

Informal Learning at



HYPOTHETICAL COMMUNICATIONS

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What exactly is Informal Learning?

Generally speaking *informal learning* is unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu learning. Everyone has been doing this since the day they were born. In the professional world informal learning generally means a variety ways of learning outside of formal training. Formal training involves an instructor and would include things like classes, seminars, and mentoring. Informal ways of learning might include: self exploration, reading books, support and reference materials and systems, advice from experts, etc.



Jay Cross - champion of informal learning, informal learning guru, and CEO of Internet Time Group LLC, makes understanding informal learning and it's importance very clear. Much of the following information was garnered from his statements:

Informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way most of us learn to do our jobs. Informal learning is like riding a bicycle: the rider chooses the destination and the route. The cyclist can take a detour at a moment's notice to admire the scenery or help a fellow rider.

Formal learning is like riding a bus: the driver decides where the bus is going; the passengers are along for the ride. People new to the territory often ride the bus before hopping on the bike.

What Are the Benefits from Informal Learning?

Informal does not mean *unintentional*. Reinventing the wheel, looking for information in the wrong places, and answering questions from others consumes two-thirds of the average knowledge worker's day. Good connections vastly improve knowledge worker productivity. Executives don't want learning; they want execution. They want performance. Informal learning is a profit strategy. Companies use it to:

- Improve knowledge worker productivity
- Increase sales by Google-izing product knowledge
- Generate fresh ideas and increase innovation
- Transform an organization from near-bankruptcy to record profits
- Reduce stress, absenteeism, and healthcare costs
- Invest development resources where they will have the most impact
- Increase professional growth
- Cut costs and improve responsiveness with self-service learning

If Informal Learning is “Informal” Why Promote It?

Informal learning is learning without borders. Organizations improve it by removing obstacles, seeding communities, increasing bandwidth, encouraging conversation, and growing networks. It's a natural way to learn and grow.

- The generation coming into the work force has no patience for spoon-feeding, single-track instruction, or working alone.
- Boomers are leaving the work force, taking their knowledge with them unless it is transferred to newcomers by informal means.
- As the global economy shifts from factory work to service work, workers need the human, judgmental expertise and emotional intelligence that one doesn't learn in class.
- A flat world means global competition, faster production cycles, and more to keep up with.
- Time is speeding up. It's impractical to try to learn in advance when what you need to know won't stand still. (2009)

What Do We Do Now?

Now that we have an understanding of informal learning, the benefits it offers our organization, and why it is important, what is the next step toward encouraging productive informal learning within HC? What management must do now is to **identify specific activities, identify the types of informal learning activities employees should focus on, and promoting & enhancing those activities.**

Informal Learning Activities

What are the specific activities that facilitate informal learning? There are many ways people come in contact with useful information:

- **Sharing knowledge through emails/IMs**
- **Searching the internet for useful information**
- **Self-learning resources - books, tutorials, etc**
- **Online social networking (Facebook, MySpace, etc.)**
- **Casual, unplanned encounters - (Coffee breaks)**
- **Informal lunches**
- **Open agenda time in meetings**
- **Voluntary informal mentoring**
- **Informal networks**
- **Introductions to experts or others with helpful information through others**





Identifying the Types of Informal Learning Activities Employees Should Focus On

People have preferences on how best to process new information. It is hard to say which activities will best suit each person or department. In these situations it is best to leave it up to the individual and the department supervisor. However, management can help promote and facilitate productive informal learning opportunities.

Promoting & Enhancing Activities

One fear that might occur to management is that if we promote “informal” learning we may have employees taking 20 minute coffee breaks claiming to be having an informal learning session while in actuality discussing non work related personal matters with a fellow employee. While this might occasionally occur, for various personal reasons employees are motivated to keep their position with HC. Employees are well aware that unproductive, disruptive, and/or low performance/behavior will not allow them to keep their position. Administration could keep in mind that as long as an employee’s job is done well, circumstances that may seem as if an employee is wasting time may in actually be boosting performance. Only when performance begins to suffer for these activities, should action be taken to minimize them. Hence, employees should be allowed and encouraged to seek informal learning opportunities through networking with other employees, career peers, and superiors; books and other printed sources; online searches and resources; and brainstorming in chance encounters.

As management we should make employees aware of informal learning opportunity situations and offer help in facilitating them. Below are some ideas to promote informal learning opportunities for our employees.

- Employees should be encouraged to communicate freely with other employees through email, IMs, and during break and lunch times.
- Management could provide a free, unstructured company luncheon once a month to promoting inner networking and sharing ideas.
- Time during formal meetings could be scheduled for informal discussions.
- Employees schedules could offer time for specifically requested informal learning - such as reading a related book or magazine, completing an online tutorial, unofficial mentoring of another employee.
- Suggestions from employees should be requested and encouraged regarding facilitating more and better informal learning opportunities.

References:

Jay Cross. (2009) What is informal learning? Informal learning: rediscovering the natural pathways that inspire innovation and performance. *Informal Learning Blog*. Retrieved June 7, 2009 from: <http://www.informl.com/the-informal-learning-page>