

Informal Learning in Organizations

How to Create a Continuous Learning Culture

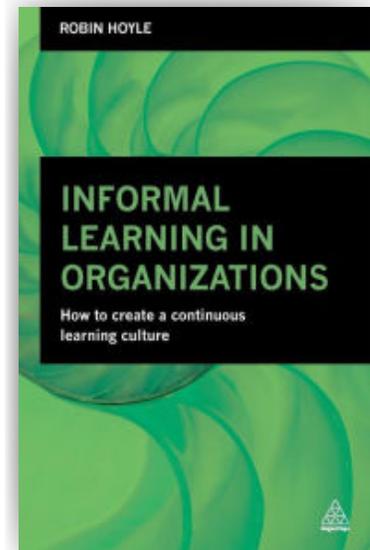
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KEY CONCEPTS

- *Informal learning* (as opposed to formal, classroom-style learning) occurs constantly, and can be leveraged by organizations to improve employee performance.
- Informal learning works best when it is complemented by formal input from managers and trainers.
- Social media can help form connections and facilitate collaboration, but must be used cautiously (obtaining “likes” and comments on an online training program does not correlate to the users actually learning anything).
- Based on the model of *massive open online courses* (MOOCs), organizations can create online, company-specific learning tools to encourage continuing education for their employees.
- *Blended learning*, the combination of online modules with real-world simulations, can be leveraged by companies to ensure that professional development is truly developing real-world skillsets for employees.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s workplace environment, many of us need to learn on the job. In **Informal Learning in Organizations**, Robin Hoyle encourages companies to promote informal learning (which we all engage in every day) and leverage it with more formal learning (e.g., classrooms, presentations) to educate, train, and develop employees.

SECTION ONE: MAKING SENSE OF INFORMAL LEARNING AT WORK

WHAT IS INFORMAL LEARNING?

In *informal learning*, learners determine what and how they will learn, set goals for their learning, seek input from outside sources, and experiment with different methods and modify their strategies based on these results.

In a work setting, the company must become involved and help set standards for informal learning. The ways that an organization can do this include establishing the details (why, what, when) of the learning, encouraging learners, setting performance measurements, supporting learners' goals, and setting deadlines.

Informal learning is a five-step process that involves:

1. *Observation*: We watch those around us.
2. *Imitation*: If others are achieving what we want, we mimic them.
3. *Experience*: Through trial and error, we determine what works best for us.
4. *Innovation*: We build new, better methods based on our experiences.
5. *Articulation*: We convey our new, improved methods to others.

Organizations can incorporate informal learning in the workplace through *guided discovery* and *learning through work*. Guided discovery includes activities like coaching, preparing for a formal class, and directed learning with coworkers. Learning through work involves more informal collaborations, as well as training new employees by having them shadow more experienced workers.

THE CAPABILITY CONTRACT

A *capability contract*, or the skillset that employees are expected to develop, now involves the constant seeking of information and updates. In some cases, this devolves into staffs simply completing required hours of professional development just so that this can be checked off during their performance reviews. In today's fast-paced work environment, companies need to enable continuous learning, whether informal or formal, and recognize it as part of employees' work routines. In doing so, companies must establish three factors:

1. Performance measurements that are necessary for the job.
2. An environment that encourages experimentation with new methods, coupled with collaboration from management.
3. Opportunities for employees to meet coworkers within their fields to exchange ideas.

INFORMAL DOESN'T MEAN UNMANAGED

There are three main types of informal learning:

1. *Implicit*: The learner connects past and present events, in a nonlinear way.
2. *Reactive*: The learner thinks about past experiences, learns via questioning, and tries new methods.
3. *Deliberative*: The learner examines recent activities, discusses them with others, and creates better methods to use in the future.

The main criticism of informal learning is that it cannot be managed or measured. However, of the three types of informal learning, deliberative learning most lends itself to being managed in the workplace with tools like *post-implementation review sessions* (PIRs) or *after-action reviews* (AARs). Deliberative learning can also be fostered through nonjudgmental environments, where people feel free to ask questions and talk through both failures and successes.

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Measuring informal learning can be achieved by using three methods:

1. *Manager ratings*. Ask employees, via anonymous surveys, how their managers support their learning efforts.
2. *PIRs/AARs*. Ensure that these methods include discussions of lessons learned.

3. *Personal development plans.* Every employee should have a PDP, which includes joint efforts between the employee and supervisor.

Additional factors that foster successful informal learning include:

- *Role clarity.* Ensure that everyone from team members to management is clear on individual roles and supports informal learning.
- *Recognition.* Acknowledge employees who teach others on the job.
- *Reward learning.* Provide positive feedback to employees who make the effort to learn new skills and improve their abilities.
- *Team leaders.* Reward the leaders whose teams have shown the most improvement.

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BUILDING A LEARNING CULTURE

An organization can create a learning culture by focusing on three basic building blocks:

1. *Standards.* People must know their roles and responsibilities.
2. *Structures.* Teams should be structured so experienced workers can coach less-experienced ones, and team meetings should emphasize collaboration and problem solving rather than blaming.
3. *Collaborative groups.* Creating teams that cross organizational boundaries widens people's perspectives and encourages creative solutions.

Smaller groups within an organization can foster a learning culture if they follow these three principles.

SECTION TWO: LIKING AIN'T LEARNING: THE RISE OF SOCIAL AND THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

While the Internet has enabled learning in certain ways, its actual benefits can be deceiving. For example, the web has enabled "mavens," subject-matter experts who share and trade their knowledge online. However, when it comes to online training programs, their effectiveness is often measured by the amount of "likes" and comments they receive—and these are not true measurements of learning.

Social media is often used by freelancers for learning and development. But most companies do not encourage its use by in-office employees, even for work-related tasks. Rather, they enact rules that limit social media use by employees, under the assumption that their use would be personal and detract from their work. With that said, recent studies have found that more than half of senior management do make use of social media on the job.

For online learning to truly be effective, three factors must be present:

1. *Seeking.* Finding colleagues online enables people to trade relevant, trusted information.
2. *Sensing.* Employees need to think about what they've learned and experiment with it.
3. *Sharing.* It's helpful to exchange information with colleagues online.

To enable the *seek-sense-share model* in the workplace, a company must be sure to:

- *Signpost.* Provide information resources for employees seeking to improve their skills and knowledge. Make at least some of these resources company-specific.
- *Resource.* Encourage employees to try new methods, allowing for some trial and error.

- *Support.* As a manager, be onboard with trying new techniques and support employees who struggle to adapt to new procedures.
- *Respond.* Acknowledge employees who have learned new skillsets and put them to use for the company.
- *Enlist.* Encourage social media participation by knowledgeable employees.
- *Validate.* Ensure that the information being shared online by employees is accurate.
- *Publicize.* As part of the recognition process, inform employees about what information is available.

LEARNING FROM ACADEMIA: MOOCs AND THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM

Outside of employer-led online learning, there are enormous numbers of people engaging in *massive open online courses* (MOOCs). The two types are *xMOOCs*, which are similar to university classes but are usually free, and *cMOOCs*, which are peer-to-peer based, requiring user input. MOOCs were derived from the university concept of the “flipped” classroom, in which lectures are sent to students and the in-person time with professors is spent in dialogue.

MOOCs are not necessarily the answer to raising the skillset of less-capable employees, primarily because people who engage in MOOCs tend to be already engaged and involved learners. There are four primary types of MOOC attendees:

1. *Samplers* watch a selection of videos to get a flavor of the course.
2. *Auditors* watch the videos but do not engage in assignments.
3. *Disengaged* leave the course partway through.
4. *Completers* engage in most of the videos and complete most of the assignments.

As a manager, be onboard with trying new techniques and support employees who struggle to adapt to new procedures.

A company that wishes to create a derivative training product for its employees should take away the following six “Cs” from MOOCs:

1. **Create.** Create resources such as videos or podcasts, and tag them for easy searching.
2. **Curate.** Search online for complementary content, and ensure its quality before including it in your company’s MOOC-like environment.
3. **Culture.** Create a culture of learning in which employees are actively encouraged to participate in continuing education.
4. **Communicate.** Establish an ongoing communication plan to let employees know what training is available.
5. **Collaborate.** Have employees work on projects together to problem-solve.
6. **Community.** Establishing a sense of community works in value-driven (as opposed to profit-driven) companies, where employees are working toward a shared goal.

SECTION THREE: LEARNING AS YOU WORK, WORKING AS YOU LEARN

Informal learning, if integrated with on-the-job work, can accomplish two goals of learning and development: aligning learning and development efforts with the company’s overall goals; and correlating learning and development with work performance.

INTEGRATING LEARNING INTO WORK

The limitations of eLearning became apparent fairly early on. For example, did the person who signed up for the class actually read all the modules (or did he or she just skim the material and get a passing grade on the end-

of-chapter quizzes)? Was this person actually the one taking the quiz at all? These issues were solved, in part, by creating a separate assessment using real-world simulations. This type of *blended learning* (includes some in-person and some on-line components), seeks to connect theory to real-world practice.

Blended learning comprises four basic steps:

1. *Preparation*: Determining what the group needs to learn and the most appropriate media to deliver the information.
2. *Input*: The content of the course.
3. *Application*: Testing the skills learned via real-world simulations.
4. *Follow-up*: Using the skills on the job (the longest, ongoing step of the process). This involves giving employees new tasks/responsibilities to hone their new skills as well as access to coaching/mentors.

Learning on the job is the ultimate informal learning experience, and one that should be encouraged. This is how most professionals (lawyers, doctors, etc.) learn the ins and outs of their practice after completing their formal education. Polishing a skillset becomes a habit, leading to increased knowledge and abilities. Companies should encourage this mindset in their employees, understanding that the long-term benefits outweigh any slowing of pace that occurs when learning a new skill.

MEASURING AND EVALUATING

Measuring the success of training is tricky. Most evaluations focus on the training content and the level of participation, rather than on outcomes and increases in job competence. Informal learning, by its nature, is difficult to quantify. However, performance data taken by organizations can help to support the value of informal learning. For a company that encourages learning, making it intriguing enough that people willingly engage in it, success is measured by how much the supplied resources are used. The end goal is to increase the quality and attractiveness of the company's learning resources. The success of informal learning depends on employees' motivation, their desire to learn and improve, and environments of ongoing personal development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Hoyle has worked in training and development for almost 30 years, designing and delivering learning and development initiatives across the public, private, and voluntary sectors. He is chair of the World of Learning Conference and is the author of *Complete Training: From Recruitment to Retirement*.

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