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McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

Social Media and Social Learning:
An Interview with Pam Boiros, Skillsoft Books24x7

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INTRODUCTION

For the last five years social media has been the rage and everyone is trying to figure how to maximize the return on social media. Commentary on social media ranges from that it's teen-aged drivel, inane celebrity and sports chatter, and a valuable business tool for promotion and publicity. What is the truth? Somewhere in-between.

Even though we are in the infancy of social media, we now know that an organization can use social media in many inventive ways. We have learned that social media can be valuable in getting an organization's name in front of an audience.

Social media is now used widely by all publishers, commercial and association/nonprofit publishers. Social media has much to recommend it as a vehicle to promote sales, publicize new books, and build networks and communities with authors. And what is rarely written about is this: social media can also be an important part of an organization's social learning efforts.

Yet many questions are unanswered. For example: What is the difference between social media and social networking? What social media works best for professional and business audiences? How can an organization avoid disjointed social media messages and achieve a consistency in its social media messaging? What are the experience requirements for a full-time social media staff member? How can social media contribute to social learning? What is "Knowledge Management" and how does it relate to social learning?

To answer these questions, and more, I interviewed Pam Boiros, Vice President, Product Management, Books24x7 at Skillsoft. In 2010, Pam did a *McHugh Expert Interview* entitled *Innovative Content Distribution*. Information on Pam's background is at the end of our interview.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q **Can you give a succinct definition of social media?**

A Social media is any online platform or site that enables users to create their own content and make it available to others. Like everything with social media, there are varying definitions. Blogger Heidi Cohen offers 30 different definitions. We are in a participation revolution – there is no such thing as one-way communication anymore, everything is potentially an online discussion. And although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, social networking is very different from social media.

Q **OK, then what is social networking?**

A Social networking is the action of building and expanding your contacts through an online platform. A key aspect is the network effect—the connections you have or that you make to connect you to even more people. For example, if you have 1,000 connections on LinkedIn like I do, the number of second and third level connections you have multiplies out to the millions. Literally millions of people from whom you are only one or two degrees separated.

There is some fascinating research on this topic—Mark Granovetter's theory of the Strength of Weak Ties (published in 1973) was fascinating to me and is highly relevant to social networking, as has been discussed on many blogs.

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Q   Organizations seem to use primarily three brands of social networking: LinkedIn™, Twitter™, Facebook™. Can you suggest a hierarchy of social media in terms of their importance to publishers in terms of exposure, effectiveness, reaching a business/professional and audience, and return on investment?

A   Yes, these are the big three. For now at least. There are many evolving social sites including Pinterest™ and Google+™ that are worth keeping an eye on as well. But focusing on the "big three" for the moment, each is unique in a number of ways:

- **LinkedIn** is the best example of a professional social network. It is changing how organizations recruit talent, how job seekers pursue their next opportunity, and how business connections are made. The connections are relatively strong, and the depth of your "connections' connections" is the real power of LinkedIn. The ability to create groups on any industry or area of interest links like-minded individuals. I know several publishers that troll LinkedIn looking for potential authors or for emerging experts on a given topic of interest—especially experts that already have a built-in following based on their social media activities.

- **Facebook** gets the most attention in the social networking sector. It has the largest number of users, globally, and had an IPO this year that was watched as closely on Wall Street as it was on Main Street. On Facebook, the connections are personal—people connect to their family and friends, and tend to "like" products and organizations that are closely aligned to their personal interests.

- **Twitter** is both the broadest and, at the same time, the most limited, due to its 140 character limitation per post. The connections made on Twitter can be loose and tend to be ephemeral. Since Twitter uses the "follow" model, any Twitter member can follow anyone else, and there is no implicit or explicit two-way relationship. From what I have seen, Twitter users follow a wide range of other users spanning across their personal and professional interests. A colleague of mine once said, "Twitter offers the illusion of an audience," and that's true. Posting something to Twitter can be seen by virtually any other user, but will it be?

The marketing opportunities using social media and social networking are endless and just starting to be exploited in any meaningful way.

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Q   Should an organization be concerned over a disjointed social media message, thereby diluting brand image, if every department in an organization is sending a different social media message?

A   Yes, this is a concern at most organizations. A social media policy is a good idea to ensure that employees have a good understanding of how social media is to be used. The best example I've seen of a social media use policy is IBM's which is available online.

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Q   Should an organization strive to have a consistency in its social media message? How can a consistency in social media be achieved?

A   Yes, social media marketing should have the same diligence around consistency of message as any "traditional" marketing. It's a critical aspect of protecting your brand.

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Q   It seems like every day a new social media consultant appears. What criteria do you suggest using to evaluate the competence of a social media consultant?

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A   I am highly skeptical of anyone who hangs out a shingle and purports to be a social media expert. All of these technologies, and the behavior changes that they are causing, are so new—and changing so fast—that no one can be an expert. The flip side to that, and the good news, is that literally anyone can quickly become more knowledgeable about social media and social networking technologies. It's easy, fast, and free to set up profiles on the major networking sites and experiment. Experimentation is encouraged. Plenty of information exists about how to use these sites, including tying profiles together to reduce the sense of "profile fatigue." Be an active member of the participation revolution. Start a blog on a topic of interest to you, and perhaps more importantly, contribute comments and other content to existing blogs and other sites. It's easier than ever to build your brand online.

Q   If one wants to hire a full-time social media position, what would the profile look like of an ideal candidate? What work experience and education would you look for? If an organization promoted from within, would the criteria need to be the same?

A   These days, I think you need someone smart and creative who's willing to experiment and try a few things, measure the result, and move on. Moving on might mean repeating or slight tweaking of successful activities and campaigns, or quickly abandoning the ones that fall flat. The old "fail faster" advice is especially relevant with social media and social networking initiatives. The good news is you can get a pretty good sense of whether you have a success or failure on your hands in a few hours. I've heard others say that the ideal candidate for a position like this is a new college grad, no special experience. The thinking is that social comes as naturally to these "digital natives" as breathing, and

they'll be social gurus. This may be the case, but inexperienced new hires will need careful oversight and training and an in-depth understanding of your products and company goals. Remember, your entire organization's online reputation is at stake. The limited history of social media already has its textbook examples of failures from Chrysler to former Congressman Anthony Weiner.

Q   I enjoyed reading your article "The Eight Truths of Social Learning Now." What is social learning? What is the primary thesis in your article and how does it relate to social media?

A   Social learning is really just the use of social technologies, such as connecting, recommending, sharing, and contributing, to enhance the learning process. Learning is an inherently social activity anyway—we learn from other people—but in today's large, global, virtual and dispersed organizations it's harder to learn by osmosis. Social learning, when used effectively, can help create a virtual "water cooler."

Q   About 12 years ago, "Knowledge Management" (KM) was an idea in vogue. How do social learning and knowledge management differ?

A   There has been a lot written about this topic. I worked for a publisher (Butterworth-Heinemann, an imprint of Elsevier) in the mid-1990s that published a number of books on Knowledge Management, and I was always fascinated by the topic. At its most basic level, KM could be just about inventorying and building repositories of knowledge, not seeing it put to use by people at the highest point of need and enabling people to contribute to the knowledge base vs. just consult it. In some ways social learning is KM 2.0.

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Q   Where can our readers get a free copy of "The Eight Truths of Social Learning Now?"

A   Copies are available on the Skillsoft website at www.skillsoft.com/truths. A short, painless registration form needs to be completed.

Q   Can you bring us up-to-date with what you have been doing professionally and what is new at Skillsoft Books24x7 of interest to our readers?

A   I have been with the company for 12 years, and over that time the changes in technology have driven wider acceptance to the Books24x7 service, including a lot of use through mobile devices.

We've added more and more topical areas over time—having started with IT/technology and business, and moving on to engineering, well-being, and other disciplines—as well as a variety of media types. We've added audiobooks and video products to the Books24x7 product lines to meet the varying information and learning needs of our subscriber base. One thing we hear constantly is that folks want quick access, and they have less time to consume in-depth materials.

Books24x7 added a social learning layer to our product in 2010. It's called inGenius, because it helps to unlock an organization's "inner genius." inGenius lets Books24x7 users within the same company collaborate and share knowledge based on the information they find in Books24x7. This has given me the opportunity to speak to hundreds of our customers regarding their social strategies, and learn more about the exciting advancements of social learning.

Q   Finally, do you have any other thoughts on how our readers can maximize their return on the use of social media?

A

* The key thing is experimentation. Social media and social networking can seem terribly intimidating, and they can be an incredible time drain if you're not disciplined in your approach. The best advice I have is to roll up your sleeves and dig in. Carve out perhaps an hour per day to understand what each social site offers, the type of community each attracts, and the fit for your organization/brand/product.

* Build profiles for yourself and/or your brands on the various social sites where it makes sense. You may or may not need a Facebook page, depending upon your product, service, and intended audiences. More specialized communities may be a better use of your time.

* Many social sites are interlinked. A post on Facebook may take you to a blog post, a Tweet on Twitter might lead you to a shared photo on the photo-sharing site Flickr. Explore the connections to better understand the strengths of each site.

* Mobile and social technologies are inextricably linked. Mobile technologies like smartphones and tablets took off because of the instant access to one's social networks. For example, according to Social Skinny, smartphone users average 24 minutes per day using social sites. Nothing like the instant gratification of posting that photo you just took with your phone right to your social networks. Think about how the two technologies used in conjunction can benefit your social media activities.

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Q   How can we connect with you?

A   I am active in all of the usual social media platforms, and I welcome your readers to connect with me on LinkedIn and Twitter (details appear in my bio below). I am a member of a number of groups on LinkedIn, including your group for Association and Nonprofit Publishing. I am on Facebook, but use it to communicate with family and close friends. I also write for the Skillsoft blog periodically, which is available at: http://blogs.skillsoft.com. For folks who prefer email, I can be reached at pam_boiros@skillsoft.com.

Pam is an avid reader and literacy advocate, and lives in the Boston area. She holds an MBA from Babson College (Wellesley, MA, USA) and a BS in Business Administration from Northeastern University (Boston, USA). She is an engaging and passionate speaker and presenter on topics related to publishing and learning.

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ABOUT PAM BOIROS, Vice President, Product Management, Books24x7 at Skillsoft

Pam Boiros joined Skillsoft in 2000, as part of the Books24x7 organization, and she is currently responsible for the overall product and content strategy of the Books24x7 "On Demand" product line. Prior to Books24x7, Pam was with global scientific publisher Elsevier in various sales and marketing roles.

She is the key architect and evangelist for inGenius™, Skillsoft's social learning solution which has to date been adopted by over 300 organizations around the world. Pam was involved from the inception of inGenius, through the launch in 2010, and continues to drive ongoing feature and functionality innovations for inGenius on Skillsoft's learning platforms.

Pam has also been involved with emerging mobile learning initiatives since the launch of the Books24x7 on the Go™ mobile solution in 2006. Mobile learning is one of the most dynamic and exciting innovations in the learning industry, and is being adopted into the learning strategies of major organizations.

ABOUT JOHN B. MCHUGH, Publishing Consultant

John B. "Jack" McHugh, a 40-year veteran of the publishing business, is a long-time successful publishing consultant. He is the author of the **McHugh Publishing Guide Series**—80 practical papers on all aspects of publications management, which can be ordered at his website. He also publishes the **McHugh Expert Interview Series**—15 interviews with publishing leaders on various publishing specialties, which are available free at www.johnbmchugh.com .

In the book publishing business, McHugh has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. McHugh is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality. For a two-year period, McHugh served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute.

McHugh has advised a variety of association publishers including: AASHTO, Alliance for Children and

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Families, ASCD, ASM International, ASTM, AWHONN, Boy Scouts of America, International Employee Benefit Foundation, NSTA, Police Executive Research Foundation, SAE, SMACNA and SNAME. McHugh has also worked for commercial publishers such as Butterworth Heinemann, Cardiotext, Kendall Hunt, and Llewellyn Worldwide.

Jack McHugh's specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, marketing, rights and permissions, organizational design, and startups.

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McHugh Expert Interviews of interest, free at
http://www.johnbmchugh.com/expert_interviews.htm

I-14, Copyright Aspects of Social Media: An Interview with Attorney David Koehser, 2010

I-9, *McHugh on Rights and Permissions,* 2012

I-5, *Innovative Content Distribution: An Interview with Pam Boiros, Books24x7,* 2010

I-17, *Innovations in STM Publishing: An Interview with Mark Mandelbaum, American Society of Agronomy,* 2010

Other *McHugh Publishing Guides* of interest, which can be ordered at

http://www.johnbmchugh.com/publishing_guides2.htm

 A-9, *Making Association Publishing an Income-Producing Asset: Role, Mission, and Stages of Development,* 2009, 5 pages, $8

PM-25, *Transitioning to Digital Products: Fourteen Suggestions,* 2011, 3 pages, $6

PM- 26, *Pricing Digital Content for STMs*, 2011, 3 pages, $6

PD-17, *Improving Product Development in Associations through Collaboration and Information Sharing,* 2010, 4 pages, $6

R-9, *How to Develop a Rights Policy and Establish Permissions Fees,* 2012, 6 pages, $12

R-22, *Electronic Rights: How to Assess Their Value,* 2009, 3 pages, $6

R-24, *McHugh's 22 Questions and Answers on Copyright and Permissions,* 2012, 14 pages, $14