



# OPTIMIZING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN A TWITTERIZED WORLD

## ABSTRACT

To be competitive in this time-crunched, budget weary, twitterized world, forward thinking companies are turning to neuroscience based methodologies to optimize engagement and development opportunities. This e-book describes how to thrive in environments that make it difficult to get focus and create meaningful learning opportunities

William Seidman Ph.D. and  
Richard Grbavac

# Optimizing Employee Engagement in a Twitterized World

## Introduction

What would it mean for your organization, if there were a way to both increase employee engagement and create significant performance improvements within the constraints of a twitterized world?

Leaders of many organizations are confronted by sharply conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they are under constant pressure to improve performance and employee engagement scores. In order to improve performance, people have to work smarter, not just harder, which requires giving people meaningful development experiences. On the other hand, virtually everyone is operating in very fast-paced, micro-fragmented environments – we call this the “twitterization” of the workplace -- that makes taking the time to have a meaningful learning experience nearly impossible. How are organizations going to get better if they are unable or unwilling to provide the time and environment needed for meaningful growth experiences?

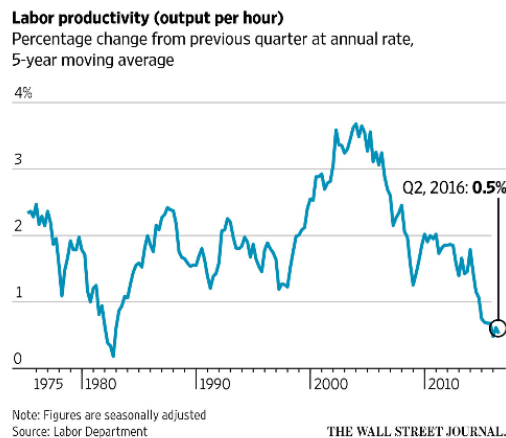


Table 1: Productivity Decline

There is a real link between learning and performance. On a national level, productivity is actually declining slightly. The *Wall Street Journal* in August, 2016 reported that the US has had three straight quarters of decline after eight years of slow growth (Table 1). *Time Magazine* in an examination of this data suggests that one of the primary reasons for this decline is a lack of investment in people development. Even though people are working harder than ever, productivity isn't improving because people's capabilities aren't improving.

In our experience, a good portion of the reason for the absence of investment in people is the twitterization of work and of the learning experience. In virtually all of the hundreds of organizations we have worked with over the last decade, the pace of work has increased. Intense efforts to measure all work have resulted in more micro-management, in pursuit of perceived efficiencies the work itself has become more transactional and fragmented and time allocated for personnel development has been reduced if not eliminated.

For example, we were recently on a call with a client discussing their initiative to transform their business in response to rapid market changes. The client's view was that "training" was the primary, well, only way to make the change. When we asked them what they meant by training they said that all training had to be done through five- to 10-minute online courses, primarily looking at PowerPoints and taking multiple choice tests. They also said that, because of intense time pressures, they could offer only 2 such courses.

This client needs to change people's attitudes, develop their skills, redefine business models and processes, reorganize the structure, change how and what they sell and service... in short, it's a tall order. And they think they can achieve all of that with two, five- to 10-minute online courses? They somehow expect that such twitterized learning is going to have meaningful impact. Yet, it is clear that twitterizing the learning experience stripped all meaning from the initiative, which seriously undermined impact.

The minimal impact is not surprising given recent research on motivation. Daniel Pink's work in his *New York Times* best-selling book *Drive* indicates that driving toward a meaningful social good – in his terms, a "purpose" – is one of the primary motivators of performance. This pattern is pervasive. Almost any survey on employee engagement shows that employees everywhere are alienated from the work environment, finding little meaning and displaying poor motivation. Gallup's 2015 survey of employee engagement, for instance, found that only 32 percent of the workforce in a typical company is "engaged." The challenge is to find a way to create meaningful learning – purpose-driven learning – consistent with our twitterized world.

**When both work and learning are twitterized, purpose is stripped from both, reducing motivation and therefore reducing performance.**

## Applying Neuroscience to Twitterization

---

We first began to see substantive changes in the work place during the recession of 2008. In response to harsh economic conditions, companies put more pressure on employees to work faster and, at the same time, for cost reasons, cut back investment in employee development. These trends became more dominant with the spread of smart phones, texting and real-time social media. Everything was happening faster and with less expectation for concentrated, meaningful engagement. Shortly after we noticed these changes, we began experimenting with online formats that might achieve a meaningful definition of purpose in these highly pressured, under-developed environments.

This work led us to create an online learning platform that consistently produces profound, comprehensive growth experiences at speeds approaching the demands of these environments -- what we call "twitter time" -- for a wide variety of roles and conditions. The foundation of the work was advances in the neuroscience of learning and the recognition that people needed to control the pace of their learning so they could adapt to the demands of twitter time. We came to call this methodology "neuroscience-based self-directed learning."

The key is the neuroscience research on purpose (cf. Rock or Sinek). This research suggests that the desire to achieve a greater purpose causes the release of neurochemicals (endorphins and a dopamine squirt) that create openness to new ideas and significantly speed up the learning required for performance improvement. This and other research indicates that putting this purpose in writing

suppresses portions of the brain (the amygdala) associated with fear and resistance to change, speeding up learning. Still other research shows that social groups aligning on a purpose and working together to achieve the purpose release other neurochemicals (serotonin and oxytocin) that further promote a desire to learn. Identifying, writing and discussing a purpose is a very fast way to achieve substantive motivation and accelerate learning.

Practically speaking, how do you generate a compelling purpose in twitter time? Also, while defining a compelling purpose is a good start, there is a lot more needed to generate sustained meaningful learning. How do you create a full development experience that really improves performance and still be in twitter time?

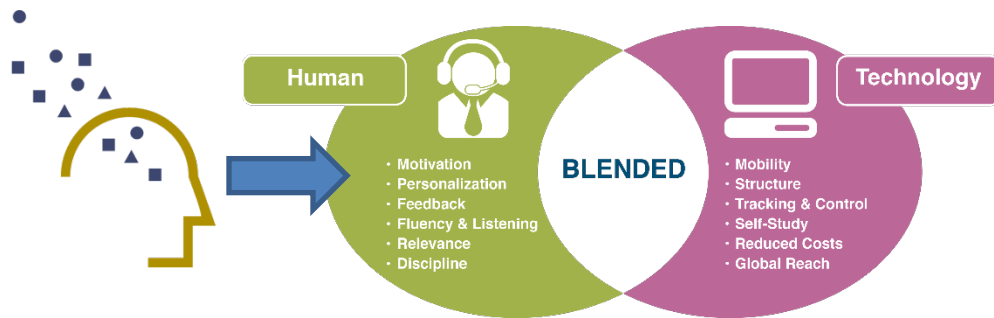


Figure 1: Self-discovery and Blended Self-directed Learning

Part of the answer was to divide neuroscience-based self-directed learning into two distinct, smaller processes (Figure 1) that we will discuss further:

- **Self-discovery** -- an expert defines what makes them extraordinary, their secret sauce of greatness
- **Self-directed Learning** -- a non-expert quickly learns and applies expert content to their real work situation

## Self-discovery

---

Picture this common situation. You have a sales person (or customer service person or design engineer – any critical role) that is just amazing at their job. They are so much better at their job than their colleagues that they account for a huge portion of the productivity of the organization.

Now picture trying to capture their knowledge so others can make just as big a contribution. Getting that expert knowledge, the secret sauce of greatness, has tremendous benefits for an organization, but has historically been quite hard to do.

One of the key challenges for many organizations, and particularly for knowledge management functions, is the difficulty of gathering experts' intrinsic or tacit knowledge. Experts typically are unconsciously competent, meaning that they don't know what they know. Directly asking them "What makes you so special?" or "How do you do this job?" results respectively in "I am not so special" and some form of "I just do it." Neither are very useful responses. Expert knowledge is more than just what they do, it is how they think about what they do and how they translate those complex mental models into efficient action, all of which is not immediately apparent to themselves or others.

In addition, there is a common belief that these experts wouldn't share their knowledge even if they could because it is what makes them so unique. Sharing expertise would undermine their competitive

position with peers. In most cases, however, this fear is unjustified and can be easily overcome with the right stimulus and by connecting them to their greater purpose.

The self-discovery process addresses both of these issues. The self-discovery process adds considerable value to an organization by guiding experts to discover their own unconscious knowledge very quickly. The insights this generates within minutes are so engaging and enjoyable for these experts that they embrace the process and want to share the results with others. More specifically, self-discovery asks the expert to think about the purpose of their area of expertise by responding to a series of online questions, and then use their answers to write a compelling purpose statement as though they were talking to a colleague. Writing responses to questions like the following stimulate the expert's reflection:

- Why is your area of expertise so important and even, sometimes, fun?
- Why would others enjoy learning about this area?
- How did you develop your expertise in the area?

They encounter these questions within 2 minutes of entering our online platform so they are operating at twitter speed. Answering them takes slightly longer – 1-2 minutes each – but the act of answering them causes all of the neural effects described earlier. They then summarize their answers into a single, written, compelling purpose statement. For example, here are some purpose statements generated by, respectively, a highly successful customer service representative in a call center, a business development expert on solution selling and very effective change leader in a complex healthcare organization:

*I am a customer champion. I am positive, knowledgeable, and an effective communicator empathizing with and owning any customer situation. Collaborating with my team, I provide balanced solutions that cultivate customer confidence leading to retention of customers and lasting great relationships.*

*I am tenacious about winning. I am passionate about our company, my customers and the innovative, valuable solutions we deliver. I build a high performing team of stakeholders, through mutually beneficial relationships, that consistently exceeds objectives.*

*As a trusted transformational leader, my passionate commitment and skills enable me to guide creation of a compelling collective vision and empower others to convert the vision to action. I courageously make the hard decisions needed to drive excellent, long-term results.*

The experts' energy and passion are readily apparent in these statements. Writing a compelling purpose causes dopamine to flood into their brains, creating meaning for themselves (and later for others) at the speed (or close to the speed) of twitter.

The momentum from writing the purpose statement quickly carries into an expansion of the expert insights. In the next online page, they are asked to envision guiding a colleague to become efficiently organized to achieve greatness in their role – again by responding to a series of questions. The questions are variations of:

- What is the right way to think about this role?
- What are the basics that need to be mastered for the role?
- What are the advanced attitudes and skills needed to excel at the role?

- How do you sustain excellence in the role?

These questions organize the expert guidance in a progression of development phases from most basic to most advanced. Here are the responses from the leadership expert:

**Right way to think:** *Your authentic beliefs and confidence are the primary drivers for creating purpose for your organization. Your superb business acumen enables you to sense unique opportunities and articulate them as a compelling vision that has the potential to produce extraordinary business results.*

**Basics:** *Build a comprehensive network of stakeholders and key influencers based on mutual trust and benefit. Your network actively supports the vision by speaking about it positively and frequently and formally allocating needed resources.*

**Advanced Skills:** *Drive efficient organization of the work required to achieve the vision. Establish an effective operating model that includes excellent planning and ongoing management. Be a self-consciously great manager of the work and our team.*

**Sustained Excellence:** *Be a model of transformational leadership working to create a culture where change is embraced by everyone and greatness is the goal. Enjoy and encourage others to enjoy "pushing the envelope" of innovation in our products, services, business processes and, most importantly, ourselves. Guide your organization to consistent high performance. Achieve the vision in a way that is deeply satisfying and a lot of fun.*

**Responding to these questions has proven to be so engaging for the experts that they lean forward, often tap the screen thoughtfully and will spend anywhere from 2-5 minutes per question.**

Responding to these questions has proven to be so engaging for the experts that they lean forward, often tap the screen thoughtfully and will spend anywhere from 2-5 minutes per question. They are completely engaged in helping their colleagues become organized for success in the role, and want to take the time to go deeper.

The experts have another layer of meaning available -- the specific tips and advice they would give to someone they were mentoring to better understand the goals and meaning of each development phase. They are guided to define 2-5 "tips" for their colleagues on how to interpret and apply the defined path to mastery. These tips provide substantive guidance, are the definition of mastery for the role and are the difference between mediocrity and greatness. It takes about 8 minutes per phase to define the tips -- so about 32 minutes total.

Here are some of the tips for the **Right Way to Think** about being a change leader:

- *Be deeply and genuinely committed to creating a greater social good for our clients, your team, and the organization. Everyone senses the authenticity of your "purpose" and trusts you to always act with honesty and integrity in your drive to achieve it. Your authenticity and purpose are the foundation of my transformational leadership.*
- *Do the homework required to develop superb business acumen particularly when information is incomplete and trends are uncertain. Understand our strategic objectives, study the broader trends in the market, "check the edge" and talk to many clients (internal and external). Seek unique, innovative opportunities that align with our growth strategies.*

- *Articulate the vision of the opportunity in a compelling way. Create positive images of purpose that engage the team and provide a clear path for achieving the purpose. Everyone knows that this is worth doing and has a general idea of how it can be achieved; why us, why now.*
- *Courageously evangelize the vision with conviction, urgency, and a sense of certainty to encourage people to believe in it. Maintain your commitment, even when there is uncertainty and/or when you encounter resistance.*

The process of visualizing guiding a colleague has the same neural impact as actually guiding a colleague, invoking many desirable neural responses around social learning. The progression of questions is guiding people to perceive “mastery” – more correctly a “path to mastery” – which Pink shows is the second key motivator of performance. The act of writing this down is causing introspection that is very rewarding for experts. They feel that they are doing this process for their own edification and they love it. Finally, the overall process takes about 20 minutes – not 140 characters -- but separated into very small, twitter size components that are completed in near twitter time and meld meaning and speed.

As the experts put in the tips, they become so engaged that time seems to slow down for them. Many athletes and others have talked about the feeling of being in a zone where everything just flows. One of the attributes of flow is that everything is perceived as moving at a slower pace, giving the expert more time to respond. Experts in the tips section seem to go into flow -- and enjoy it so much that they keep refining the tips even when we suggest that they stop.

From a twitterization perspective, meaning has substantially displaced the time pressures. Getting it right is more important than speeding through it. We had expected that we would have a maximum of 15 minutes of attention for the entire process described above – which would be consistent with twitterization – but the experts typically took 75 minutes and reported that it felt like 5 minutes.

Getting into the flow causes people to perceive they are functioning in twitter time, when they are actually taking more time. But this sense of time compression also produces much greater productivity in the actual time executing the process. They get a tremendous amount done in very little time. When they are then shown the summary report of their work, the response is always “Wow, I know a lot about this and I sure got it out fast.” Meaning and twitter time merge.

## **Prepare to Share**

Not only were the experts very excited about the quality of their work, they proactively wanted to share it with others. Throughout trials and testing of our platform, we found that, to a person, they said something like “This is really great. I want to share it with...” and they would list several names. Because of the connection to purpose, individual concerns about keeping their secret sauce to themselves fell to the wayside.

This is the power of social neurochemicals being released. As they were going through the process they were visualizing sharing their work with others. Now they are excited to make that visualization a reality. With this step, they entered the realm of social learning and media – twitter of course being a social media.

It became clear to us as we continued to experiment with trying to create meaningful learning in the world of twitter, that the raw content generated above wasn’t finely enough tuned to be absorbed by others in twitter time. The experts needed to adjust their work to make it more accessible for others and applicable to real world situations. This last is a twitter requirement too – if something isn’t perceived as immediately valuable, it is rejected. Twitterization demands obvious, practical value.

This was addressed in two ways. The expert is guided to:

- Return to the previous answers and make them “stickier” for others to perceive. For example, in the change leadership work, the titles for **Right Way to Think** became *COMPELLING VISION* and for **Basics** became *DEEP ALIGNMENT*. Converting the generic headers to sticky ones turned out to be a lot of fun for the experts. They enjoyed playing with the language and the ideas to make it more energizing and exciting, and, in doing so further increased their engagement
- Define 2-5 practical actions that they would recommend to their colleague to get started. Imagine an on-the-job situation where a mentor suggests to a mentee that the mentee try doing certain things to learn a job. That is the type of guidance the expert gives here. The expert feels good about helping others (again a social purpose) and the suggestions set up self-directed learning below. Here are some of the suggestions from the **Right Way to Think** from the change leader:
  - *Review the attached video on motivation. Write 1-2 sentences about your purpose and social good. Write 1-2 sentences about why your personal commitment to a purpose is a foundation of transformational leadership.*
  - *Review our most current corporate strategy statement. Identify three ways your purpose aligns with our strategy.*
  - *Identify one source outside our company that might provide insight into market trends. Review the source, describe 3 implications for your business unit. Identify a possible opportunity for improving the organization.*
  - *Create a "story" around your purpose and share it with a safe peer. Be sure it is compelling. Ask specifically for feedback on your passion, logic, tie to our strategy and value created.*

These processes take an additional 20 minutes. When these actions are completed, the expert sees another summary report that shows all of their work – and they feel great. They are literally in a neural bath of success.

The combined self-discovery and preparing to share processes capture all of the core elements of expert knowledge acquisition including:

- A compelling purpose
- How to be organized to achieve excellence
- Tips that guide practical application
- Actions that build mastery

It typically takes about two hours which may seem like a lot more than twitter time but when you consider that it is capturing what some researchers say takes years to develop is, relatively speaking, much faster than a tweet. Ultimately, a fast-paced, self-directed tool for capturing tacit knowledge – the essence of what truly separates the great from the good – is what works best in today’s world. This is particularly true when the tool is well grounded in neuroscience.



## Self-directed Learning

---

Getting an expert to articulate their knowledge in twitter time was certainly a challenge. Getting others to understand and most critically use this knowledge also in twitter time turned out to be an even bigger challenge.

Here too it is the neuroscience of learning that led to the solution of creating meaningful learning in twitter time. Drawing on the same body of research about the importance of purpose to neural engagement, writing to suppress resistance to change and social learning to promote mutual success, it is possible to create meaningful learning incredibly fast.

We also utilized the well-proven concept of priming. Priming is the idea that a prior experience frames your thinking. The classic example of priming is when researchers presented two groups of people with different images – one of someone smiling and one of someone frowning – had them watch the same video and interpret what they saw. The people who saw the smiling face gave a positive interpretation of the video while the people who saw the frowning face gave a negative interpretation of the video. The type of face people saw *before* watching the identical video primed them to interpret the video in a particular way. Interacting with the expert content from self-discovery primes a prospective learner to interpret the content in a positive, meaningful way.

More specifically, presenting the purpose, organizing guidance and tips portions of the expert knowledge to prospective learners and asking the learners to write a comment about the expert content – any comment without judging their comments – requires the learner to:

- Read the expert content (one experience of the content)
- Synthesize the content sufficiently to formulate a response (another experience of the content)
- Formulate their comment in writing (a third, and very demanding, experience of the content)
- Share the comment with a peer group (a fourth experience of the content)

Taking the expert purpose statement as an example, the learner would read it and write a few thoughts they had about what the expert was saying. In crafting their comments, they are invariably forming their own version of the purpose, primed by the expert's purpose. It looks pretty simple and it is fast – typically 1-2 minutes – so, in twitter time. But, in order to do this simple task, slews of meaning-related mental tasks are used, resulting in the internalization of meaning but still within the expectations of twitterization.

Once purpose is established, the neurotransmitters tend to take over. The learner repeats the reading, synthesis, writing and sharing process for the organizing questions and the tips. In particular, the learners get into what amounts to mental discussions with the expert (sometimes actual discussions through social sharing), generating great engagement and deep internalization. These additional processes take about 20 minutes for the organizing phases and about 30 minutes for the tips.

**Overall it takes slightly less than an hour for a learner to generate a comprehensive conceptual framework of their purpose, a path to mastery and understand the meaning of mastery.**

Absorbing the key concepts from years of expertise in about an hour is meaningful learning -- all in twitter time.

However, even though everyone wants to be able to develop mastery in twitter time, actually developing sustainable mastery cannot be done in twitter time. Here too the neuroscience of learning tells us what can, and in this case, what cannot be done. As one learner put it, "I was cruising through the program and loving it when suddenly I realized I was going to have to do some real work to master my job." Developing mastery takes substantive work, more than can be done in twitter time, but it can nonetheless be accomplished by embracing the twitter philosophy that a little at a time can lead to big results.

The basic building block of all of the neuroscience of learning is "neurons that fire together wire together." In non-science terms, what this means is that all learning is a rewiring of connections between neurons in our brains. Until a few years ago, it was thought our brains stopped rewiring at about age 18. But more recent research shows that our brains re-wire – we learn new things – our entire lives. The key question becomes, what optimizes re-wiring of our brains, or, in lay terms, what optimizes our learning, particularly if we are constrained by twitterization?



The simple answer is practice – lots of it. The need for practice is what surprised our person above. The optimal practice has the following characteristics:

- It is short (and therefore aligns with twitterization)
- It is highly personal and practical for the learner (which can be done in twitter time but typically requires more time)
- It is repeated frequently (which does not align with twitterization)
- It is repeated over a period of time (which also does not align with twitterization)
- It is formally scheduled to establish commitment and accountability (which gives some flexibility in aligning with twitter time, though when people are accountable for something, they usually extend beyond twitter time)
- It is done in an environment that promotes both written and social reflection about the practice (and again, not very twitter time)

Specifically, in self-directed learning, the learner is guided to read the actions described by the expert, modify them to make them personal and practical, schedule the actions, do the actions, record what was learned by doing the experiences and share the experience with peers. Because the expert defined 2-5 actions per organizing step, there can be from 8 to 20 actions. Each action typically averages about 30 minutes, so eight actions isn't so much (4 hours of work) and can sometimes be done in a single day. Twenty actions is more of a load – though still only about 10 hours of work.

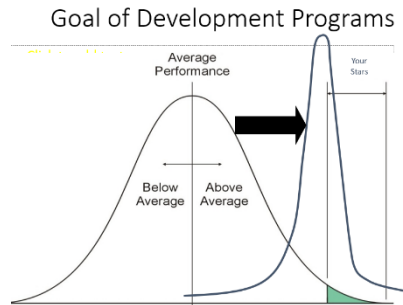


Figure 2: Program Impact

What happens here is that the purpose-driven attitudes and concepts generated in the first hour create a profound motivation to develop mastery and the actions themselves feel so useful (remember they came from a real expert and are adapted to apply to real situations), that the value of doing the practice is obvious. In environments where we have seen lasting impact, we have demonstrated that people who do all of the actions, record their learnings and participate in the social sharing retain 90% of the expert content immediately after the experience and, most critically, months later (Figure 2). Obviously the overall experience takes a little more time than is normally thought of as twitter time, but each component is in near twitter time and it consistently creates a meaningful experience. And there's no question that it is faster and more effective than any other existing methodology.

## Demanding Situations

---

Let's return to imagining the expert who outperforms everyone else. Now imagine that everyone else can be as effective as they are. What would that mean for your organization? Applying the above methodology for self-discovery and self-directed learning can enable any organization to quickly and with a process that fits in a twitterized work environment raise the performance of everyone to the level of the best. It is universally applicable and valuable.

Going a step further, there are some environments where using this type of approach to creating meaningful learning at the speed of twitter is the **only** realistic option for substantive performance improvements. These tend to be environments that are very transactional, have limited access to experts or occur only occasionally. Here are some of the environments where this type of methodology is essential:



- **Highly time constrained job functions such as sales and customer service, particularly call centers** -- In these environments, differences in expertise and performance really matter. Expert can do amazing things (think of a great sales person). Less than experts can have disastrous consequences (think of a bad customer service experience). But the experts in these environments have little time or incentive to define what makes them special and the

learners even less time to develop the attitudes and skills required for excellence. Compressing meaningful learning into twitter time has huge value.

- **Large numbers of people in a role, particularly if they are geographically dispersed** – In these situations, the organization has to develop many people fast. The self-directed learning capability can create meaningful development for large numbers of people regardless of location. It is meaningful learning in twitter time for the masses.
- **Restricted access to experts such as situations where there is only 1 expert or just a few experts or if the experts are approaching retirement (aka the “retiring knowledge worker” problem)** – In these situations, the organization is vulnerable to loss of expert’s highly specialized knowledge, but because experts are typically so unconscious of what they do, they can’t easily share the expertise that really matters. Also, like the time constrained situations above, they tend to be so important, that they are incredibly busy and don’t have the time to do anything in more than twitter time. The good news is that, once these experts begin self-discovery, they find it so personally rewarding that they will refine their work even if it takes more time. This process also creates a tangible asset of their “secret sauce” for the company when that person does retire.
- **Hiring and on-boarding particularly for small and medium size companies** – Many organizations hire and on-board people only a few people at a time. Investing significantly in developing sophisticated hiring and on-boarding processes doesn’t make much business sense. On the other hand, open positions put strains on the organization, bad hires can be incredibly destructive and ineffective on-boarding can lead to poor performance and high turn-over. Self-directed learning based on expert knowledge of hiring and on-boarding can significantly improve the hiring and on-boarding process.
- **Functions that are only performed occasionally such as cross-functional support and certain types of trouble-shooting** – Many organizations have functions that occur only occasionally. For example, an IT group only occasionally has to do certain types of trouble shooting or, in a public utility, one technical function has to occasionally cover for another short-handed function. Being able to quickly and efficiently access self-directed learning based on expert knowledge gives organization the ability to have these functions performed with expertise on short notice.

In each of these situations, the environmental conditions limit the options available for performance improvement. Traditional training clearly can’t meet the needs. Other types of e-learning, many of which have been gamified or twitterized, lack the meaningful impact. Only an approach that effectively creates a meaningful growth experience – and the related performance improvement – at the pace of twitter time fits these demanding conditions.

## The Sofia Learning Platform

---



Throughout this paper, we have referred to an online, neuroscience-based learning platform. Our company, Cerebyte, developed such a platform, the Sofia Learning Platform, based on our nearly 20 years of implementing comprehensive transformational programs. These programs, using the latest neuroscience of learning, consistently guide more than 95 percent of participants to think and act like the star performers.

However, as has become increasingly apparent in the few years, comprehensive transformational programs require significantly more time and investment than

most twitterized work environments can support. Sofia provides all of the functionality defined above, specifically tailored to performance improvement in a highly twitterized world.

Most organizations have some element of the conflicting pressures of a demand for improved performance but little time to make it happen. In our twitterized world, neuroscience has given us an opportunity to have it both ways – meaningful *and* fast. To learn more about the Sofia Learning Platform and how it can help you capture know-how and improve performance at the speed of twitter, go to: [cerebyte.com/Sofia](http://cerebyte.com/Sofia).