

PAUL MATTHEWS



informal Learning AT WORK

HOW TO BOOST PERFORMANCE IN TOUGH TIMES



Three Faces Publishing

Copyright © Paul Matthews 2013

The right of Paul Matthews to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

First published in 2013 by
Three Faces Publishing
Alchemy House
17 Faraday Drive
Milton Keynes
MK5 7DD
United Kingdom

www.threefacespublishing.com
info@threefacespublishing.com

All rights reserved; except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism or review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher. This book may not be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise disposed of by way of trade in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published without the prior consent of the publishers.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names, product names and trademarks used in this book are the property of their respective owners, and the use of such trademarks does not imply any affiliation with or endorsement of this book by such owners. Although every reasonable precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the publisher and author assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Neither is any liability assumed for damages resulting from the use of information contained herein. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-909552-00-5

The Publisher's policy is to use paper manufactured from sustainable forests.

Typeset by Ramesh Kumar P.

Contents

Foreword by Donald H. Taylor	xi
Foreword by David Apparicio	xiii
Chapter 1 - Survive and thrive with informal learning	1
The learning organization	7
The challenges L&D face	8
The opportunity for L&D	17
Chapter 2 - The agile learning organization	19
The arrival of the agile learning organization	22
Factors that limit or enhance learning agility	29
Learning leaders	31
The learnscape	36
Chapter 3 - What is informal learning?	40
So what is informal learning?	43
Push versus pull learning	44
Formal versus informal	49
How informal learning happens in the workplace	54
Characteristics of informal learning	57
Informal learning in its different guises	68
Why the interest in informal learning?	69
Chapter 4 - Informal learning in practice	75
Examples	76
Chapter 5 - The new L&D role	112
What CEOs want	114
The 70:20:10 model – a new focus for L&D	118
Talk the language of business	122
Seeking budget	129

Chapter 6 - Practical things for you to do	132
Find out how information moves	132
How people collaborate in an organization.....	137
Don't discard formal learning	141
Know it versus find it	143
Market what you are doing.....	148
Employee engagement.....	151
Chapter 7 - More tools and ideas you can use.....	156
Collaboration and sharing.....	157
Chapter 8 - Managing your learnscape.....	174
Ideas and examples	175
Chapter 9 - Obstacles you may face	187
Blocks and barriers.....	191
Removing blocks and barriers	196
Bridging the knowing-doing gap	198
Make information access easier.....	203
Chapter 10 - Getting managers more involved.....	207
Why don't they engage?.....	210
How to involve line managers	211
Chapter 11 - Evaluating informal learning.....	215
What to measure	217
When to measure it	218
How to measure it	218
Measuring capability	220
Conclusion	221
About the author	223
References	225
Index	233

Foreword by Donald H. Taylor

The past decade has seen a transformation in the way we learn at work. The leisurely world where organizations trained to an annual schedule of classroom courses is gone. In its place are demands for a faster initial speed to competence, for performance support initiatives and for business-aligned skills development.

That's a big change.

One thing that has not changed, however, is the overall aim of training and learning. As always, it is the role of learning and development professionals to ensure their organizations have the skills to deliver on their promises, both now and in the future.

But if the aim remains the same, the ways in which we achieve that aim are now more diverse than ever, and with the proliferation of opportunities for learning in today's connected world, the training department is no longer at the controlling centre of all activity. It is no longer the sole provider of information and skills. It cannot be, in an era where information is widely available at almost no cost, and nor should it be. Instead, its role has changed to ensuring people have high-quality opportunities to learn – both from the right materials, and from each other.

We should regard this new, wider remit as liberation from the limiting 20th century view of how people learn. In particular the availability of near instant communication in the 21st century has brought informal learning to the fore. Largely ignored by the profession before Jay Cross published *Informal Learning* in 2006, this most natural way of learning has exploded in importance with today's near ubiquity of social networking and mobile internet access.

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

Paul Matthews' work takes us another step forward in our understanding and appreciation of informal learning, and does so in a very pragmatic way. This book does not claim that all learning should be informal, nor does it claim that informal learning will flourish organically without being nurtured. Importantly, it emphasises the role of managers in the adoption and use of informal learning, and stresses that performance improvement via informal learning is not only an end in its own right, but also a way of ensuring the active support of those managers.

The learning profession has a new role, very different from the 'stand and deliver' role of the past, and this book provides a valuable guide to an important part of that new role – informal learning.

By Donald H. Taylor, Chairman, Learning and Performance Institute

Foreword by David Apparicio

Low Cost, High Impact Learning – Informal Learning

I think we all recognise that the only real differences between one organization and another are the people within it. People are the true differentiator.

Many businesses spend thousands and sometimes millions to have:

- experts come in to review systems, processes and ways of working, and then recommend improvements
- a business solutions team to install a new total quality methodology
- the latest training programmes delivered to employees
- the newest and most efficient equipment, systems, production lines or technology.

And the problem is that any other business can do the same, resulting in a situation where competitors can always ‘catch-up’. These things are not enough on their own. Something more is needed to build a truly unique and high performing business. The answer lies in the people and their ability to learn fast enough to keep pace with the changes happening around us.

Paul explores the Agile Learning Organization and its critical role in business sustainability and performance. He has clearly identified where informal learning can provide cost effective and high impact ways of improving workforce engagement and capability. He also explores barriers to learning, an often overlooked factor when people are developing learning strategies.

Most importantly of all though, is the recognition that informal learning is already taking place within your organization. You need to guide and direct

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

it so your workforce can learn when and how they need to learn, resulting in better retention of learning. By applying some simple steps we can create a supported learning culture that enables informal learning to thrive and grow. This results in a more agile learning organization that flexibly responds to the ongoing learning needs of its entire workforce.

As Chairman of The British Institute for Learning & Development, I am delighted that this book has been written, and even more delighted that the contents are so practical.

David Apparicio, JP, FRSA, FBILD, LiCIPD, FITOL
Chairman of The British Institute for Learning & Development (www.thebild.org)
Former Head of Learning & Development at The Royal Mail

Chapter 3

What is informal learning?

“Informal and formal learning are the end points of a continuum. On one end, formal learning is like riding a bus: The driver decides where the bus is going, while the passengers are along for the ride. On the opposite end, informal learning is like riding a bike: the rider chooses the destination, the speed, and the route.”

Jay Cross

Informal learning is a rather confusing notion, because the definitions vary and the term is bandied about by many who have not really even defined what ‘learning’ is, let alone some variety of it called ‘informal’. So let’s first take a quick look at the concept of learning

In the 60s and 70s, the standard psychology textbooks defined learning in terms of a change in behaviour. Learning was approached as an outcome and was the end product of a learning process. The change in behaviour could be seen, so learning was couched in terms of change. This somewhat simplistic view had a few drawbacks and gave rise to some obvious questions:

1. Is the change in behaviour really required in order to know that learning has happened? Or could the potential to change be sufficient to signify learning, and if so, how do you know learning has happened?

2. Are there things other than learning that can cause behaviour to change, and thus we don't know for sure if learning actually took place?

You will still find today this idea that learning and change are interchangeable in some way, but there is more to it than that.

If you ask people what they think learning means, the answers will vary widely, but will tend to belong to one or the other of two concepts.

The first is that learning is about memorizing information so it can be recalled. It is about knowing a lot of things, or having access to a lot of internally-stored information. It also covers the area of skills and methods that have been internalized so they can be used at will (for example, a dance routine).

Thought of in these terms, learning is a bit like shopping: you can go out and get learning and it becomes your possession.

The second concept, which is often offered up after a little more thought, is that learning is about making sense of information, or abstracting meaning from evidence. It involves making relationships between bits of information and the real world. It is about 'joining the dots' to get a new understanding or interpretation of reality.

This is a much more personal view of learning, as it is about something that happens internally within the learner. It is something people do to make sense of the world around them. It is something that adds value and depth and scope to the 'shopping' concept of learning, and takes the learning further.

One question that arises about learning is how much people are conscious of what they are doing when they are learning. And does it matter if they are aware that they are learning? If they are unaware, is it still learning? This question begins to lead us into the informal areas of learning.

Alan Rogers sets out two contrasting approaches: task conscious or acquisition learning and learning-conscious or formalized learning.²⁸ The first is the kind of learning that happens when you are conscious of the task, though you may be unconscious of any explicit learning taking place. Rogers says it is "concrete, immediate and confined to a specific activity; it is not concerned

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

with general principles”. It is going on all the time and it is how we learn to be a parent or run a home. It is the ‘side-effect of life’ learning mentioned at the very start of the book. It is the accumulation of experience.

Learning-conscious or formalized learning arises when there is full awareness of learning as an outcome, so it is ‘educative’ learning. The task may not be a learning task, but learning is one of the desired outputs of the task and the task is set up so that learning can take place.

It is clear that both types of learning can take place at the same time and within the same context. They can also be seen as forming the ends of a continuum. Rogers defines the continuum in this way:

“At one extreme lie those unintentional and usually accidental learning events which occur continuously as we walk through life. Next comes incidental learning – unconscious learning through acquisition methods which occurs in the course of some other activity... Then there are various activities in which we are somewhat more conscious of learning, experiential activities arising from immediate life-related concerns, though even here the focus is still on the task... Then come more purposeful activities – occasions where we set out to learn something in a more systematic way, using whatever comes to hand for that purpose, but often deliberately disregarding engagement with teachers and formal institutions of learning... Further along the continuum lie the self-directed learning projects on which there is so much literature... More formalized and generalized (and consequently less contextualized) forms of learning are the distance and open education programmes, where some elements of acquisition learning are often built into the designed learning programme. Towards the further extreme lie more formalized learning programmes of highly decontextualized learning, using material common to all the learners without paying any regard to their individual preferences, agendas or needs. There are of course no clear boundaries between any of these categories.”

As you look through the continuum described by Rogers, you can see that at one end is what most people in L&D are referring to with the term ‘informal learning’, and at the other end is ‘formal learning’. His description also makes it obvious that there is no clear cut boundary between the two.

We need to approach learning holistically and, although it is useful for operational purposes to separate informal and formal learning, it must always be remembered that they co-exist on this continuum.

So what is informal learning?

Considerable time and effort is invested in formal training programmes by many organizations. Many still don't realize that employees only learn about 10 to 30 per cent of what they know from training programmes. The majority of employees' learning happens informally back in the office or on the shop floor.

Informal learning is any learning or collaboration that takes place outside of a class, seminar or workshop, beyond the scope of a self-study course, and away from any environment recognized as part of formal learning.

It happens as a result of interactions between people. Quite often, it is not even recognized as 'learning', because a lot of it is an exchange of tacit knowledge – “the sharing of knowledge gained through experience with another who hasn't yet had those experiences”.²⁹

Informal learning is something that many people are talking about, but it seems that very few grasp how important it is in the work context.

It's been said the water cooler is the new corporate university, and what may seem like idle chatter should often be encouraged, not stamped out.

When you look back at your most powerful and deep learning, it's informal. It's in context. It has meaning.

Reflect for a moment on how you have learnt most of your professional skills. I suspect it will be a mix of watching master performers, trial and error, sessions with friends, faking it, reading magazines, calling the helpdesk, asking the person in the next cubicle, listening to stories, composing a story, burning your finger on a hot stove, waking up with an inspiration, visiting a museum, pursuing a hobby, noticing and reflecting and just talking to people.

This is natural learning: learning from others when you feel the need to do so.

Informal learning in the workplace is neither the training department's job nor a human resource function: nurturing informal learning is an implicit part of every manager's job. L&D's job is to make it happen easily and seamlessly within the work context.

What's more, informal learning is the way people like to learn (even though most probably won't be consciously aware they are learning). In general, workers do not like training. They do, however, often say they do, because they get to go away to a nice hotel and escape their desk for a day or two.

Push versus pull learning

Training is 'push learning', which happens when an outside source or authority chooses the curriculum for a learner. It comes with the implied belief, "You need to learn this". Obviously, there are situations where push learning is necessary, such as learning safety routines, for example. In a teacher- or trainer-centric learning system, push learning reigns. However, this kind of learning goes against the natural way people learn. The human brain is designed to learn on an opt-in basis – the individual controls the motive and reason for learning. When that individual is interested in a subject or situation, he or she learns faster, retains the information for longer and is more likely to integrate the knowledge into his or her knowledge base.

Push models treat people as passive consumers whose needs can be anticipated and shaped by centralized decision-makers, say organizational learning experts John Hagel and John Seeley Brown.³⁰ Pull models, however, treat people as networked creators who are uniquely positioned to transform uncertainty from a problem into an opportunity. Pull models are ultimately designed to accelerate capability building by participants, helping them to learn as well as innovate, by pursuing trajectories of learning that are tailored to their specific needs.

Hagel says the dominant model for institutions today is one that pushes, rather than pulls. "Virtually everyone operates on the model that says that your first challenge is to forecast or predict demand and then to organize to make sure all the right people and right resources are in the right place to meet demand," he says.

The model requires a tightly integrated and executed system, which is increasingly difficult to maintain in a rapidly-changing environment. "For a variety of reasons having to do with long-term trends playing out in the world, the ability to predict and forecast is more and more challenged and there's a need... to think about pull platforms, which allow you to draw out the right people and right resources wherever they're needed, whenever they're needed," he suggests.

In a pull platform, talent development emphasizes on-the-job learning and informal structures, rather than a formal training programme. Pull learning gives people the ability to confront challenges and draw out the resources needed to develop solutions.

“The learning is actually a by-product of facing unexpected challenges and ever-increasing performance requirements,” Hagel claims. “If you really took that seriously, you would end up rethinking all aspects of the company from operations, how you design the organization, even what kind of business strategy you would pursue, and certainly what kind of technology platforms you would use to support them in their work environments.”

Nick Milton blogged about eight demand-side knowledge management principles, based on his and his colleagues’ experiences as knowledge management consultants.³¹ These principles are about the learner:

1. People don’t pay attention to knowledge until they actually need it.
2. People value knowledge that they request more highly than knowledge that is unsolicited.
3. People won’t use knowledge, unless they trust its provenance.
4. Knowledge has to be reviewed in the user’s own context before it can be received.
5. One of the biggest barriers to accepting new knowledge is old knowledge.
6. Knowledge has to be adapted before it can be adopted.
7. Knowledge will be more effective the more personal it is.
8. They won’t really know it until they do it.

If you think about push learning or formal training with these principles in mind, there is a massive disconnect. For example, how often are training courses delivered to learners at the moment they need that specific information? Pull style learning is far more suited to satisfying these principles and this helps explain a lot of learner frustration and the growing use of learner ‘workarounds’.

According to extensive clandestine research by the co-authors of *Hacking Work: Breaking Stupid Rules for Smart Results*, Bill Jensen and Josh Klein, between one-third and two-thirds of employees are meeting their learning needs by working around L&D and IT departments.

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

Stymied by their organization's infrastructure – the tools and processes employees are supposed to use to get their work done – they do what they can to find ways to get the work done. While these tools and processes are designed to help the company succeed, they are not built for the success of the individuals who do the work, say Jensen and Klein. They comment that “Business's failure to deal with this obvious problem is one of its biggest problems.”

In an article in *Chief Learning Officer Magazine*³² the pair said “Learning and development is rarely learner-centred, for example. Once we get past the executives who get five-star concierge-like support, study after study finds that most in the workforce are not getting the tailored learning and development they so desperately need to excel.

“What do your learners find outside of your company? They find that IT and training play together quite well. For example, Apple's store has over 300,000 apps, thousands of which deliver on-the-fly tutorials plus developmental and assessment tools tailored to every need, many of which are free.

“Through coaching portals, the expertise of world-class coaches and how-to gurus like Ram Charam, Marshall Goldsmith and David Allen is available for peanuts. With social networking, most everyone can reach out to peers for advice on most any how-to, and Google is now every employee's adjunct professor.”

Faced with workplace obstacles, employees create their own workarounds or hacks to get the information they need, say Jensen and Klein. Gary and Sean are two people they interviewed.

“Gary found that what L&D provided was so lacking that he built his own internal wiki and started sharing it. His wiki went viral within the company and produced critical bottom-line results, so senior management had no choice but to sanction it after the fact.

“Sean created computer training for his company's project management and knowledge-sharing tools. He knew that what the CIO [Chief Information Officer] had commissioned from outside vendors was a waste of everyone's time. So he asked for permission to test a prototype that his team was working on. Within a year, Sean's prototype had gone viral throughout the company and absolutely no one was using the CIO-approved pet project.”

After several years of secret meetings with thousands of people given the promise of anonymity, Jensen and Klein found that these kinds of unofficial hacks and projects are extremely common and happening everywhere.

“And as long as HR and IT are not worker-centred, these kinds of workarounds are only going to increase,” they predicted. “Learners are only working around organizational barriers because it’s the only way they can get the personalized training and development they need.

“Up to two-thirds of the workforce knows what’s blind to you – that personalized, tailored training and development is easily doable. It’s time for L&D to lead by following its workforce into the future,” they warned.

The following Canadian study illustrates what happens when workers are motivated to pull information without waiting for traditional training programmes.³³ Boutilier (2008) researched the learning of employees in a social services department involved in the implementation of new and highly problematic computer technology.

These social service employees were highly motivated to provide service to their clients. That motivation led them to engage in the creation of workarounds, non-standard procedures they developed to circumvent new software in order to meet their clients’ needs. These workarounds were created primarily through individuals’ trial-and-error learning, and were then shared, both informally and formally, through public official bulletins.

Boutilier stressed that the employees were not financially compensated for creating the workarounds and, indeed, felt at risk, because using the workarounds to accomplish their jobs frequently involved the violation of organizational policies.

Interestingly, other research has confirmed that employees will pull the information they want and need, no matter what the organizational or IT policies may be.

According to a Forrester Research report, 47 per cent of business technology users at North American and European companies report using one or more website(s) that are not sanctioned by their IT department to do part of their jobs. “We expect this number to grow as frustrated workers work around IT to self-provision technology,” the report concluded.³⁴

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

More evidence of how employees will go to great lengths to learn what they need to informally was revealed in a study of Canadian SMEs.³⁵ The study found that employees' informal learning included seeking out a coach or mentor, observing someone else at work, asking each other questions and trial and error. Their motivation was to solve problems as they arose on the job. They initiated cross-learning opportunities (learning about other employees' jobs) for two reasons: to be more effective in doing their own jobs and to give them the advantage when promotions or sick leave positions became available.

Their motivation to learn was indicated by the fact that they were engaged in informal learning even though it was not recognized in any systematic way. Cross-training was not offered to employees and was not formally recognized. Moreover, engaging in self-initiated cross-training could even be experienced as threatening to co-workers.

Employees continued to learn in spite of the dictum not to. That is, they found a way to do a job more effectively and efficiently, but kept the knowledge hidden from management because it was against policy. Since management did not value the employees' knowledge, these positive innovations were not shared upwards. Keeping knowledge to themselves also gave the workers more control over their workplaces, an increasing issue as technology allows management to monitor workers' activities minutely.

While learners prefer to take charge of their own learning, this does not mean that they enjoy solitary learning. Tough (1999) discovered that within each informal learning episode (where the primary motivation is to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill at a task or thing), the average learner interacts with an average of 10 people.³⁶ In fact, there may actually be more social interactions during informal learning episodes than there are in classrooms.

Most training is built on the pessimistic assumption that trainees are inadequate in some way. Training is the cure for what is broken. The consequences include:

- Negative reinforcement
- Unmotivated learners (who wants to accept that they are inadequate?)
- Learner disengagement, unrewarded curiosity, and spurned creativity because the training implies "My way or the highway"
- Training instead of learning (co-creation of knowledge)

- A focus on fixing the individual rather than optimising the team.

Instead of learning the answers to yesterday's problems, people need to learn how to deal with the unknown.

One of the key drivers for informal learning is the rate of change. More happens in a minute today than in one of your great-grandmother's minutes. Not only is more and more activity packed into every minute, the rate of change itself is increasing. Change itself is accelerating. The future is unpredictable. The traditional mode of training employees in isolation is becoming obsolete, or very close to being so. When training is done, it must be better integrated into the workspace and made more relevant to real-life needs.

Learning is like breathing: so much a part of our lives that we are unaware of it. Learning is that which enables you to participate successfully in life, at work and in the groups that matter to you. Informal learning is the unofficial, non-scheduled, impromptu way people learn to do their jobs. Learning is adaptation. Adapt or die: it is really about evolutionary pressure and survival through change.

Formal versus informal

With formal learning, employees are given the opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge that are defined and sanctioned by the organization. This gives employees the opportunity to spend paid time concentrating on learning defined essential knowledge and skills that allow them to be productive and flexible in their jobs. The skills and knowledge may also allow the employees to maintain their employability and to advance their careers.

The control of formal learning lies primarily in the hands of the organization. It may or may not have relevance to the individual, because the programme has been tailored to fit the needs of the organization. It is normally provided when the organization (or training provider) deems it suitable.

The timing is important, since the individual may or may not find the information useful or relevant at the time it is taught. By comparison, informal learning happens in real time, not weeks or months beforehand, as is often the case with formal learning. The learner is confronted by a situation in which he or

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

she needs information and responds at that moment. It's called 'just in time' learning, whereas formal learning is more often 'just in case' learning – people are given information that they may need at some point in the future.

Training focuses on equipping individuals with the knowledge or skills they need to improve their performance to meet their current work conditions. It's essentially a short-term learning intervention, designed for immediate improvements in performance or to equip people with mandatory knowledge in areas such as food hygiene or health and safety. It's used to orientate new hires, qualify employees for special assignments or projects within the organization, or for cross-training.

Jay Cross says learning things in advance is “a losing game... Until the case arrives, the workers suspect that the subject matter won't be relevant. And when the case does come along, the knowledge acquired in advance is probably long forgotten. Knowledge, like muscle tissue, deteriorates when it's not used. But learning something at the moment of need couples learning to application, and has more lasting effects.”³⁷

Normally, formal training is highly structured and scheduled and tends to have a specific start and finish time and outcome. Informal learning is continual. It never stops because the world around the learner is constantly changing.

Formal learning begins with well-defined and measurable objectives and is deemed successful when evaluations show that those objectives have been achieved. For example, a person taking a certificate course might only be deemed successful if he or she passes the certification examination.

In contrast, informal learning often begins with vague goals and is deemed successful when workers themselves feel that they have benefitted from the learning. Outcomes may be tangible, such as new jobs and different work assignments, but they can also be intangible, such as the confidence that comes with knowledge and experience.

Informal learning occurs during organized work activities, such as meetings, working in teams, interaction with customers, supervision, mentoring, shift changes, peer-to-peer communication, cross-training, exploration, on the

job training, documentation, execution of one's job, and site visits. In fact it can occur anytime, even away from the workplace. A scenario played out on a TV programme or in an interaction with a shop assistant could provide information that is retained and later used in the workplace.

Researchers found that assembly line workers and shift supervisors at Motorola were taking advantage of a 30-minute overlap in shift changes to update workers on the next shift on any problems that had occurred, as well as the probable causes and possible solutions.³⁸

The control of informal learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. The content is highly relevant and need-specific to the individual (but not necessarily the organization). What is learned tends to be used immediately on the job. Informal learning usually happens spontaneously, is unstructured and has no specific start or finish time. Informal learning might not even have a specific outcome. An example would be over-hearing something useful that was not even on the radar of the learner as a desirable bit of knowledge.

The 'Teaching Firm' research project was initiated in 1996 by the Education Development Centre Inc. (EDC) of Massachusetts.³⁹ It involved businesses, including Boeing, Ford Electronics, Siemens and Motorola, in six states in the US. The researchers found that critical learning skills are learned informally and that informal learning often takes precedence over formal learning. The project was based on the idea that the long-term employability and flexibility of American workers depends on employee's ability to learn on the job. It builds on the 1996 US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics report which indicates that as much as 70 per cent of all workplace learning may be informal.

Their definition of informal learning is "learning in which the learning process is not determined by the organization".

Note that this definition distinguishes between the goals of learning and the process of learning. An organization may or may not have a goal for learning, yet learning is informal if it does not determine the process of learning. This definition allows for organizations to have explicit goals of increasing informal learning and creating the environment that will facilitate it.

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

The EDC report outlines how informal workplace learning is critical to a company's overall effectiveness and, ultimately, its ability to compete economically in a rapidly changing and increasingly demanding global marketplace.

This 1996 study was the first to use a large body of empirical findings (over 1,000 participants) describing informal workplace learning. As a whole, the study presents compelling evidence that informal learning is the fundamental way that workers develop competence and acquire new skills and information.

Having said that, the report also goes on to say that employees develop skills and knowledge through a combination of both formal and informal learning opportunities. Informal learning is ubiquitous and fulfils many learning needs; however, when both informal and formal learning occur, employees have richer opportunities for development. Formal and informal learning exist along a continuum, rather than being two dichotomous processes.

Note the date of this study – 1996. This is prior to any significant impact of the internet on the workplace. Even email was in its infancy. The same research today would almost certainly show informal learning as being even more important in the daily workplace, given the way employees now access information online from their PCs or mobile devices.

The report concluded that informal workplace learning occurs in the course of work activities and includes:

- Acquisition and application of skills and knowledge
- Movement along the continuum from inexperience to confidence
- Maturity and expertise with regard to specific tasks, skills and knowledge.

Employees also develop essential knowledge and skills around other facets of the workplace, including:

- Intrapersonal: problem solving, creativity, coping with stress and dealing with novel situations

- Interpersonal: interacting, cooperating, and sharing skills and information with other employees
- Culture: understanding acceptable behaviour and the norms that are culturally rewarded and lead to career advancement.

Certain key factors determine how much informal learning occurs in the workplace, as well as how much the individual employee is motivated to learn. These factors include

- External industry/economic factors, such as the level of competition
- How HR policies and practices, as experienced by workers, match against the formal policies and practices
- Social and environmental factors, such as physical work conditions and social norms
- Personal characteristics and developmental needs of individual employees within the organization.

Another finding of the report is that informal learning is extremely context sensitive and that the same activities in different contexts will yield different informal learning results. A consequence of this is that the context relating to informal learning within an organization needs to be analysed to gain an understanding of how to intervene to increase informal learning. There is no 'one size fits all' solution, although it is clear that informal learning is productive for both the company and its workers when a company's culture and practices fully support informal learning. The Teaching Firm research consistently demonstrates the importance of providing a productive environment for informal learning.

The following table sets out the main differences between formal and informal learning in the workplace.

In the ASTD/i4cp study, 'Tapping the potential of informal learning', most respondents said informal learning enhances performance to at least a moderate extent and 46 per cent of all respondents said it improves employee performance to a high or very high extent. But these responses are not the only indicators as to why managers should devote attention to informal learning. The study also found a significant, positive correlation between the degree to which informal learning occurs in organizations and their reported market performance.

Formal learning	Informal learning
Typically provided by a training department	Resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure
Structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support	Not structured (flexible) in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support
Leads to certification	Typically does not lead to certification
Intentional	May be intentional, but in most cases is non-intentional (incidental/random)

Table 1: Formal versus informal learning (European Commission 2001)

Informal learning can, however, be inefficient and time-consuming and the information may not always be accurate. A CIO Magazine survey found that workers spent more than seven hours a week searching for information. An IDC Information Worker Survey in April 2003 found that 15 to 30 per cent of work time is spent actively seeking information.

Informal learning presents a number of other challenges, including workers learning material incorrectly when studying on their own, choosing to finish studying before they have actually mastered the content, lacking the motivation to continue learning, and receiving no acknowledgment for their studies.

How informal learning happens in the workplace

Allen Tough, a Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto, researched adults’ successful efforts to learn and change and, in particular, the 70 per cent that is self-guided, without relying much on professionals or institutions

(informal learning). During his research, he discovered that people spend an average of 15 hours per week learning on their own.⁴⁰

In the late 1970s, Patrick Penland, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, performed a survey, part of which focused on why learners prefer to learn on their own, rather than in a class or course.⁴¹ The main reasons, in ranking order, were:

- I want to set my own learning pace
- I want to use my own style of learning
- I want to keep the learning strategy flexible and easy to change
- I want to put my own structure on the learning project
- I didn't know of any class that taught what I wanted to know
- I wanted to learn this right away and couldn't wait until a class might start
- I had no time to engage in a group learning programme
- I don't like a formal classroom situation with a teacher
- I don't have enough money for a course or class
- Transportation to a class is too hard or expensive.

Interestingly, it shows that the main reason learners like informal learning is not that they lack resources or hate attending formal classes, but that they prefer being in charge of their own learning.

From that list, it's possible to identify eight characteristics that impact most informal learning episodes:

1. It's self-paced.
2. It's personalized.
3. It's tactical.
4. It provides empowerment.
5. It's complex.
6. It's just-in-time.
7. It's flexible.
8. It's casual.

In 2000 and 2001, Graham Cheetham and Geoff Chivers surveyed practitioners in six professions to determine which out of 10 types of informal learning

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

or experiences helped them to become fully competent.⁴² Respondents were able to choose more than one type of informal learning.

On the job learning was the most popular (with an average 4.2 rating out of 5), followed by working alongside more experienced colleagues (rated 3.9 out of 5), working as part of a team (rated 3.7 out of 5), self-analysis or reflection (rated 3.6 out of 5), learning from clients, patients or customers (rated 3.5 out of 5), networking with others doing similar work (rated 3.4 out of 5), learning through teaching or training others (rated 3.1 out of 5), support from a mentor (rated 3.2 out of 5) and use of a role model (rated 2.6 out of 5).

Theorists in the field of work-related informal learning, Marsick and Watkins, identified the following informal learning activities:⁴³

- Task accomplishment
- Trial and error
- Self-directed learning
- Networking
- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Performance planning.

More recent surveys⁴⁴ in Canada and the USA expanded the list of self-directed learning methods to include such activities as:

- Seeking advice from someone knowledgeable
- Using the internet or other software
- Observing someone performing a task
- Consulting books or manuals
- Teaching oneself how to do tasks differently
- Self-paced study using books or video tapes
- Self-paced study using computers
- Attending conferences, fairs or conventions
- Reading manuals, reference material or professional journals or magazines
- Learning through assignments in different parts of an organization
- Attending lectures, seminars or special talks
- Using video, television or tapes to learn
- Getting help from others.

Type of learning	Format	Method of delivery
Formal (structured learning in which a curriculum is required)	Live/interactive (requires interaction between individuals)	Classroom learning, virtual classroom
Formal (structured learning in which a curriculum is required)	Just-in-time/self-paced (learning without direct interaction with another individual)	Self-study guides, distance learning, and computer, web, video or audio based training
Informal (learning without the help of a structured curriculum)	Live/interactive learning that requires interaction between individuals	A help desk, a coaching or mentoring session, collaboration, communities of practice, presentations, virtual knowledge sharing, desk-side support
Informal (learning without the help of a structured curriculum)	Just-in-time/self-paced (this is learning without direct interaction with another individual)	Publications, reference guides, job aides, electronic performance support systems, or online self help

Table 2: The different delivery methods of formal and informal learning

Characteristics of informal learning

How do you know when someone is learning informally?

The short answer is that they are aware – aware of themselves and their surroundings. This means they are processing information and making new

neural connections. Some would even say new connections are made while we are asleep and dreaming. Informal learning is indeed ubiquitous, but what does it look like in a work context?

The following list will help you and your department to recognize it.

Informal learning happens just-in-time

Informal learning is ‘just-in-time’ – it’ll usually happen right when the learner can put the knowledge or skills to immediate use. For example, an employee needs to find out how to use the database and asks his colleague in the next cubicle. He didn’t have to attend a workshop or training course to find the information.

Informal learning happens in context

Informal learning usually happens in context – ‘on-the-job’. A manager in the sales department discusses preparing sales reports with two of her employees. They all meet in her office within the department so they can look at her computer screen to see exactly how it’s done.

Informal learning is part of a learning continuum

Some early informal learning proponents put forth the idea that informal learning was the opposite of formal learning, but they have now to come to see that both are part of a learning continuum.

Formal and informal learning are both learning, and both involve building new neural connections in the brain and adapting to new conditions.

At one end is the regimented approach – and I use that word on purpose. It was the military that started training people in groups to be ‘clones’, to be able all to do the same thing in the same way. Think back to the Roman military machine, which focused on a standardization of infantry manoeuvres that enabled it to conquer the known world. Someone decided what they should all be able to do, and then devised training to ensure that happened. Much later, as the scale of industry and businesses grew, so did the need for significant numbers of people to acquire identical skills. The military approach to group training was the obvious answer. Alongside this, the education system also

grew and this too used an approach where experts decided what needed to be learned, and then devised training to teach it.

Formal learning is often the primary need of novices in a field. Formal training can enable them to rapidly build a framework of knowledge which then allows the information from subsequent informal learning in that area to be retained.

At the other end of the continuum is informal learning. Here, there is no fixed outcome or curriculum, or the opportunity to graduate with a grade and a certificate. Informal learning will often better suit more experienced people who have already established a base of knowledge in an area. They just want to learn whatever they need at the time to fill in the gaps that enable them to accomplish their tasks.

Informal learning cannot and should not be separated from formal learning, according to a research report written by Margaret Dale and John Bell.⁴⁵ “Both are needed and fit together. Informal learning supports and is supported by formal learning. Informal learning does not replace formal learning; it complements it and has some drawbacks.”

The following example illustrates how elements of both informal and formal learning blend together. Writing in the ‘Training Journal’, Vincent Belliveau, General Manager of Europe, Middle East and Africa at integrated learning and talent management software and services provider, Cornerstone OnDemand, explained how the London Business School is using technology as a form of online introduction to its many thousands of new executive students.⁴⁶

The London Business School is one of the top ten global business schools, with an executive education team that serves more than 7,400 executives on a variety of open and custom programmes each year.

Many of its students are busy executives who have not engaged in formal education or training for some time, so having an online introduction to the subject matter in advance helps maximize the impact of classroom-based learning. In addition, faculty and programme directors need to identify, understand and assess each participant’s needs so the programme – particularly the coaching element – will generate real improvements in their skills and abilities.

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

Moreover, participants come from a wide range of countries, making it difficult to assess their needs by telephone. The executive education team identified that online collaboration tools could help participants, faculty and programme directors to interact and prepare before the start of a programme, and also noted demand (particularly from younger executives) for social networking functionality to enrich the learning and networking experience.

When informal learning is integrated with formal learning, it produces a significantly stronger retention of learning than would be possible through either type of learning on its own.

To be effective, training needs to be followed up and applied on the job, but research has shown there's too little follow-up. An ASTD study in 2006 found that 70 per cent of training failure happens after the formal training finishes, with only 10 per cent of training failure attributed to actual learning events.⁴⁷ The transfer of learning is often given low priority and poorly followed-up. Moreover, there are too few opportunities for learners to use what they've learnt.

If people aren't given the opportunity to review and use what they have learnt, they quickly forget the information.

One of the first people to study the process of forgetting was the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus. He conducted an experiment in which he memorized lists of three-letter nonsense words and then tracked how quickly he forgot the words at different time intervals, ranging from 20 minutes to 31 days.

Ebbinghaus' results revealed a relationship between the forgetting of learned information and the passage of time. He found that a good part of what a person forgets takes place within 20 minutes of the initial learning. Within one hour, a person forgets nearly half of what was originally learned. After 24 hours, almost two-thirds of the previously-learned material is forgotten. These results are known as the 'Ebbinghaus forgetting curve'.

He discovered that it is much harder to retain information that has no meaning for the learner. He also showed that re-learning material is easier than the initial learning and that it takes longer to forget material the second time.

Finally, he showed that a person will have greater success with learning if the studying is spread out over time, rather than fitted into a single session.

Formal training can be used to support informal learning

Formal training can provide employers with a way to support informal learning. Mentors can work with employees taking formal courses and help them understand how they can integrate the content into their daily work, for example.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) launched a wiki, Intellipedia, in 2006 to enable its agents around the world to share knowledge, tips and ideas with each other. They offer employees training programmes to teach them how to make the best use of informal learning opportunities such as this.

The organization has developed training programmes that help analysts integrate social software tools into their daily work habits. These classes generally focus on the use of Intellipedia to capture and manage knowledge, but they also incorporate the use of the other social software tools. These include blogs, RSS and social bookmarking. The courses stress immersion in the tools and instructors encourage participants to work on a specific project in Intellipedia.

Informal learning can support formal training

A lot of informal learning takes place in the small spaces between formal learning episodes – “between the cracks,” according to Bob Hoffman, author of *Informal Learning: Tips, Tools and Intelligence for Trainers*.⁴⁸ “People often want more discussion than they get in many formal workshops, and they tend to take advantage of lunch and refreshment breaks – not to mention carpooling to and from the workshop – to satisfy that desire.”

These discussions help people to:

- Consider other perspectives
- Compare the theory they’re getting in the workshop to the personal experiences they and others have had
- Share their understanding to identify gaps in their knowledge and raise new questions
- Process the content of whatever formal instruction they’re getting.

Common wisdom, says Hoffman, has it that socializing at professional conferences is at least as valuable as attending formal presentations and workshops. “In addition to strengthening and making new professional contacts, people talk about what they’re learning. Formal instruction is often designed with too much information presentation and not enough processing and practice. The interstices provide that valuable learning space.”

Another way that informal learning can support formal training is when, after completing a formal training course or programme, employees decide either to find the answer to a question that arose, but wasn’t addressed during the course or programme, or to explore the topic in more detail.

Nowadays, formal courses may use wikis and forums to develop and discuss ideas.

Executive and management support plays a critical role

For informal learning to succeed, employees must believe they have the support of executives and managers in their learning efforts. That support means employers:

- Allow employees to learn during work time
- Allow mistakes to be made during the learning process
- Make it clear that mistakes are part of any learning process
- Recognize and acknowledge informal learning efforts
- Act as informal learning role models by embracing and using it themselves.

The commitment of the manager and the skills of those supporting the learning environment are prerequisites to successful informal learning.

Informal learning is ubiquitous

One of the most important things to remember about informal learning is that it is present in all workplace environments and day-to-day activities. It is the essential way in which individuals grow with the ever-changing needs of the business environment, and their lives. People will always be learning in the workplace; people cannot not learn. The question, of course, is what are they learning and how much are they learning?

Informal learners access more than one resource to learn

Informal learners usually rely on several resources to learn (published materials, case studies, activities, access to experiences, coaching, advice, conversations and so on), so to promote informal learning in your organization, you need to develop, acquire and offer those resources. This isn't always easy, because while some explicit content (organizational structures, responsibilities, processes, job descriptions and so on) may already exist, some resources may be undocumented (they may reside in the minds of subject matter experts in your organization, for example).

Once the resources are available, L&D professionals need to make employees aware that they exist and encourage them to access them. It's important that L&D makes it easy for employees to locate and access such resources. They also need to ensure that the material is accurate, relevant and easy to use.

Workers need to be encouraged to participate in discussions about the material and share their knowledge and insights with others in the organization. They also need to be encouraged to seek out opportunities to apply the knowledge they've learnt.

Informal learners follow their own interests

Informal learners tend to explore areas they find most interesting, which may not always serve the organization's learning agenda. They will learn or find out about things that enable them to participate effectively in whatever motivates them at the time. This may be a current problem they want to solve, or it may be a new project they want to be involved in because it is exciting and aligns with their values.

Informal learners may lack learning skills

Many informal learners may also lack learning skills, such as the ability to find the material they want, to learn from what they find, and then to transfer that to the job. They may find it hard to locate and discern valuable content from the mass of available knowledge.

They may find it difficult to unlearn information that is getting in the way of new information. Their beliefs may also interfere with how they approach information or with what they discover.

That's why it's important for L&D professionals to address their employees' ability to find information, assess the quality of that information and recognize when what they've previously learnt or believed is interfering with their new learning.

One of the challenges of informal learning is that, because it doesn't have an official beginning or an official ending, it is hard to determine whether an employee has finished a learning effort. This makes it very difficult for L&D professionals to determine whether workers have learned the material correctly and, if necessary, what would motivate them to complete a particular learning endeavour.

Informal learning can be inefficient and inaccurate

There's a risk that if employees can't find the information they need from a business-sanctioned knowledge source, they will look for what they need externally. A lack of efficiency can result when external sources are used. For example, the interaction might not be captured and, consequently, the employee or peers might not be able to rediscover the information. There is also no way to ensure the information that is obtained is relevant or reliable. The process could result in less than best practice being implemented, and that practice could spread as informal learners share their knowledge with others.

Informal learning often happens socially

Informal learning often takes place through collaboration on work teams. People learn from others who are not in their immediate work environment, using informal networks. These networks often involve people in and out of the immediate work environment – and inside and outside the organization – and are valuable sources of news, technical content, advice and insights.

The networks might be made up of existing colleagues, former colleagues (both inside and outside the current organization), former classmates, members of professional organizations and bloggers, as well as members of social media networks, such as Twitter, LinkedIn Groups and Facebook, among others.

If someone has a question about a specific problem or issue and can access an expert on that issue through their personal network, they may be able to receive a speedy response. This saves the organization time and money.

In 2008, Mitchell, Frazzee, Panitch, Luciani and Bowan conducted a survey of

bank employees involved in implementing a new software system for financial services. They found that employees were motivated to learn informally because the time allotted to use more formal, self-directed training materials, such as computer-based training software, was inadequate. In order to perform their day-to-day tasks and cope with the stress of the new system, the workers had to learn informally from each other.

Although the employer had introduced computer-based self-study materials, the employees organized informal learning groups to help each other master the formalized training materials. They continued to use other informal learning activities, such as asking each other for help, seeking out a coach or mentor, or self-organized cross-training. Furthermore, they reported a strong preference for informal learning activities over more formalized training.

The challenge of evaluating informal learning

Using existing L&D measures to evaluate informal learning presents challenges. Traditionally, trainers and developers measure the effectiveness of a learning programme with an evaluation tool, such as David Kirkpatrick's chain reaction model. This is based on the principle that there are five distinct stages of learning and change that can be measured to gauge the impact of the learning programme.

The five chain reaction stages are: training, which leads to reaction, which leads to learning, which leads to changes in job behaviour, which leads to change in the organization.

The evaluation begins with a formative look at the processes used on the programme, moving on to the measurements of reactions (how trainees felt about the programme and how they responded to aspects of it). These reactions lead to learning, measured against learning outcomes set for the programme.

Evaluators may try to assess whether there were any unintended learning outcomes. The learning should result in individuals changing their behaviour in the workplace (in line with the learning outcomes), which will ultimately lead to changes in organizational performance.

But even as a measurement tool for formal training, the chain reaction model is limited. "In practice, the chain often breaks down when attempts are made

to link learning outcomes achieved on the course to the effects on job behaviours and evaluation is then limited to an assessment of reactions through an end-of-course questionnaire and some testing of learning outcomes which can be built into the programme,” according to Jeff Gold and his co-editors of the *Gower Handbook of Leadership and Management Development*.⁴⁹

The reason is that it is very difficult to measure learning transfer, seen when learners attempt to apply what they’ve learned in a training room in their normal work environment. Trying to measure the final step in the chain reaction evaluation process – organizational impact – is the most problematic of all, they say.

“The problem lies in trying to disentangle and then reconnect individual learning and organizational performance in a sterile ‘cause and effect’ way rather than acknowledging that a wide range of factors impact on how organizations perform and trying to understand which of these can be affected by management development initiatives.”

Although it is possible to apply a chain reaction approach to person-centred learning, it is unlikely to produce helpful results.

Kirkpatrick’s framework assumes that learning happens in formally defined events that have well-defined objectives and are intended to address a business need. But none of these criteria necessarily apply to informal learning for the workplace. Much of informal learning results from a process in which several experiences – some planned, many unplanned – result in changes in behaviour, knowledge, beliefs or attitudes. Some of the changes are visible and easily identified; others are unconscious, so uncovering them requires extensive work.

Formal learning in a training context is primarily rooted in behaviourism (which defines learning as a change in behaviour), while informal learning is rooted in constructivism, which characterizes learning, not as a change in behaviour, but as changes in knowledge, beliefs and attitudes – most of which cannot be observed or measured, but some of which are reflected in new skills and processes.

Behaviourism is based on a belief that knowledge is fixed and is consistent across individuals. The design of formal learning programmes allows evaluators

to identify and measure the behaviours that change as a result of the learning. Constructivism suggests that knowledge is constructed through experience and influenced by interaction with other people. Each person has a unique collection of experiences and knowledge. Constructivism often portrays learning as a process or journey. This makes it difficult to transfer many of the core practices of L&D professionals (writing objectives, offering courses, conducting tests and evaluations) into a constructivist approach.

Informal learning can be cost-effective

With informal learning, there's no need for expensive training programmes or for employees to take time away from the office – people learn wherever they are. By empowering people to publish their expertise and learn from each other, you can cut spending on content development, external content and formal training.

Learners can provide immediate feedback on content

The fact that the social and mobile web offers small chunks of content enables learners to select for quality and relevance. Learners who self-select their curriculum can instantly provide feedback if a piece of content is helpful or unappealing, signalling in real time the knowledge that resonates and makes a difference for them, and by implication their organization.

Informal learners don't always realize they're learning

Participants often do not perceive themselves to be 'learning', particularly when this takes place in an unstructured setting. This perception is an important factor in overcoming resistance to participation. It is also an important factor when surveying people about learning. They will say they are not learning, when in fact they are doing so without realizing it. Much of this is down to how people have been trained by our education system to think of learning as a formal event, where an expert tells them the right way to do something.

Informal learning can happen at every stage of employment.

Informal learning occurs at every level of employment, from job entry and basic skill acquisition, through to ongoing development of people in senior and experienced roles. One of the most valuable skills to learn is the skill of continuous learning.

Informal learning usually occurs in small chunks

Unlike formal learning events, which can last from a few hours to a few days, informal learning events are usually completed in minutes or, at most, a few hours. The information is obtained in a more organic, just-in-time fashion. What's more, because the learner is getting the information in small chunks, interspersed with periods of practice and rest, he or she will be likely to store more of it in long-term memory than if they were sitting through an intensive training session.

Informal learning is limited in scope

An informal learning occurrence is limited in scope and might involve a specific skill or a small bit of knowledge, rather than an extended, formal training session or course.

Informal learning is individualized

Informal learning is individualized to meet specific needs. One employee might ask his or her predecessor, for example, to show him how to put together a monthly sales report and then take the opportunity to find out how to deal with the finance department.

It is also individualized in the sense that what is learnt builds directly on the learner's prior knowledge. For example, an employee might want information that is quite specialized and for which there is unlikely to be a formal training programme, since it's likely to be something that few others in the organization need. However, she needs that information to do a specific part of her job. She thinks of someone within the organization who has that information and gets in contact with that person. What she needs to know won't take long to obtain because she already has a level of expertise in that area.

Informal learning in its different guises

Informal learning takes place in a variety of guises in the workplace. These include what Marcia L. Conner calls accidental, intentional, non-formal and social learning.

Accidental learning

Accidental learning takes place as a result of engaging in everyday activities, without expectations or intentions on the part of either the learner or the organization. Examples of accidental learning include a lunchtime conversation that reveals organizational culture or a casual chat about a software feature.

Intentional learning

In the case of intentional learning, individuals define their own learning outcomes, choose learning strategies to accomplish those outcomes and pursue those at their own pace. Examples of intentional learning include finding a good tutorial and sitting down with a new piece of software, or checking out a book on hiring practices.

Non-formal learning

In the context of the workplace, non-formal learning really means an otherwise formal activity – a course or a workshop, for example – that isn't sponsored or sanctioned by the organization. An example would be when an administrative assistant finds and completes an online course in a spread sheet application.

Social learning

Social learning covers all those instances in which people learn from others, in so-called 'communities of practice'. Examples include a new hire shadowing an experienced salesperson, or an engineer seeking advice from a user group or a developer's forum.

Why the interest in informal learning?

One of the biggest factors is the growing awareness of the frequency and importance of informal learning in the working lives of most adults. The first large-scale study of informal learning in the workplace was done in 1996 and fully published in 1998.⁵⁰ Most studies are far more recent and they have built up an overwhelming store of evidence that informal learning is a vital component of organizational effectiveness.

There are also other interacting causes and sources for the interest: for example, shrinking L&D budgets have forced people to revisit the whole question of learning within the workplace, how it happens and how they can improve upon it. So the current financial climate is a major factor, because it has forced companies to look for low-cost and highly-effective learning opportunities. With cutbacks in training and resources, employees themselves have in many cases taken responsibility for their own learning.

It is taken as read that learning itself is critical to success and this was succinctly put by Jake Reynolds: “Learning leads to adaptations in the behaviour of employees that, if properly aligned with group and corporate goals, will allow the organization to deliver greater value to stakeholders”.

If learning is important, and a lot of it is happening informally, then people want to know just how much learning is informal, and what that means in practice.

A 2009 Conference Board of Canada study reported that 56 per cent of work-related learning occurred in informal contexts.⁵¹ Jay Cross and others suggest this percentage is closer to 80.⁵² In 1998 and 2004, David Livingstone and his colleagues at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) conducted national surveys focused on adults’ informal learning and work.⁵³ These surveys indicated high rates of participation in work-related informal learning.

The arrival in the workplace of those born towards the end of the last century – the ‘Millennials’ – is another contributing factor. They are impatient, energetic and have little time for hierarchy. They are the first to have grown up using technology, both at work and at home. Being used to the internet and social media, they expect to be able to access information almost instantly, in a way quite unlike that of the working generations that preceded them: the baby boomers, generation X and the traditionalists. By 2015, Millennials will make up the most significant part of the workforce.

Their approach to learning has three key characteristics: it is naturally social, it is non-hierarchical and it is impatient. That impatience means they are generally very clear about what they want to know and very clear about how they want to learn it. They want to learn it immediately, and without any extraneous information. They are unlikely to want to sit through a traditional training course. They will instead seek out what they want when they want it, reference it and, probably, share it.

Growing dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the formal education system and off-the-job training has also been a factor in the emergence of on-the-job informal learning as a field of interest.

The quality and cost of classroom courses has led to increased frustration with formal learning. Studies have shown that many training courses fail to meet the needs of organizations or learners. There's also the fact that courses are often not available when learners need the content. When the courses are available, employees have to take time away from the office, which many don't like (fearing their desks will be piled high with additional work by the time they get back). And their managers often don't like the time they are away from their desks, due to short-term operational issues.

Traditional methods of training have shown rapid knowledge loss, says Tom Høglund, a senior executive who runs the collaboration and knowledge management practice on a global basis for the consulting firm, Accenture.⁵⁴ For example, he notes that 60 per cent of material can be forgotten 24 hours after a formal class is given.

Informal learning fits the context of today's knowledge-on-the-go world, where information is best processed in small information bites, he says. "It's a perfect storm of pressures from the budget and newer generations of workers, and companies that have had success with informal learning are seeing good results."

Cost is another factor. It is expensive hiring training facilities and trainers and there is a short-term loss in productivity, because employees are not doing work that is immediately productive.

Employers are turning to informal training methods to help reduce learning and development costs, according to research by XpertHR. Two-thirds of the organizations taking part in their survey have taken steps to cut back on training expenditure in the past year, and among these, 80 per cent have turned to informal learning as a cost-cutting measure.

Along with the reduced use of external providers, informal learning methods, such as work-shadowing, secondments, mentoring and social networking, are considered by the HR professionals taking part to be the most effective ways to reduce expenditure.

Other examples of measures taken to reduce outlay on training include:

- More cross-organizational collaboration
- Increased involvement of managers in the delivery of training
- More rigorous training needs analysis against business strategy.

Many training departments are not keeping up with the changes in technologies and the social networked world we now live in. And those changes are accelerating. Many courses are already out of date as the pilot is delivered. Much of what workers need to learn is a moving target, which makes learning in advance impractical. Life as we knew it in the golden days of training is gone. Rapid change in the workplace makes ongoing informal learning critical.

The web has transformed informal learning, offering over a billion people ready access to information and ideas on a vast array of topics. Google and other search engines are now the biggest learning providers on the planet. They answer over two billion searches per day for the 33 per cent of the world's population who are online.

The rapid growth of Web 2.0 has made it possible for individuals and organizations to have readily-accessible and highly-interactive information networks. Corporations that understand the value of knowledge sharing, teamwork, informal learning and joint problem-solving are investing heavily in collaboration technology and are reaping the early rewards. Furthermore, informal learning is highly visible in the form of recorded interchanges taking place in wikis, blogs and other interactive websites.

A recent report from McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) estimates that social technologies could potentially contribute between \$900 billion and \$1.3 trillion in annual value in just four industry sectors.⁵⁵ And whereas most business use of social networking so far has been external-facing, the MGI report finds that two-thirds of that potential value lies inside the company. It estimates that the use of social tools to enhance communications, knowledge sharing and collaboration can enhance the productivity of high-skill knowledge workers by 20 to 25 per cent.

We have been social learning experts since we sat around fires in our long-forgotten caves. The new social connection technologies have simply

expanded the numbers of people with whom we can connect, and have thus supercharged our ability to connect, have conversations, listen to stories and make sense of what we discuss. Technology has globalized and accelerated our social experience.

The emergence of social media has given individuals and teams the tools to support their own learning and performance needs much more easily and powerfully themselves. It is now L&D's job to support this and the new ways that people are learning.

Alongside the growth of social media technologies are new programmes that allow non-technical people to prepare and post online information in various formats, from e-learning to wikis and blogs. Subject matter experts can get templates from learning content management systems to guide them through the process of providing material on a given subject so that it contains all of the information that workers need.

There is now an explosion of information available, and with the advent of mobile data and smartphones, it is available almost anywhere.

A report by Claire Schooley of Forrester Research⁵⁶ highlights three trends that have made it necessary for companies to adopt new informal learning practices at corporations:

1. Information overload in the workplace.
2. The immediacy with which information is desired.
3. The work style of the Millennial generation (for example, the desire to drive one's learning, rather than being a passive recipient of knowledge).

Schooley emphasizes that the idea behind all of these informal methods is user-initiated learning, whether it be through harnessing social networks, blended learning solutions, or creating employee knowledge centres for just-in-time learning. She also sees value in aligning learning with whatever is going on in the company, which includes having senior executives encouraging young employees to directly contribute to the learning culture.

Another trend, identified by Saul Carliner, is towards increasingly dynamic knowledge-based work assignments.⁵⁷ This stems from computerization. Since

INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

computers provide decision-makers with information more quickly, they have helped organizations develop sophisticated business strategies that allow them to better target their activities and respond faster to external events. This, in turn, has resulted in greater flexibility of work assignments.

This flexibility takes many forms, he says. One is more flexible work teams that bring together people with the expertise needed on a particular project, and then disband when workers have completed their project. Another is shorter product development cycles.

It means organizations expect their employees to become more productive more quickly. Employees need to develop knowledge and skills as fast as possible, but it's not always possible for L&D to create the programmes when they need them.

This, says Carliner, ushers in the need for informal learning programmes.

Praise for *Informal Learning at Work*

“Paul has clearly identified where informal learning can provide cost effective and high impact ways of improving workforce engagement and capability.”

David Apparicio

Former Head of Learning & Development, The Royal Mail

“In order to meet the challenge of equipping a public service organisation to develop and improve on performance in today’s climate, something new is required. ‘Informal Learning’ has changed my mindset and provided a framework and direction for how that can be better achieved.”

Adrian Kingswell

Head of Learning & Development, Hampshire Constabulary

“Hurrah!! Finally, a book that doesn’t just theorise about informal learning, but actually provides real-world, practical advice for making it happen. In the current climate of over-stretched L&D resources and budget, this book really does open the door to creating a true learning culture by harnessing what our employees do naturally. By applying the advice in this book, enhanced employee engagement and increased organisational performance will inevitably follow.”

Nicki Talbot

Director – Learning & Development, Colt Technology

“Too few business leaders recognise the importance of informal learning in the development of their people and hence the value such learning can contribute to the future prosperity of their enterprise. ‘Informal Learning at Work’ provides a very readable explanation of the value to be derived from this aspect of learning together with practical examples of how it works and why.”

Andrew Hall

Group Chairman, Vistage UK

“A refreshing read that provides the L&D specialist with a clear mandate to immerse themselves in the business, work with leaders and managers and be a fundamental part of the learning process with people in their daily working activities. A helpful insight into placing learning as part of the change agenda and working with learners innate abilities to self-learn when it matters to them not when the training department tells them. Learners, leaders and managers will need to know how to do this, this is the new role for L & D – a paradigm shift for traditionalists.”

Carol Bolton

Organisational Development Manager, University of Liverpool

“Informal learning drives competitive advantage; this book tells you how to harness informal learning in the workplace to drive engagement and workforce capability. It is a fantastic tool that enables employees to leverage their knowledge and share their skills whilst completing their daily activities, resulting in a low cost, but highly effective option for improving performance across the entire organisation.”

Sarah Menday

Learning Solutions Manager, Home Retail Group

“At last, a thought provoking practical book with ideas and insightful examples which challenges us all to embrace informal learning. This book is an easy read, filled with wonderful stories and great ideas which invite us all to re think how we work within our organisations.”

Christina Bush

Learning & Development Manager, large supermarket chain

“Paul sets out his case succinctly and manages to distil, in a very easy to read book, clarity, common sense and a way forward from the often over-crowded debate on the future direction of workplace learning.”

Derek Brimley

Learning Manager, aviation industry

“Paul clearly explains the shift in expectations on L&D professionals these days and explores the new opportunities that are available without disregarding the value of traditional training routes should they still be applicable. A good read and I would recommend this to anyone joining our team to understand the relative benefits of formal and informal learning.”

Fiona Jones

Senior Management Development Advisor, large financial institution

“A really practical book with plenty of examples and tools to encourage L&D professionals to become learnscapers. I love the helpful and engaging quotations that will motivate those involved in workplace learning to “seed, weed, feed and breed”

Linda Walker

Senior People and Learning Manager (West Scotland), British Red Cross