

# Formalizing Informal Learning



BY RUTH KUSTOFF

Informal learning has been a steady presence in the world of learning. Today, we recognize that individuals learn independently and informally at least some of the time. Informal learning continues to grow with the likelihood it will become more ingrained in organizational culture as Generation Y infiltrates the workforce. Accustomed to, and expectant of immediate responses to anything they are seeking, employees born after 1977 are attracted to informal learning. This coming of age workforce, who in a few short years will make up 50 percent of workers, coupled with an ever-expanding global world and increased access to mobile devices, is paving the way for the growth of informal learning. Here's why:

## IT IS AN ORGANIZATION'S TACIT KNOWLEDGE THAT WILL BECOME THE REAL COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

- Gen Yers are used to working as part of a team — they learn while doing and while multitasking.
- The number of mobile devices worldwide is 1.1 billion with new applications available every day.
- With easy availability of quick, on-the-go learning tools, informal learning will become more and more the choice of a

mobile, global world where immediate information and knowledge continues to become a necessity.

Another area where informal learning may be valuable is in capturing the knowledge and organizational imprint of baby boomers as they leave the workforce. What needs to be garnered from retiring boomers is their tacit knowledge. This is the information, knowledge, insights and experiences in a person's head. No one is fully able to communicate their own tacit knowledge or transfer it to someone else. Although tacit knowledge is difficult to capture generally, some of it can be shared through informal learning tools that document knowledge in writing. Accessing tacit knowledge is an active role on

the part of the learner — learning by doing and from experience while watching what someone else does.

The value of tacit knowledge is its uniqueness to each individual, which provides a perspective not found otherwise. It is an organization's tacit knowledge that will become the real competitive advantage, recognizing that explicit knowledge is available to everyone.

### The Value of Informal Learning

Informal learning supports organizational talent to do their job better, improve their performance and gain on-the-job satisfaction through professional development. A benefit of informal learning is individual learners taking responsibility for their own learning, showing their commitment to learning and managing their own needs. Organizations can capitalize on this self-directed approach and encourage peer-to-peer learning and collaboration while supporting each other in learning and performance goals.

Capturing informal learning outcomes is important. It shows support and encouragement of informal learning. It also empowers individuals to share and document knowledge in a defined way so it becomes part of organizational memory. This process helps staff meet job expectations, and supports professional growth through a defined process of knowledge sharing.

To do this, organizations are creating social media platforms that promote knowledge sharing and its capture. Using wikis

## THE FORMALIZATION OF INFORMAL LEARNING MEANS EMPOWERING STAFF TO CREATE WAYS TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND BUILD UPON ONE ANOTHER'S IDEAS, CREATIVITY AND THINKING



or blogs as collaborative work spaces where building a knowledge base on different topics, and sharing new project ideas can be explored and commented on supports the informal learning process.

### Defining and Identifying Informal Learning

Informal learning was first identified in the early 1970s in Malcolm Knowles' book *Informal Adult Education: A Guide for Administrators, Leaders, and Teachers*. In 1996, the Bureau of Labor Statistics identified that 70 percent of what employees know about their job is learned informally on the job. In 2007, Jay Cross outlined how to support and grow informal learning environments in his book *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways that Inspire Innovation and Performance*.

Informal learning has been defined in several ways. The obvious difference from formal learning is that informal learning is learning that is not planned or scheduled. It is learning that is impromptu among peers and colleagues. Jay Cross defines informal learning this way:

*“Learning is formal when someone other than the learner sets curriculum. Typically, it’s an event, on a schedule and completion is generally recognized with a symbol, such as a grade, gold star, certificate or check mark in a learning management system. Formal learning is pushed on learners. By contrast, informal learners usually set their own learning objectives. They learn when they feel a need to know. The proof of their learning is their ability to do something they could not do before.”*

Although informal learning has been around for quite some time, the term itself doesn't necessarily define what it is. Though it isn't planned, or scheduled learning, it does impart knowledge and impact change in learners that affects how a task is completed or something is understood. As a result, this learning needs to be tangible for those who seek it, and opportunities for it should be encouraged.

The formalization of informal learning does not mean changing the nature of informal learning. Rather it is a function of capturing important information around the needs of staff. It means empowering staff to create ways to share knowledge and build upon one another's ideas, creativity and thinking. Informal learning requires formalization and management because it makes up 80 percent of staff development time; this can't be left unmanaged, unplanned and unevaluated. There needs to be clear understanding of what informal learning is, and an understanding and recognition of its importance, in order to manage it and parlay it to support individual and organizational needs. This approach will require an adjustment of how organizations view informal learning.

### A New Perspective on Learning

It is commonly recognized that 20 percent of corporate learning is formal, planned programs, while 80 percent is in-

## Informal Learning: Promoting New Ideas & Creativity

Formalizing informal learning doesn't mean creating scheduled learning events that are pushed to learners. Formalization does, however, create opportunities for informal learning by supporting a learning environment within the organization that promotes new ideas, and values every individual's creativity and knowledge. Additionally, organizations can create physical spaces that encourage small group conversations, and opportunities throughout each day for informal gathering and conversation. It also means capturing what is learned in these informal groups so information can be shared with a wider audience in the form of knowledge assets such as defined processes, lessons learned and case summaries around performance challenges and their solutions.

formal learning. Informal learning includes on-demand, social and embedded learning. On-demand learning can be e-learning, videos, books, articles and podcasts. Social learning is around wikis, blogs, communities of practice, coaching and mentoring and social networks. Finally, embedded learning can be found in performance support, managerial feedback, and coaching or mentoring.

With 80 percent of learning available to corporate learners in various delivery modes, such learning opportunities need to be communicated to learners, identifying what is available where, and in what format. This is becoming the role of the learning leader who can direct learners to find what they need. This role, and informal learning itself, begins to overlap into knowledge management. Organizations and learning professionals are becoming curators of the information and knowledge that learners create, with the ability to capture it and re-deliver it when needed.

Recognizing the value of informal learning, it is clear there are advantages to promote it and support it to be most effective. This includes:

- Advocating informal learning as a follow-up component of face-to-face or online programs in order to continue the learning process.
- Creating communities of practice by topic or interest as a repository of information where resources from informal meetings can be shared.
- Encouraging knowledge capture and sharing it among all levels of learners in the organization including subject matter experts.
- Providing access to information about informal learning and how colleagues can help one another as informal coaches or mentors, as well as peer to peer.
- Identifying where informal learning is occurring in the organization and in what areas it isn't, in order to determine why learners aren't learning for themselves.
- Identifying and innovating ways to improve informal learning.
- Continuing to support and promote self-directed learning through a culture of continuous learning.

## ORGANIZATIONS AND LEARNING PROFESSIONALS ARE BECOMING CURATORS OF THE INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE THAT LEARNERS CREATE



### Strategizing Informal Learning

In order for informal learning to be most effective and relevant it requires a strategy. This entails an upfront analysis of need, and determination of the current informal learning environment. This can begin by talking with learners and identifying what informal learning opportunities are being used, and identifying what is and isn't effective when learning informally. Additionally, once informal learning methods are identified, determine how to create easy access for anyone interested in participating — including online resources and tools.

Planning an informal learning strategy:

- Gain a basic understanding of how learners prefer to learn
- Identify what knowledge areas learners need
- Determine how knowledge and information is collected, shared and resourced
- Create a centralized location for sharing of ideas and documentation

It's important to remember that ultimately what will have the biggest organizational impact around informal learning is how new knowledge and information is both shared across the organization and how it is processed and used. Learning leaders need to determine if informal learning is being integrated into every-

day work needs and solutions, and if it supports individuals to work better with greater insight and understanding of business goals.

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### Takeaways

Informal learning should be recognized as a positive, individually-focused, grass roots effort within the organization. It shows employees are committed to doing the best they can through continual learning and improvement. It supports new ideas and innovation within the parameters of how business is conducted and work is accomplished. Learning professionals should respond to informal learning by:

- Creating processes to promote informal learning opportunities.
- Creating support systems that encourage informal learning.
- Encouraging individuals and work groups to share knowledge.
- Building avenues for making informal learning opportunities more accessible.
- Capturing informal learning output to integrate into organizational memory.
- Supporting user-generated learning such as internal blogs, wikis and sharing knowledge through a management platform.