

Final Word - Informal Learning (Jan 07)

Sambit Mohapatra discusses how informal learning could be better suited to today's dynamically changing workplace.

Informal learning has been in existence ever since people huddled around the fire and learnt by sharing stories. Most learning still happens through informal interactions between colleagues and spontaneous searches for information. Studies have indicated that over 80% of learning in organisations takes place informally outside of the formal classroom and e-learning courses. Out of this, 45% happens on the job and around 30% is a result of networking. This has perhaps been true over time, but what's different now and why is informal learning such a hot topic?

If one were to look at trends, there are two or three things that stand out. One is the pace at which organisations are changing. With increased globalisation and competition, there is a need for corporations to learn dynamically and be responsive at a pace that hasn't been seen before. Employees need to learn many more things as organisations adopt new processes, introduce product variants, and comply with cross boundary regulations. And all these at the speed of light!

It is difficult for structured learning to keep up with the pace of change. Structured learning requires the stability of subject matter expertise and the time to develop courseware. Also deployment methods are aligned to traditional forms of delivery. Although technology has been blended into the mix, it still requires learners to dedicate time in a planned manner that is not necessarily in their control. There are areas that structured learning can support, but increasingly there will be more areas that it can't.

Also, a side effect of this pace of change is that people turnover in companies has increased hugely. If people don't stay long enough in companies, there is less time to build competence. Organisations can't rely on lengthy learning programmes and have to focus on learning on the job and other means. Therefore, organisations need to be able to harness the power of informal learning and find ways to make it much more effective.

The other important trend is the development of tools and services that can support informal learning in better ways. Although informal learning can hardly be planned and directed, an organisation can support informal learning by the innovative use of technology. A number of tools have come of age, but the key is in the ability to integrate them into the workflow seamlessly so that they mimic natural forms of interaction.

EPSS (Electronic Performance Support Systems) is perhaps one of the best examples of tools that allow learning to be integrated into the workflow in a seamless manner. Although EPSS's have been around for a while, developments in technology have meant that they are much more intuitive and can incorporate multimedia elements (and design techniques) that enhance just in time learning. Instead of having to ask a colleague, an employee could drill down into an EPSS and access a slice of learning that equips him/her to do the task. If the ease of access, and the information acquired is better, then this could replace the action of consulting the colleague. Over time this could become the norm and provide the organisation an opportunity to add value through this informal learning route.

Another example of a tool that could facilitate spontaneous searches is Google, which most employees are familiar outside the job context. Google now provides 'appliances' for the corporate market that can be used to do restrictive searches within the corporate context. An organisation can cleverly collate its knowledge bases and allow users to use a Google appliance to access information based on a job role, task or any predefined criteria that employees could use to access information to enable them to perform the task at hand.

The lowered cost of services and the ability to access them over the web in a much more integrated manner can also be used for informal learning. For example, e-tutoring services or access to a subject matter expert (SME) in a synchronous manner can be a very powerful way in which informal learning can be supported. Some of these services can be provided externally or from within the company and can facilitate expert interactions on the job.

However, as organisations take more control of the learning, the boundaries between informal learning and structured learning start blurring. E-learning was introduced as one of the best forms of informal learning, with its motto of 'do it at your own pace, place and time'. However, as it has become more mainstream and the means to deliver and track it have become more sophisticated, it has become more formalised. It now sits within the ambit of structured learning with prescribed learning paths, often blended with other forms of learning.

Although components of informal learning will become formalised over time, informal learning is here to stay. Despite the formalisation of components, the proportion of informal learning within corporations will remain the same and managers will be challenged to find newer ways of supporting this. However the step change is that corporations have recognised the importance of informal learning, and assigning responsibility to managers will focus attention on this.

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