Does (In)Formal Learning Enhance Employability?

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Not much is known about the actual contribution of informal learning to employability over and above formal learning activities. This paper presents findings of a research project among university staff members and is aimed to determine the contribution of formal and informal learning activities in the light of future career potential. Findings indicate that employability is enhanced by a mix of formal and informal learning opportunities. Possibilities for networking appear to be significant for employability.

Keywords: Employability, Informal Learning, Training

The concept of lifetime employability implies that individual employees become more accountable for investments in their own human capital and hence in their own job security, learning and career development. Maintaining employability presupposes the availability of learning possibilities and its actual use by employees throughout their career. Next to formal learning activities one should adopt opportunities for informal learning in order to increase one's potential at the labour market.

In order to better understand the added value of informal learning this paper approaches both formal and informal learning activities in relation to one another and regards its contribution to workers' employability. Given the lack of empirical research on the concept of employability, its predictors, and its outcomes, a systematic approach addressing the relationship between (in)formal learning and employability might partly close the literature gap and will shed more light on the significance of this domain of HR activities (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Employability and Informal Learning

This paper adopts the definition of employability as was proposed by Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006). They defined employability, or career potential, as 'the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competencies' (p. 453). Their definition is consistent with the definition of Forrier and Sels (2003, p. 106), and is in line with the conceptualization by Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004). What these conceptualizations share is that employability implies a permanent process of acquisition and fulfillment of employment within or outside the current organization, to date and in the future.

Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) developed an employability instrument which combines domain-specific expertise (Van der Heijden, 2000) with more generic competences. Previous research using this instrument in various settings among professionals working in different occupations, showed high levels of reliability and validity (see for example Van der Heijden, 2005). The instrument consists of the following four generic competences, as important dimensions of employability, alongside occupational expertise: 1) *anticipation and optimization*, i.e. preparing for and adapting to future changes in a personal and creative manner, and striving for the best possible results; 2) *personal flexibility*, i.e. the capacity to easily adapt to all kinds of changes in the internal and external labour market that do not pertain to one's immediate job domain; 3) *corporate sense*, i.e. the participation and performance in different work groups, including organizations, teams, occupational communities and other networks, which involves sharing responsibilities, knowledge, experiences, feelings, credits, failures, goals, etc.; and 4) *balance*, i.e. compromising between opposing employers' interests as well as one's own opposing work, career, and private interests (employee), and between employers' and employees' interests.

Available findings indicate that employees spend considerable time to learning in their work (see for example the studies of Livingstone and Eichler (2005) and Borghans et al. (2006). Marsick and Volpe (1999) defined informal learning by means of six characteristics: 1) integrated with work and daily routine; 2) triggered by an

internal or external jolt; 3) not highly conscious; 4) often haphazard and influenced by change; 5) an inductive process of reflection and action; and 6) linked to the learning by others. Informal learning includes incidental learning. This latter type of learning occurs as a by-product of some other activity and it occurs even although employees are not always conscious of it, and they do not intentionally seek for learning experiences..

There is a growing bulk of research on factors enhancing informal learning. What recent studies reveal is that reasons for informal learning lie in the work itself, in the organisational environment, or are related to employees' own initiatives. Especially the way these factors interact together determines the occurrence and quality of informal learning in the workplace (Onstenk, 1997; Van Eekelen et al., 2006). While most research projects (see for example Lohman (2005), Van Eekelen et al. (2006) and Koopmans et al. (2006)) tend to focus upon informal learning of specific groups of workers with similar positions in the organization, Ashton (2004) and Skule (2004) applied alternative approaches. Ashton (2004) investigated all employee groups within a single organization which allowed him to gain in-depth information on how organizational structures shape informal learning. For some groups of employees he found evidence for learning in breath and depth while for others learning appeared to be shallow and fragmented. Access to and availability of relevant information, opportunities to learn and to apply learned skills, availability of support and feedback of managers and co-workers, respectively, seemed to be conditions that impacted the possibilities and content of informal learning experiences. Skule's (2004) research concerned the identification of factors most conducive to learning at work in different sectors. Findings revealed that sector and organizational size were important predictors for the proportion of learning intensive jobs. Access to learning intensive jobs depended on prior education. Higher levels of education more often lead to jobs with a rich reservoir of various learning possibilities. Moreover, those who are well equipped in terms of formal education continue to enjoy better learning opportunities at work, according to Skule (2004).

Though recent research projects seem promising some issues regarding informal learning remain quite unattended. Most research projects focus on a single occupation which inhibits the development of more general conceptual frameworks. Research attention is mainly drawn to the micro-level, meaning that emphasis is placed on 'how' learning occurs. There is only little attention for the impact of organizational factors on informal learning. Moreover no attention at all is paid to the (long-term) effects of informal learning on career and employability. The relationship between employability and informal learning is in fact a black box. It hardly needs saying that more insight in this relationship is necessary since substantial groups of employees do not have unlimited access to formal training opportunities and primarily rely on informal learning possibilities embedded in their current job to maintain or improve their employability.

Research Questions and Methodology

In order to gain insight into the relationships between formal and informal learning, on the one hand, and employability, on the other hand, the following research questions have been formulated:

1) What is the effect of background variables and context variables on formal and informal learning?
2) What is the relationship between formal and informal learning?
3) What is the effect of formal learning activities on employees' employability?
4) What is the effect of informal learning activities on employees' employability?

An electronic survey instrument was administered to non-academic staff members of a university in the south of the Netherlands (see Van der Heijden, Van der Klink & Meijs, 2006). All survey scales were previously applied in a large international research project on employability in various occupations in different European countries, including the Netherlands (Van der Heijden et al., 2005). The international research project on employability has started with a so-called employability management needs analysis based upon a series of in-depth interviews aimed at determining what ingredients make up employability, and what individual, job-related and organizational variables might be taken into account as its predictors. As such our quantitative survey approach is strongly rooted in elaborate empirically-based qualitative analyses. After the validation of the employability dimensions, its predictors and its outcomes, the survey has been optimized by eliminating non-contributing factors (Van der Heijden et al., 2005).

The following *background characteristics* (control factors) of employees were included in the analysis: sex, age, job tenure, educational qualification. This latter variable was measured using a six-point scale ranging from primary education to university degree. Organizational context included learning climate, department, and job position. *Learning climate* as perceived by the individual employee was operationalized by means of two dimensions: one scale measured the lack of time for learning, and a second scale measured perceived team support. All items were scored by means of a five-point rating scale ranging from (1) never true, to (5) always true. *Formal job-related training* was measured by asking respondents to fill in the number of days they attended training in the

past year in the area of their current job, and in adjacent areas. *Other formal training* was measured by asking respondents to rate the number of days they attended training in the past year in other areas, or training for personal development, thus not related to their domain-specific expertise or current job. In total four learning conditions were included: learning value of the job, interaction with supervisor, networking within own organization, and networking outside organization. *Learning value of the job* refers to the employees' perceptions of the degree in which their jobs provide opportunities for everyday learning. This scale consists of six items using a six-point rating scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (6) strongly agree. *Interaction with one's supervisor* refers to the quality of the exchange between supervisor and employee. Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) Leader-Member Exchange scale was used, and all seven items were scored on a five-point rating scale. A scale developed by Bozionelos (2003) was used to measure the amount of *networking within the organisation*. Six items were used to measure the amount of networking using a five-point rating scale ranging from (1) not at all to (5) to a very large extent. The six-item scale that assessed the amount of employee's *networking outside the organisation* (Bozionelos, 2003) refers to the extensiveness of an employee's ties with individuals outside one's own organisation (see also Adler and Kwon, 2002; Higgins and Kram, 2001). Respondents rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) not at all to (5) to a very large extent. For the measurement of employability 47 items were used: 15 items for occupational expertise, 8 items for anticipation and optimisation, 8 items for personal flexibility, 7 items for corporate sense, and 9 items for balance, respectively. All items were scored using six-point rating scales. Higher scores indicate higher levels of employability.

Results

In total 215 employees (107 men and 108 women) belonging to the non-academic staff participated to the electronic questionnaire. The respondents' average age was 46 years. 77% of the respondents were older than 40, and 33% were over-fifty years old. The majority of the respondents had full-time job contracts (59%). 72 respondents worked at central departments (bureau of the university), 39 held job positions at faculties, 80 were working at the service centre/ICT department, and 26 were working at educational research and consultancy departments. The largest groups of respondents worked in secretarial/clerical jobs (48 respondents), ICT (35 respondents), student support jobs (32 respondents), or management support jobs (29 respondents). Means, standard deviations and correlations were computed and are displayed in Table 1 (see Appendix A).

The means of the two learning climate variables indicate that, on average, employees experienced the climate as slightly positive: severe time constrains are lacking, while team support is perceived as somewhat encouraging. The means of both variables that measured formal learning, job-related training and other formal training respectively, indicate that the number of days spent on training is quite modest. The mean score of 3.87 for learning value of the job indicates that, on average, respondents experienced that their jobs provide some learning possibilities. Respondents experienced quite some quality interactions with their supervisors, as the mean of 3.48 shows. In general, respondents' networks within the organisation were substantially larger than their networks outside.

The first research question concerns the impact of employee characteristics and organizational context on formal and informal learning. To explore these relationships regression analyses were computed. Sex, age, educational qualification, tenure, and job contract (full-time versus part-time) were entered in step one (employee characteristics), followed by the variables that measured aspects of the organizational learning climate in step two. The results of the regression analyses are displayed in Table 2. This table only presents the statistical significant findings.

The results displayed in Table 2 show that no significant outcomes were found for the analyses with job-related formal training, and for other formal training. Yet, for all four *informal* learning conditions significant results have been found. Our outcomes suggest that two employee characteristics, i.e. educational qualification and a full-time job contract are the most important predictors. The two learning climate variables only as appeared to be predictors for interaction with one's supervisor.

Table 2. *Regression Analyses with Formal and Informal Learning as Dependents*

Dependent variable	*Regression model (enter)*	*Standardized B*	*p-value*
Learning value job	Educational qualification	.21	.04
Interaction with supervisor	Learning climate – lack of time	-.18	.05

	Learning climate – team support	.40	.00
Networking within organisation	Full-time contract	.21	.03
Networking outside organisation	Educational qualification	.22	.03
	Full-time contract	.20	.04

In addition to the regression analyses, One-way ANOVA tests were computed using the employee's department and job position as independent variables. Results of the ANOVA's with department as independent variable showed that differences were found for three informal learning conditions: (1) learning value of the job, (2) interaction with supervisor, and (3) networking outside the organisation, respectively. Respondents working at the bureau of the university or at educational research and consultancy departments appear to have slightly higher scores for learning value of the job ($F = 3.00$, df 214, $p = .03$). Respondents working at the service centre or at the ICT department rated higher supervisor interactions ($F = 5.61$, df 214, $p = .00$). Also higher ratings for networking outside the organisation were observed for respondents with jobs at the bureau of the university or at educational research and consultancy departments ($F = 3.37$, df 214, $p = .03$). As far as job position is concerned, only a significant relationship with learning value of the job ($F = 3.42$, df 214, $p = .00$) was found. Respondents working in student support jobs had significant lower scores on this scale compared to respondents in other job positions.

Research question 2 concerns the relationships between formal and informal learning. For the examination of these relationships the correlations displayed in Table 1 (see Appendix A) need to be taken into account. Correlations of both formal training variables with the four informal learning conditions showed that, in general, no strong relationships have been found. However, job-related formal training appears to correlate quite strongly with other formal training employees attended ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), and informal learning conditions correlate quite strongly with one another (see Appendix A). All in all, our findings suggest that the relationship between formal and informal learning is not substantial.

The third and fourth research questions concern the relationships between formal training and informal learning conditions, on the one hand, and the five employability dimensions, on the other hand. The results of the regression analyses are summarised in Table 3. Table 3 indicates that we have not found significant outcomes for the dimension of personal flexibility. Moreover, formal training that is not directly related to one's job, being either training that is related to other expertise domains, or training oriented to one's personal development, does not significantly predict any of the employability dimensions. Networking within the organization, interaction with supervisor, and formal job-related training appeared to be the most important predictors (see Table 3).

Finally, regression analyses were computed with the five employability dimensions as dependent variables. Background variables, organizational variables and learning variables were entered in three separate steps (see Table 4). Our outcomes indicate that in the light of one's further employability development both formal and informal learning activities are important. Job-related formal training and network within the organisation turned out to be the most significant factors. Moreover, employability depends also on other factors like the learning climate (Occupational expertise dimension) or background variables as gender, marital status and fulltime jobs (Corporate sense dimension, Personal flexibility dimension, and Balance dimension).

Table 3. *Regression Analyses with Employability Dimensions as Dependents*

Dependent variable	*Regression model (enter)*	*Standardized B*	*p*
Occupational expertise	Formal training (job-related)	.17	.02
	Learning value of the job	-.17	.03
	Interaction with supervisor	.14	.05
	Networking within organization	.17	.04
Anticipation and optimisation	Formal training (job-related)	.27	.00
	Learning value of the job	.14	.05
	Networking outside organization	.26	.00
Corporate sense	Formal training (job-related)	.14	.04
	Interaction with supervisor	.21	.00
	Networking within organisation	.36	.00

Balance	Interaction with supervisor	.34	.00
	Networking within organization	.19	.02

Table 4. *Hierarchical Regression Analyses Using Employee Characteristics, Organisational Context, Formal and Informal Learning as Predictors and Employability Dimensions as Dependents*

Predictor	*Dependent Variables*				
	Occupational expertise	Anticipation and Optimisation	Corporate sense	Personal flexibility	Balance
Step 1					
Age	.06	-0.3	.19**	.03	-.03
Gender	-.04	-0.9	-.11	-.22**	-.13*
Marital status	.03	.07	.13*	.15*	.10
Ed. level academic	.03	.03	.07	.06	-.09
Ed. level higher prof.	.10	.12	.05	.11	-.07
Ed. level medium prof.	-.02	.03	-.02	.03	-.16
Full-time	.17*	.09	.27**	.24**	.12*
Step 2					
Org. tenure	.02	-.12	-.17*	-.19*	-.08
Learning climate-time	-.27**	-.03	-.02	-.15*	-.31**
Learning climate-team	-.18**	-.06	-.01	-.14	.06
Step 3					
Formal training (job-related)	.17*	.27**	.13*	.14	.07
Other formal training	-.05	.01	-.06	-.01	-.05
Interaction with supervisor	.12	.08	.22**	.08	.21**
Networking within org.	.20*	-.08	.41**	.16*	.18*
Networking outside org.	.06	.23**	.01	.06	-.01
Learning value job	-.17*	.14	-.03	-.10	.02
Model summary					
Step1 Δ R square	.04	.05	.11	.08	.06
Step2 Δ R square	.08	.02	.04	.05	.19
Step3 Δ R square	.09	.16	.24	.06	.08
Full model R square	.21	.23	.39	.20	.34
Overall F	3.2**	3.8**	7.9**	2.9**	6.2**

a. Standardized regression coefficients (Beta) shown for the *last* step in the regression
b. *p<.05 **p<.01

Conclusions and Discussion

The previous sections discussed the background, methodology and findings of our study. The main aim of this final section is to reflect upon our outcomes, and to draw some conclusions. Moreover, we will go into the limitations of our study and some recommendations for further research.

The present study has some limitations. Firstly, all data have been collected at one point in time, that is, our study is cross-sectional. This implies that further research is needed in order to address issues of causality. Secondly, our study used different measures to assess formal training and informal learning conditions. For formal training we have used the number of days that employees were involved in training courses. Measuring informal learning is much more difficult, since employees are not always aware of their informal learning experiences. Our survey measured the conditions that encourage informal learning but it did not capture the actual informal learning experiences employees were engaged in. For more accurate insights into actual informal learning experiences, face-to-face interviews with employees that allow them to recall their informal learning experiences will probably provide more detailed information.

Our first research question concerned the impact of employee characteristics and organizational context variables on formal training and informal learning conditions. None of our independent variables appeared to be a predictor for formal learning. This implies that the well-known Matthew Principle (see for example Skulle, 2004) indicating that those who already have higher levels of educational qualifications are expected to more frequently attend formal training, was not confirmed by our data. However, the Mathew Principle has been found in our data pertaining to informal learning conditions. The amount of prior education appeared to have a positive effect on the learning value

of the job, and on the amount of networking outside the organisation. These findings concur with Skule's (2004) findings.

Respondents working full-time indicate higher levels of networking within and outside the organisation. This outcome is not surprising as it is a common observation that part-time employees experience fewer possibilities to maintain contacts with others. In general, the effect of organizational context variables on informal learning conditions was modest. The only variable that appeared to have substantial impact on informal learning was the department where respondents were working.

The second research question concerned the relationships between formal training and informal learning conditions. The number of days that respondents attended formal training was not related to any of the four informal learning conditions, which implies that formal training and informal learning are in fact two separate phenomena. However, our findings showed that participation in the four distinguished informal learning conditions is highly interrelated.

The third and fourth research questions concerned, respectively, the impact of formal training and informal learning conditions on employability. Job-related formal training, interaction with supervisor, and networking within the organisation appeared to be the three main predictors of employability. The significance of the supervisor for one's further career development has been demonstrated in various studies (see for example Van der Klink et al., 2001). The impact of networking activities on employability emphasise the importance to consider learning and development as a highly social process wherein interactions with significant others are strong catalysts. The absence of more significant outcomes as regards the learning value of the job on employability is quite remarkable since many studies point at the significance of this learning value (see for example Onstenk, 1997). A possible explanation could be the fact that most of our respondents appeared to work for many years in the same job position which makes it more likely that the job itself does not provide much triggers for learning and development. For these employees it is more likely that the interaction with their supervisor or the involvement in networking activities encourage their further learning and development. In some respect these findings are encouraging as it is not too difficult to increase possibilities for networking, both by active investment by employees as well as by their management.

Our findings allow the conclusion that employability is encouraged by a mix of formal and informal learning. It is therefore not advisable to restrict learning either to formal training or to participation in informal learning opportunities. When it comes to maintaining or increasing employability, it is not in the interest of employees to rely solely on increasing knowledge and skills pertaining to their current job. Similarly, Human Resource Development strategies that focus exclusively on enhancing informal on-the-job learning should neither be encouraged. Though to date informal learning is a major source for learning for many employees, it is not the universal remedy for securing employability.

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Appendix A

Table 1. *Means, standard deviations and correlations*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Background characteristics																	
1 Age	46.16	8.35															
2 Years current job	10.96	5.43	.46**														
3 Ed. qualification	4.72	1.06	.03	-.14*													
Organizational context																	
4 Learning climate-lack of time	2.74	.63	.04	.02	.10												
5 Learning climate – team support	3.40	.57	-.22**	-.13	-.08	-.39**											
Formal training																	
6 Formal training job-related	3.66	2.04	-.03	-.02	.04	.03	.05										
7 Other formal training	3.22	2.08	.09	.02	-.03	.14*	.03	.43**									
Informal learning																	
8 Learning value job	3.87	1.12	-.07	.06	.13	.13	-.04	.16*	-.02								
9 Interaction with supervisor	3.48	.86	-.10	-.08	.04	-.33**	.44**	.10	.00	.16*							
10 Network within organization	3.14	.78	-.21**	-.07	.06	.01	.12	.08	.07	.40**	.27**						
11 Network outside organization	2.27	.90	-.03	-.15*	.18**	-.01	.04	.08	.18**	.27**	.21**	.52**					
Employability																	
12 Occupational expertise	4.73	.54	. 03	.01	.05	-.26**	.00	.14*	.01	-.02	.19**	.20**	.17*				
13 Anticipation and optimisation	3.50	.75	-.11	-.17*	.12	-.01	.03	.31**	.15	.23**	.15*	.15*	.29**	.39**			
14 Organisational sense	3.80	.80	-.01	-.11	.14*	-.09	.13	.17*	.04	.24**	.34**	.48**	.33**	.45**	.46**		
15 Personal flexibility	4.42	.54	-.10	-.19**	.07	-.13	.03	.14*	.06	.03	.13	.20**	.19**	.58**	.47**	.50**	
16 Balance	4.10	.64	-.16	-.12	-.05	-.42**	.32**	.07	-.06	.09	.39**	.26**	.14**	.43**	.28**	.43**	.44**