

Supporting performance at Dixons Retail – integrating formal and informal learning

Dixons Retail is continually looking for ways to implement innovative learning processes that improve business performance and better serve customers.

This story outlines how their journey with learning technologies has evolved from initially addressing a legal requirement to demonstrate compliance to supporting colleagues in new creative ways in their moment of need.

We look at practical steps taken along the way to introduce innovation, engage learners, and deliver bottom line results.

DIXONS RETAIL
BRINGING LIFE TO TECHNOLOGY

Contents

Developing a culture of learning.....	2
Engaging colleagues with formal online learning	3
Impact of e-enabled formal learning	4
Formal or informal learning- why not both?	4
Piloting informal learning – getting to grips with user communities	5
Overcoming Challenges	6
Informal learning - a few months on	7
Informal learning – bottom line impact.....	8
Top tips for integrating informal learning within the business	9

Dixons have been using technology in learning for the last five years. As a fast moving, market-leading retailer specialising in electricals and computing, the organisation is at the mercy of the knowledge of both customers and colleagues. The organisation works with over 10,000 different products, with new ones constantly being

added as the latest technology develops. So building and retaining a knowledge base for their staff is a key strand of their strategy to continually improve the customer experience.

Developing a culture of learning

Initially Dixons had been focussing on e-enabling the organisation's formal training strategy, initially for the organisation's 16000 retail colleagues operating from 700 outlets. This has since been extended to thousands more colleagues who work in head office, contact centres, home service and distribution. It was clear that the organisation had to embrace more online learning and a formal learning strategy was developed focussing on the way that colleagues actually learn in their day to day jobs.

Boyd Glover, Head of Learning at Dixons Retail commented that *'Prior to introducing learning technologies, the organisation relied heavily on a catalogue of classroom courses but these were costly and time consuming and the pick and mix approach to training didn't meet the on-going needs of colleagues or indeed customers. What we needed was a learning offering that didn't just deliver more for less but could also be more aligned to support individuals on the job.'*

Like many other organisations, the business need behind the initial investment in learning technologies was a requirement to demonstrate that colleagues were compliant and able to sell financial products within the stores. Previous experience with classroom training had proven costly; especially as the organisation had incurred fines in the early days as a result of not being able to demonstrate that training had been delivered to all colleagues. This experience prompted the legal department to quickly invest in a series of online courses and a robust learning management system to monitor and prove compliance. The platform was quickly extended to address other legal requirements such as health and safety.

At that time, Boyd Glover was looking for new ways to leverage the technology investment and introduce technology to other business critical learning requirements. Two streams of learning were introduced for the retail outlets— skills training ('how we sell') and product training focussing ('what we sell'). This online learning was delivered via the now rebranded national learning management system called The Edge¹.

However the organisation did not want to sheep-dip colleagues in a bath of online content, the aim was that every individual should have a personalised training plan linked to their job that would adapt to their needs and experience.

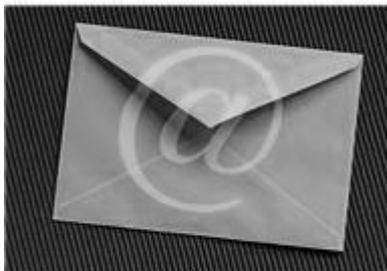


¹ LMS AI Talent

Dixons developed 'Our Training plan'. As soon as an individual joined the company, their learning management system worked out a tailored learning plan based on the area of the store that they were in, focusing on the skills and product knowledge required. As a result of being integrated with the HR system, The Edge knows the job that the individual had been recruited to do and it automatically assigns a range of online courses to the individual that are relevant to their job.

The system drip feeds new content to the individual as they progress through their courses. All colleagues are provided with learning linked to Dixons processes and procedures but for areas (such as product knowledge) where colleagues may have prior knowledge, the system can adapt following a mini needs analysis from the line managers and individuals themselves. The Edge examines new and existing knowledge of individuals as they progress and the plan changes automatically so that everyone has a unique programme outlined for them. Technology has enabled a highly personalised learning experience but without the need for high administration costs.

Engaging colleagues with formal online learning



Fun promotions were used to initially launch The Edge to the existing team to encourage engagement with the new system.

To capture their attention about the new platform colleagues were sent their log in details via a postcard sent directly from one of the top global technology shows in Las Vegas!

Following the launch, colleagues continue to be engaged via a number of routes. New joiners are introduced to The Edge as part of their formal induction process. In the classroom, colleagues are provided with an in-depth understanding of how and why learning technology is used in Dixons and the organisation found that this focus on new ways of learning right at the start of an individual's career has a positive impact on adoption. For example, 100% of new starts now complete their health and safety programmes within the first 7 days of joining (prior to introducing The Edge in the induction process, engagement with mandated training was only 50% causing all manner of administrative headaches).

Following the initial introduction of the Edge, interest is maintained primarily by ensuring that engaging content is available to support critical business initiatives rather than by promoting the platform itself. By aligning activity to the business, Dixons has been able to introduce further learning innovations.

For example the relaunch of a new service sales process meant that all relevant colleagues had to be retrained. The Learning and development function used this need for economies of scale to create the business case for introducing in house content development function. The first content created in house was then linked to the relaunch event and the whole business's focus on the relaunch then increased engagement with the Edge.

Colleagues were all allocated one hour per week to help them learn so that everyone has 48 hours of training time set aside each year but they found that colleagues were investing 2 hours a week. Not only that but 35% of colleagues were accessing learning from home with over 250 active users after midnight! Colleagues were learning via their mobile phones, their tablets and even their gaming devices. This highlights a big commitment to training resulting in an average 15 million page hits in The Edge every four weeks.

Impact of e-enabled formal learning

Success followed each stage of the investment.

	<p><i>Statutory compliance improved, saving £500,000 in year 1.</i></p>	<p>Early successes included improvement in statutory compliance saving over £500,000 in the first year due to the cost of retraining being dramatically reduced (and the company no longer were paying out fines!). When health and safety was introduced, the numbers of health and safety claims were also reduced</p>
	<p><i>25% improvement in customer service metrics</i></p>	<p>Aligning learning content with critical business initiatives revolutionised how the organisation both taught and embedded new ideas and processes within its teams. Partly as a result of this integrated approach, over a period of 2 years, its customer service metrics had increased by over 25%.</p>
	<p><i>Not only that, an appetite for learning had been created within the business!</i></p>	

Formal or informal learning- why not both?

The scene had been set and it was clear that colleagues were engaged with formalised online learning but this did not necessarily reflect the natural ways they were learning on a day to day basis.

Inspired by Bob Mosher’s 5 moments of need (see box out) and the 70:20:10 model for learning (where 70% of what we learn we learning by doing the job, 20% from the support and coaching networks around us and 10% via formal courses), Boyd Glover felt that it was time to review how informal learning could be introduced to the organisation.

<p>Box out – When do staff need to be supported? 5 moments of need²</p>	
<p>1. When learning for the first time</p>	<p>Formal Learning</p>
<p>2. When they need to learn more</p>	
<p>3. When applying what they have learned</p>	

² 5 moments of need by Bob Mosher, Trademarked Ontuitive 2011

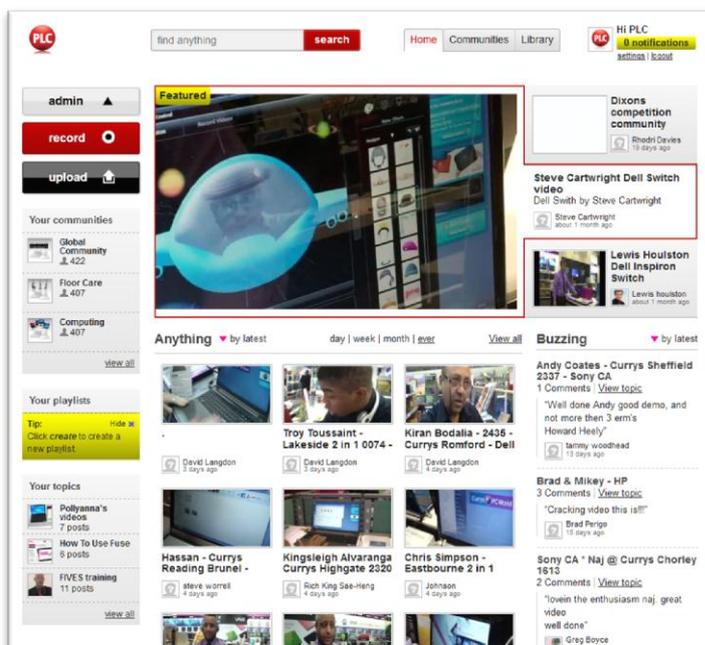
4. When things go wrong When things have changed	Informal learning
---	-------------------

He comments, *'We knew our colleagues were happy to share and were already were doing so via Facebook and other social networks, the challenge for us was what were they sharing? Colleagues passing the wrong information to each other could easily damage the customer experience. The challenge for Dixons became how do we harness the love of sharing but ensure that the right information is being shared? The organisation has its fair share of experts but how do you get them to share the knowledge that they have?'*

Another challenge was choosing the right platform. The number one search engine in use is Google, the number two is YouTube, but these sites are in the public domain creating concerns about public access to internal information. It was clear that Dixons had to replicate the opportunities that external sites offer for sharing and rating but they were looking for an environment that created a protected and private corporate YouTube for Dixons employees.

Piloting informal learning – getting to grips with user communities

Dixons decided to trial the Fuse platform from Fusion Universal, a video centric social platform that runs behind the firewall but builds on the concepts from popular social networking sites.



The platform enables video content to be created, shared and rated and had the potential to support an informal learning strategy in a number of different ways - providing support for colleagues in the work place when they are looking to apply learning, to address concerns when things go wrong and to quickly adapt when things have changed.

A pilot phase was used to explore the opportunities more fully. The organisation needed to understand how to engage colleagues with new ways of learning from each other, increase trust and confidence and identify how new approaches could influence behaviour and sales.

To test out how this would work within the business, Dixons initially identified 3 areas to review as part of the pilot:

- A sales initiative linked to a new product launch was introduced and, in keeping with Dixons approach to aligning learning with corporate initiatives, the platform was used as part of the launch. A competition was created where colleagues were asked to film themselves describing what was great about a new product and how they would demonstrate and sell it to customers. Each week a winning entry was chosen and published on the company's external YouTube site providing recognition of individual colleagues and encouraged engagement with the new platform
- In terms of applying the skills they were learning from each other, colleagues were also asked to view, rate and share the videos. As part of the pilot process, the organisation would review impact on sales in participating stores vs. sales in non-participating stores.
- The final area involved experimenting with co-creating and sharing 30 second videos to improve in store processes such as 'How to do a stock check'. These involved a simple video montage using still photographs. It was a challenge to work with subject matter experts to create content but important to find faster ways to streamline core processes within the business.

Within the first phases of the pilot 530 videos outlining how to sell the new laptops were uploaded in 4 weeks!

Overcoming Challenges

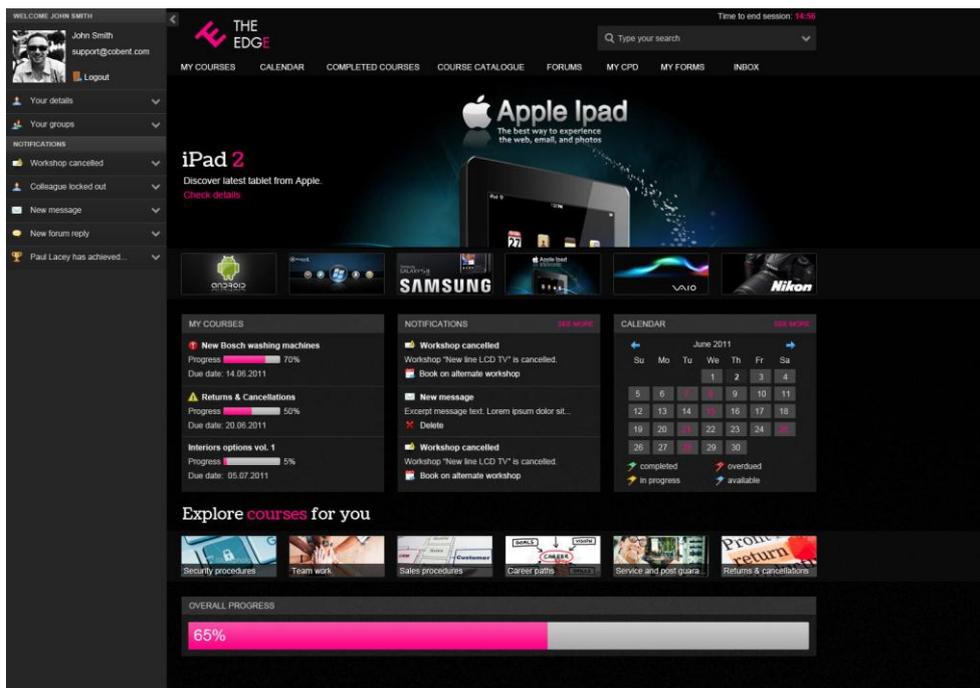
To conduct the pilot, the infrastructure challenge was something that had to be overcome and Boyd Glover worked closely with the IT department to identify risks and come up with creative solutions. Trust had already been built with the IT department through the implementation of The Edge (Dixons now run their own server farm to support learning). However the use of video created additional challenges and video was initially trialled with the IT team over a variety of platforms to identify the best route forward. The Fuse platform allowed a range of video default settings and these were set to Low to minimise bandwidth issues and they worked with the secure platform in the cloud rather than bring the programme within the firewall.

The Learning and development team also initially struggled to come to grips with a shift from sharing their own extensive knowledge on sales and product knowhow to encouraging the business to share their knowledge.

Informal learning - a few months on

The pilot has now been extended into a companywide project and steps are now being taken to integrate both formal and informal learning seamlessly for the individual. Dixons' learning platform,

The Edge now has the Fuse platform integrated within it providing a single sign on and 24x7 flexibility of access that colleagues have become accustomed to.



Learning is driven by the home page which has been modernised along the lines of an iplayer so that colleagues can hover on learning which then expands.

Simplicity rules and they are never more than 3 clicks from doing anything.

Communities working in this informal learning environment have expanded and now include the Training and Development team! Dixons colleagues that are developing new training programmes now use the platform to train the trainers and engage them in improving the programme. The owner of the programme shares new ideas for improvement via regular video blogs and the community of trainers delivering the programme on the ground can access shared resources – PowerPoint's, word documents and other course resources – and contribute and share ideas with each other on how the programme is delivered.

Informal learning – bottom line impact

Responsibility and trust - In terms of informal learning in the stores, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of success. The video editing creativity of colleagues has shone through and the team has responded well to being trusted to contribute. One store member commented *'I can't believe you let me do this – thank you!!'* Colleagues have also exhibited great responsibility as a result of having their video's published. Those who have contributed video ideas that have been rated well have worked hard to live up to the expectations of their colleagues by continuing to share ideas and illustrate their own on-going successes. Those who contributed videos that were not rated as well have often raised their game and resubmitted them.

Compliance - In terms of the 30 second process videos, the internal process project teams are currently providing anecdotal evidence that more colleagues are more compliant to new company processes, and that the approach appears to be fulfilling point of need requirements. The next step is to hook these resources into The Edge to explore the opportunity for process improvement more fully.

Bottom line business impact - For every new product, the average transaction value is tracked store by store using a unique product code. Every store was provided with the same training as part of the product launch product but only 500 colleagues were involved in the pilot that enabled them to share ideas on how to sell the product better. It is still early days but evidence coming through highlights that the personal sales of the individuals contributing the videos and the stores that they worked in had better than average sales.



In fact the stores that participated in the early pilots increased the average retail laptop price by 30% compared with those who did not.

Moving forward, the business is looking to scale the initiative and involve new communities in new ways of working. There is a commitment to continuing to content creation and to face to face delivery. Learning and development colleagues continue to be up skilled so that they can focus on creative ways of encouraging behaviour change. Their role moving forward will be to support the platform, to encourage engagement with forums and to go out and help capture great ideas from the best performers.

For Dixons it is not a question of informal or formal learning, it is both. The integration of the two is an on-going process, driven by innovative thinking, powered by technology and focussed on supporting and building performance.

Top tips for integrating informal learning within the business

1. Introduce new innovations by aligning the outputs with strategic business initiatives.
2. Creating a culture for learning - build on previous successes with formal online learning
3. Encourage seamless fit with formal learning programmes
4. Pump prime the system by creating a framework to incentivise contributions – set a challenge or create a competition
5. Trust your staff to rise to the challenge to encourage others
6. Allow trust to build - Look for evidence of individual and business success and share it all the time
7. Provide opportunities for learning and development staff to experience the benefits in their own work environment to help overcome resistance
8. Consider restructuring L&D roles to help facilitate the sharing of effective practices
9. Work with IT to identify appropriate solutions and to trial video on existing platforms
10. Don't be afraid of working in the cloud to help overcome IT infrastructure challenges
11. Don't limit your expectations of how staff will access the programme- ensure it is accessible 24x7 and via all main devices
12. Spend time with HR business partners, directors and other stakeholders to keep the profile of the programme high
13. Continually work with stakeholders to improve and identify new ways of harnessing the opportunities for informal learning in the business.

This case study has been independently investigated and developed by Towards Maturity and has been brought to you thanks to the support of Fusion Universal

