or discussion groups quite regularly in order to broaden their knowledge for the purpose of everyday work.

In total 14 respondents stated directly or in various contexts that they can indicate one or several people from their environments who more or less regularly use social media as a way of enhancing their knowledge or skills. Over half of the respondents openly admitted in the further stages of the interview that they have professional discussions in the space of social networks (both with people they are familiar with in the real world, and other experts who they met in the virtual world), for two of them it is their first instinctively chosen course of action when

they have any doubts or professional problems which need discussing with other people who have the necessary knowledge and experience. A quarter of the respondents use business networking portals (four of them use the GoldenLine portal, while three have their profiles on the LinkedIn portal, and one person is also a user of a less popular industry portal). Among the participants of the survey asked about the quality of the contents in social media in comparison with that presented in trade literature, it was often indicated that in social media the latest trends, frequently still unavailable in written publications, overshadow other contents. It must be noted that people representing professions connected with management and marketing had significantly more trust towards the contents available in social media, and the quality of the contents was mostly negated by the representatives of medical professions. All owners of social network profiles indicated that they offer a possibility of sharing novelties heard during meetings, trainings and conferences and their own observations which often become a starting point for interesting and inspiring discussions.

What was noticeable was the motive of employers' attitude to social media that appeared in the interviews in various contexts. The participants of the survey, although they never said it straightforwardly, frequently suggested in a more or less direct manner, that in employers' opinion social media are not meant to develop, and are used only for entertainment. One of the respondents even gave an example of an employer blocking access to social media at the workplace.

As the respondents indicated, social media are a great place for less assertive people who are uncertain of their own views and introverts, a place which allows to run a discussion and exchange opinions in a comfortable way, a place to discuss views before presenting them in your working environment. What is more, there was a recurrent mention that social media form a base for conducting research and statistics.

Only three people participating in the survey firmly stated that social media are not a reliable and confirmed source of information, since everyone has access to them and you cannot unambiguously and with sufficient certainty identify the authors of particular opinions, and anyone when asked face to face or on a public forum (symposium, conference) is able to disclaim a post or present their opinion and experience as quite the opposite from that described e.g. on a discussion forum. One of the respondents called social media a worthless creation, and accused those of the social network users who used them to discuss professional topics of lack of professionalism and reliability.

One of the participants of the survey described their work as one requiring being constantly online and being unconditionally available 24/7 for other users of social networks. A large part of the respondents participating in social media admitted that they read industry forums mostly after working hours. Only several people admitted that they publish their observations regularly in social media, whereas a majority described their participation in discussions as sporadic. When asked about query search in popular search engines all respondents stated that during the last week they used this method of self-education at least once.

Almost all participants of the survey (19 people) claimed that both in their private and professional lives Wikipedia constitutes their basic encyclopedia, especially when it comes to verifying unknown and difficult terms. All 19 users of Wikipedia underlined that it is an extremely reliable tool (since it is numerously verified by the users of the portal).

During a large part of the interviews the researcher also had an impression that the respondents treat the relations started in the virtual world as equal to those from the real world, and the internet community almost the same as the people they come in contact with daily in the real world. It needs to be highlighted that the participants of the survey claimed that they do not use social media in order to develop their knowledge and competences, however, later during the interviews the researcher heard statements which contradicted this thesis in various contexts.

**Conclusion**

In the last several decades the technological revolution has greatly influenced the way a society functions. It has become obvious to use the omnipresent developments of modern science and technology in everyday life – both private and professional.

Social media have become a natural place to which a part of human life activity was transferred, also the activity which regards development processes. A majority of the respondents indicated that social media are used by them to a larger or lesser extent in extending their knowledge and skills. Undoubtedly, it is in the best interest of employers that their subordinates educate themselves in an environment which is commonly perceived as natural and friendly.

Thus, it seems advisable to further use social media in the context of human resources development. It also needs to be highlighted that due to the specifics of the self-education process and the method of gaining knowledge in social media what is extremely important is the understanding and support from employers.

**A brief biography of the author**

Paweł Łuczak - the author is an assistant in the Department of Human Resources Management on the Faculty of Management at the University of Lodz. His research interests revolve around the subject of the use of modern technology in the preparation and implementation of projects in the area of HR, which are focused on employee development.

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