Informal Learning: The 80/20 Rule

WHITE PAPER

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Research shows that at least 80% of all workplace learning is informal in nature. Unfortunately, our experience indicates that the typical organization spends 80% or more of its learning and development budget on formal learning activities, which account for less than 20% of the learning that occurs in the workplace. In today's economic climate, this disconnect is more apparent than ever before. As training and HR professionals, we need to step outside of our comfort zone to leverage the most strategic informal learning practices, providing training resources to our organizations at the point-of-need, when and where they're needed most.

While integrating informal learning into our more traditional, formal learning environments seems daunting at first, there is no doubt that we recognize the rate at which the paradigm is shifting. In a 2008 ASTD/i4cp study titled, "Tapping the Potential of Informal Learning," 41% of respondents said informal learning is occurring in their organizations to a high or very high extent. Another 34% of respondents said they believe informal learning is occurring to a moderate extent.

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Introduction

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While integrating informal learning into our more traditional, formal learning environments seems daunting at first, there is no doubt that we recognize the rate at which the paradigm is shifting. In a 2008 ASTD/i4cp study titled, "Tapping the Potential of Informal Learning," 41% of respondents said informal learning is occurring in their organizations to a high or very high extent. Another 34% of respondents said they believe informal learning is occurring to a moderate extent.

More than half of the ASTD/i4cp study's respondents reported an increasing use of informal learning in their organization, citing that informal learning practices would increase in their organization over the next three years. The study also found a significant, positive correlation between the degree to which informal learning occurs in an organization, and their reported market performance. Now that is music to our senior managers' ears! Informal learning, while cost-effective in nature, is also producing real bottom-line results for organizations that are leveraging its power in best practice.

What is Informal Learning?

First of all, we need to determine what classifies as formal learning, and how informal learning and formal learning are defined. Formal learning is typically curriculum-based, occurs at a set time, and includes some type of evaluation or certification once completed. Formal learning is an event. Informal learning is essential the opposite… every type of learning that can't be formally categorized, is organic and on-going in nature.

Informal learning emphasizes that we learn by seeking information and collaborating with others; that we learn by doing. As technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, informal learning will be further embedded into our day-to-day work. Our learning methods and resources need to reflect this progression. A tech-savvy generation is entering our work force, accustomed to receiving and disseminating information at a rapid pace. With mobile web-based devices, endless search engine portals, social networks, share sites and resources … our employees are accessing learning (consciously and subconsciously) around the clock, and around the world.

Informal learning is sometimes called "incidental learning" because it often occurs incidentally, or subconsciously, as we mentioned. Incidental and informal learning is so embedded in our day-to-day workflow that the actual learning often goes unnoticed. We're incidentally learning everyday

Informal Learning also has become a key activity and not only because of foreseeable economic hardships and formal training as the model to aspire to as training becomes intrinsic to everyday interactions and work cultures. Companies see that most learning occurs informally and that action learning and collaboration are vital areas of a learning organization.

Chief Learning Officer, January 2009, The Training Industry in 2009: A Look Ahead.

as we complete tasks, engage in problem-solving, and observe and collaborate with colleagues.

Informal learning is already all around us, even if it's not a part of your organization's strategic training and development plan. While informal learning is generating a lot of buzz, it isn't a new concept, brought on by the technological revolution. The reason we're taking note of informal learning and its capabilities in today's work environment is due to the speed of delivery it allows, as change is occurring all around us in our fast-paced, technology-driven, global market. Never before has so much information been so readily available! Leveraging the power of informal learning, should be a strategic objective for every training and HR professional as both a cost-savings and efficiency-yielding initiative.

Challenges Associated With Formal Learning

While employee learning and organizational development has traditionally been a brick and mortar experience, the technological revolution has allowed for many adaptations to what traditional learning looks and feels like. We're now able to conduct, publish and disseminate traditional learning experiences online; establishing efficiencies and saving time and money in ways we couldn't have imagined twenty years ago.

Despite advances in technology, formal learning cannot meet all of our development requirements. Here are some of the most common challenges associated with formal learning programs, courseware, and content.

Formal learning is too rigid. In many cases, formal learning experiences are too rigid for our learners' needs. Most formal learning courses and experiences are created for meeting the needs of many individuals, and are therefore difficult to customize and access at any given time.

Formal learning is too basic. Because these programs are designed to provide a basic level of competency, they are most beneficial when used by subject-matter novices. Without the ability to customize formal learning courses and activities, many formal learning programs fail to include growth opportunities for c-level and high-performing employees.

Formal learning is inconvenient. Many formal learning activities are dependent on other persons and external factors (i.e. instructor-led training programs). Most formal learning activities are not incorporated into an individual's normal workflow. This is increasingly difficult in today's work environment, when many organizations have decreased their staff, and remaining employees are taking on additional responsibilities. Our training and development resources need to be accessible at the point-of-need, and compartmentalized. This will provide learners access to the information they need, and the ability to omit information that is irrelevant. This type of accessibility creates a learner-centric training environment where development can be self-managed.

Formal learning is irrelevant or outdated. Today's employees receive an overwhelming amount of information each day. They're immersed in e-mails, instant messages, social networks, discussion threads, blogs and RSS feeds. The fast pace at which we've become accustomed to receiving

and disseminating information can make many formal learning activities seem … well, old school. While the quality of information and content in top industry courses is not lost on our tech-savvy employees, by the time it gets in their hands, it can feel outdated or irrelevant to today's ever-changing workplace, and global economy.

Benefits of Informal Learning

Informal learning is 100% learner-centric, putting learners in the driver seat. With informal learning resources, learners choose how, when, and what they'll learn. Informal learning provides just-in-time resources with immediate impact at the point of need. Content is self-selected with informal learning, and therefore totally customized. Informal and incidental learning enhances collaboration, communication and feedback among employees, managers and subordinates, mentors and mentees. This type of learning is rich in real-world scenario and role-play activities. Perhaps most commonly noted; informal learning is fresh, and the content is current.

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates 70 percent or more of work-related learning occurs outside formal training.

Just-in-time

As changes occur quickly in the workplace, our response to these changes needs to be met with speed and adaptation as well. Providing the appropriate learning and development resources at the point-of-need allows for tremendous performance gains. There is no waiting, or setting aside a problem for another day, or another person to handle. When learning occurs as part of our workflow, it occurs right at the moment in which we are seeking new information, and are therefore most open to learning and adapting behavior for optimal performance.

Self-directed / Individualized

Informal learning is self-directed, and completely customized to each learner. Each individual engaging in informal learning self-selects the proper mentors, networks, and resources that he or she identifies with and learns from most effectively. This is not a one-size-fits-all experience! The accountability and decision-making is completely learner-centered. For many learning & development professionals, this is often the scary part! While we can provide the optimal resources, and suggested guidelines for effective information gathering, informal learning is completely designed and carried out by the individual learner.

Collaborative

Informal learning allows learners to call upon the best resources they can find to provide instruction, direction, guidance and answers to complete a given task or gain knowledge necessary for job performance. Informal learning works on the theory that we are more knowledgeable and stronger together as a group rather than working as individuals. Informal learning encourages information-seeking through conversation, counseling, coaching … any and all forms of collaboration.

Real-world scenarios

Informal learning engages learners and creates clear links between what is being learned and your company's business objectives. Because the learning typically happens at the point-of-need, the knowledge gained is immediately applicable to the challenge at hand. With informal learning, we learn on-the-job, in response to real business challenges.

Current content

In the information age in which we live and carry out our work, there is no shortage of, well … information! By the time new content is delivered, there is something newer, fresher on the horizon. With informal learning, which leverages the power of today's technology and social networks, learners have access to the newest, most cutting-edge strategies, theories and practices. Informal learning also allows for a complete, holistic view when tackling new challenges, as learners are exposed to so many different answers when seeking information. The learner will need to disseminate and compartmentalize the array of information constantly being added to the fray in the self-selection process.

An Aberdeen study of Web 2.0 technology found the most common use was "capturing and transferring knowledge."

Aberdeen Group, Kevin Martin, Workforce Collaboration and Web 2.0: Improving Productivity by Facilitating Knowledge Transfer, Benchmark Study

Types of Informal Learning

Informal learning is self-directed, collaborative, just-in-time, and often incidental. It's achieved by asking, searching, observing, and talking to others. So what exactly constitutes informal learning? As we stated above, informal learning is any type of learning that cannot be categorized or defined as formal learning, which tends to be a single or recurring event that can be measured or evaluated and is curriculum-based. Listed below are several common informal learning resources and activities. We'll expand on a few of these informal learning strategies that leverage technology for effective workflow and workplace integration, in the next section.

- Websites
- Collaboration & Mentoring ("Teachable Moments")
- Database / Web Searches
- Web-conferencing
- Wikis
- Blogs
- Discussion Threads & Groups
- Instant Messaging
- Social Networking
- Manuals & Instructions
- Podcasts
- Referenceware

Leveraging Technology in Informal Learning Practices

Traditional informal learning has been occurring since the beginning of time. To borrow a phrase from the popular television program, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?", we commonly 'phone a friend' when we don't know the correct answer. In traditional informal learning activities you might talk to a colleague or neighbor, seek the guidance of your boss, or look up an answer in a manual. These activities have always occurred in the workplace, and are so embedded in our work process that we often forget we are engaged in a learning plan.

Given today's age of information and 24x7 connectivity, informal learning has expanded to include a number of efficiencies that allow us to independently seek information at the speed of technology. Use technology to support and manage informal learning. As an example, rather than interrupting a co-worker or mentor with a question, suggest that your employees e-mail colleagues as they arise during day-to-day tasks. They'll then have a response that can be filed and referenced later if a similar issue arises. Not to mention the spared interruption of the contacted co-worker or mentor. This person can choose an appropriate response time based on their workload.
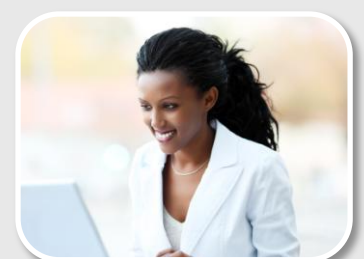
There are a number of platforms available to learners via the Internet that are thriving hubs for informal learning. In many cases, we've only touched on their potential for engaging in productive and on-going communication, and collaborating to produce optimal performance. We suggest you incorporate one or more of the following technologies as part of your informal learning offerings: social networks, web-conferencing and live chat, podcasts, discussion groups and threads, referenceware, and trusted websites.

Social Networking. Social networking, or Web 2.0, allows for a participatory web experience, with constant, ongoing conversation. Is your organization utilizing social networks to promote your services or products and engage in conversation with industry partners, clients and potential consumers? If so, invite your employees to become involved in your efforts and participate in this online collaboration and networking tool. Many industry experts believe that social networking, or Web 2.0, bridges the gap between formal and informal learning. Social networking allows for information to spread quickly, at the speed at which the 'net generation' has become accustomed to communicating with one another.

Web-conferencing or live web chats (i.e. Skype). Using this technology provides your employees with engaging, face-to-face (and free!) collaboration experiences with colleagues, mentors, and subject-matter experts. A live, interactive discussion is at the learner's fingertips, regardless of where they are physically located. This type of connectivity greatly expands the possibilities of when, how and with whom learners can engage in information sharing.

Podcasts. Podcasts are recorded content that can be revisited and distributed online and via hand-held devices – and are very popular with learners thanks to their portability and convenience. Learners can download and listen to a lively information exchange between subject-matter experts. Recommend helpful podcasts and reliable distributors of applicable podcast content (in your industry or discipline) for employees to download and view on-the-go. This will provide learners with resources for accessing information when and where it's most convenient for them.

Referenceware. Referenceware, particularly e-referenceware, where unabridged texts, journals and books are available online, provide on-demand access to trusted, searchable, industry-leading content. Performance is enhanced, productivity is increased, and learning is incorporated into day-to-day workflow. e-Referenceware can be seamlessly integrated into an existing Learning Management System (LMS), making it a self-directed, customized, accessible and traceable link between formal and informal learning activities.

Discussion Groups / Threads. Discussion groups and threads bring learners together in a collaborative information sharing platform. Learners are able to broadcast questions, receive feedback and share helpful resources. Discussion groups, threads, and online learner forums keep learners connected with other engaged learners. Open information sharing at its best!

Trusted Websites. One of the simplest (and commonly used) ways to leverage the best available information via the web, is to provide a listing for your learners that outlines a directory of reliable websites for identified workplace and job-role challenges. The only downside to using the web for information seeking as it relates to job performance, is that learners often feel as though they're searching for a needle in a haystack. For example, a simple Google™ search for "customer service" yields 262 million results! The results of search engine searches are not static and are constantly changing. Who knows what your learners will find, and where they'll go to for help when they most need it, based on a similar search. While informal learning is self-directed, we suggest that you point learners in the right direction. A listing of suggested web resources is a great way to help get them started.

When to Blend Informal Learning into Your Existing Training Program & How to Use It Effectively

In blending informal learning into your existing training program, it's important to consider who would benefit the most from informal learning. For what learner group is informal learning a most natural and obvious fit (i.e. IT Managers, new-hires, etc.)? You'll also need to determine how and when informal learning can best enhance your learning and development initiatives for these target groups. We suggest that informal learning be

 Web 2.0 Tools

Blogs:
Wordpress
Amplify
Blogger
Edublogs
Type Pad

Wikis:
Google Sites
PBWorks
Wikispaces

RSS Feed Tools:
Google Reader
WebRSS

Social Networking:
Facebook
LinkedIn

Filesharing:
Slideshare
Flickr
Google Docs

Video & Audio Sharing:
YouTube
Viddler
Vimeo
iTunes

Social Bookmarking:
Delicious
Digo
Stumbleupon

Microblogging:
Twitter
Yammer

used: as support tools, for information sharing, to replace formal learning inefficiencies, and as referenceware.

Informal learning is a great tool to support your existing formal learning activities. Informal learning resources such as discussion threads, web searches are great supplements to formal training courses for furthering comprehension, while providing collaboration opportunities among a group of learners. Learner groups should be encouraged to engage in information sharing when they come across helpful resources that support their learning initiatives.

It's also important to recognize that since the majority of learning occurs organically and informally as a part of our workflow – and outside of the classroom – many challenges your organization is currently handling with formal training, may be better addressed through informal learning activities. Take a look at some of your training objectives and goals. Is formal learning required to meet these goals? Perhaps informal learning would be a more natural fit and effective way to tackle these challenges.

Finally, informal learning resources are often best used as referenceware. Referenceware provides an on-the-job, go-to database for training on new tasks, refresher training, and quick guides in areas where employees are less than competent.

Managing Informal Learning

As with our formal learning strategies and resources, informal learning needs to be defined, and parameters need to be set. Informal learning doesn't need to be unorganized or unplanned. In fact, probably the biggest challenge associated with informal learning is inconsistency. Helping to provide a framework to support the best available informal learning resources will greatly reduce misuses and inefficiencies often associated with this type of learning. Make it easier for your employees to find the information they need. They'll need to know how to access informal learning resources, and where. Is it relevant? You don't want employees wasting a bunch of time digging through the millions of resources that appear in a single search engine results listing! Check in with employees periodically to find out how they are seeking out relevant information in the course of their day-to-day activities. Suggest efficiencies, and provide feedback. Our job as managers, when it comes to informal learning, is to provide resources for learning and reduce the time that our employees spend in information-seeking in order to do their job well.

Here are a few tips for effectively managing informal learning:

- Encourage collaboration and conversation among your employees.
- Identify high-quality resources for learning & make sure your employees know where and how to find them.
- Identify champions and subject-matter experts within your organization.
- Make sure there is an information hub (i.e. Intranet or share files) where employees can share best practices and resources with one another.
- Periodically review and adjust your informal learning strategies.

About BizLibrary

BizLibrary provides online training and technology solutions for small and mid-sized organizations nationwide. BizLibrary's total training solution includes content, technology and service. BizLibrary's online content includes streaming videos, interactive e-learning courses, custom developed courses, reference materials and e-books. BizLibrary fully-hosted Learning Management system tracks and manages all training activities including online courses, instructor-led-events, virtual events and online collaboration. BizLibrary's client services include technical support, implementation and marketing support, as well as custom content and reporting. Learn more at http://www.bizlibrary.com.

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Resources

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