

Learning & Development: Charting the Course for Informal Learning



By Michelle Eggleston

The era of personal learning is upon us. With more and more learners taking control of their own learning experience, employees are essentially turning into digital pirates, charting their own course through the vast sea of informal learning. The time is ripe for learning and development teams to drive informal learning and guide learners to calmer waters.

Learning is fundamentally social and can occur at any place, at any given time, extending beyond formal training programs and into the workplace. It is estimated that 60 percent to 80 percent of learning that occurs in organizations is informal, including job shadowing, peer-to-peer learning, research and group meetings. Informal learning is leading the race.

“You may wonder why classroom still trumps e-learning in a lot of cases,” said Sean Stowers, director of learning services at Pearson Learning Services. “It’s because it is a social experience. One thing that is really important in informal learning environment is, even if it’s technology enabled, learners have to be able to interact. They have to be able to write content, form communities and share their experiences.”

One of the reasons organizations have a hard time managing informal learning is because of the current learning and development process organizations use to fund learning initiatives. The process starts with identifying organizational needs, creating and approving a budget, and then developing a formal training program based on that funding. But what happens to the learning needs that aren’t prioritized into formal training? When those needs aren’t met, learners start to look elsewhere for answers. This leads to the risk of inaccurate information spreading throughout your organization.

While the scale is tipping heavily in favor of informal learning in terms of usage, there are associated risks for organizations when employees can’t find answers internally and turn to external networks for solutions. A lack of efficiency evolves when outside resources are utilized. The interaction is not captured and, consequently, the information cannot be “re-found.” In turn, there is no way to ensure relevance or reliability of the information obtained. These are risks that can permeate the organization if not properly managed. But the question begs, how exactly do organizations begin to manage informal learning?

To develop an informal learning strategy, learning and development groups need to focus on three parts: platform, content and solutions. Keeping an eye on these elements will allow learning and development to add more efficiency and value to the organization. It's important to start by assessing organizational needs and creating a platform that will meet those needs. It is vital for companies to find a way to organize information in a flexible and easily findable format. Locating internal experts to begin generating content is also an essential step, but don't forget that content can also be used from formal training programs. The main objective is for learning and development teams to gain an understanding of how employees organize around content and what content drives the strategies of the organization. Identifying how people find and use information is the key to developing successful informal learning initiatives.



“As an organization, it is important that employees understand the value of sharing information,” said Stowers. “There has to be an approach to doing that. We really need to encourage business unit partners to see the sharing of content as a strategic imperative.”

It's up to learning and development to be the quintessential “captain” leading informal learning. If they aren't leading this initiative, then they run the risk of losing ground and losing an opportunity to reduce the cost of content development in their organization. If an external source beats them to the punch and creates the learning infrastructure, the relevance of learning begins to diminish.

“When you get down to it, the learning and development function is really the one function in the organization that has a solid understanding of all three elements associated with informal learning,” Stowers said. “That's why we believe learning and development should be at the forefront of leading informal learning initiatives.”

Being at the forefront of this initiative and cultivating a dynamic learning experience where learners can interact and share content is advantageous for organizations. Given the content needs of learners are continuously changing, it's essential to have an infrastructure in place that gives learners the ability to find information when the need arises. Informal learning allows for greater exploration of content, but just creating content is not enough. This initiative needs to drive *meaningful* collaboration around *meaningful* content. That should be the focus for learning and development teams.

“There's a lot of really exciting ground to be broken in the space for organizations to do this right,” said Stowers.

Companies can certainly capitalize on the success of doing this well. With a sea of information available to learners outside the company network, it's time for learning and development teams to see informal learning as a way to gain a competitive advantage by cultivating an environment where learners are self-empowered to steer their learning course with the direction of the learning and development team.

If companies are able to provide learning in the way employees want, learner satisfaction increases. Organizational performance also improves if the right informal learning infrastructure is in place that gives learners the ability to find information that is impactful to what they're doing. Companies are essentially creating a culture of innovation by allowing employees to learn together. This opens the gateway to innovation and the possibilities are endless from there.

“The point of informal learning and creating a solid structure is the ability to provide for self-direction and self-exploration of content,” said Stowers. “The content needs of learners develop over time. It's important to provide an infrastructure that is highly flexible and searchable that allows learners to find what they need when they need it. In a way, learning and development is managing information flow.”

Michelle Eggleston is associate editor at TrainingIndustry.com.