

# **Integrating Informal Workplace Learning into the Workflow through the Development of Performance Support Tools**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper imparts the value of recognizing, embracing, integrating, and supporting informal workplace learning. The author uses research as well as her undergraduate and graduate studies in the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) and professional career experiences as a construction project manager to make a correlation between informal learning experiences in the workplace and the need for developing performance support tools to recognize the significance of and support the education that takes place in a setting rarely prepared to cultivate learning. Findings indicate a need for organizations to work hand-in-hand with HRD professionals to adopt methods of integrating informal workplace learning into the workflow to produce high-performing, knowledgeable business professionals.*

## **Introduction**

In adult education, informal learning, in contrast to formal curriculum-driven, instructor-led settings such as colleges and universities, suggests greater flexibility or self-directedness for learners. Coombs (1985) defines informal learning as the spontaneous, unstructured learning that goes on daily in the home and neighborhood, behind the school and on the play field, in the workplace, marketplace, library and museum, and through the various mass media, informal learning is by far the most prevalent form of adult learning. (p. 92)

Informal learning in the context of the workplace is the process of learning while on the job. It is learning that is acquired through interacting with colleagues, interacting with clientele and suppliers, and discovering new methods that assist in enhancing the performance of the learner. Informal learning is impulsive, unmethodical and even accidental at times. It is embedded in our everyday work activities. Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) describe informal learning as follows:

The very nature of informal learning is what makes it so difficult for adults to recognize. Embedded as it is in our everyday activities, whether we are at work, at home, or in the community, and lacking institutional sponsorship, adults rarely label these activities as learning. (p. 35)

Informal workplace learning encompasses activities that are originated by employees that broaden or enhance their professional knowledge and skills. Valuable informal workplace learning is taking place with regularity and great magnitude. Resulting in constructive information and processes and perspectives, informal workplace learning must be systemized to realize its value in enhancing or supporting organization wide performance. Although informal learning cannot be planned in the same manner as formal training, it can be encouraged, promoted, and supported. Mechanisms for transfer of informal workplace learning include written reports, oral presentations, site visits, tours, job rotation, coaching and mentoring, conferences, databases, intranets, work manuals, meetings, communities of practice, and

*performance support systems*. According to Rossett and Schafer (2007), "Performance support represents converged information and work, residing next to the individual, in close proximity to the challenge to offer help when help is needed." (p. 2).

This paper will exemplify self-directed, incidental, and socialization, or tacit as the three types of informal learning as identified by Schugurensky (2000) evident in the workplace. It will place a focus on the development and implementation of mechanisms, or tools for support of employees' performance; said performance being the result of informal workplace learning exchanges. Although the importance of supporting informal workplace learning is stressed, this is not to suggest that informal learning is a replacement for formal training programs. The author is suggesting that informal learning be valued and blended with formal education and training to form a partnership beneficial to employees as well as organizations as a whole.

### **Recognition of Informal Workplace Learning**

Informal learning is so prevalent that it is embedded into the day-to-day work activities of employees and often takes place subconsciously. Research by Merriam et al. (2007) established the following:

Studies of informal learning, especially those asking about adults' self-directed learning projects, reveal that upwards of 90 percent of adults are engaged in hundreds of hours of informal learning. It has also been estimated that the great majority (upwards of 70 percent) of learning in the workplace is informal (Kim, Collins, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004), although billions of dollars each year are spent by business and industry on formal training programs. (pp. 35-36).

Despite its prevalence, as suggested by Beamish (2007), "informal learning often receives less attention because it is thought of as an intangible form of learning" (p. 65). Most organizations look for learning to happen in formal training situations and overlook the learning that is taking place while individuals perform their daily work tasks. In order for an organization to implement support of the informal learning exchanges of its employees, informal learning must be recognizable.

### ***Toward Recognition of Self-Directed Workplace Learning***

The first assumption underlying Knowles' (1975) view of andragogy, which he defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 18), is that learners become increasingly self-directed as they mature. In its broadest meaning, self-directed learning describes, according to Knowles (1975), a "process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (p. 18). Schugurensky (2000) defined self-directed learning as follows:

Self-directed learning refers to "learning projects" undertaken by individuals (alone or as part of a group) without the assistance of an "educator" (teacher, instructor, facilitator), but it can include the presence of a 'resource person' who does not regard herself or himself as an educator. It is both intentional and conscious. It is intentional because the individual has the purpose of learning something even before the learning process begins, and it is conscious, in the sense that the individual is aware that she or he has learned something. (p. 3)

Self-directed learning becomes even more powerful when the learner uses a systematic approach to determine what areas of knowledge and skills are needed in order to accomplish a task (learning needs and goals), how the areas of knowledge and skills will be acquired (learning objectives and activities), and how the learner will know that skill or knowledge sought has been acquired (learning evaluation). Tough (1979) suggested that self-directed learning is

a series of related episodes, adding up to at least seven hours. In each episode, more than half of the person's total motivation is to gain and retain certain fairly clear knowledge and skills, or to produce some other lasting change in himself. (p. 7).

***Exemplification of self-directed workplace learning.*** A construction project manager is responsible for presenting the differences and similarities between .011 and .013 aluminum mesh screen to a project owner to gain approval for product substitution. The construction project manager consults with the screen supplier and manufacturer (subject matter experts) and spends time researching aluminum mesh on the internet. The construction project manager knew what had to be learned (the differences and similarities between .011 and .013 aluminum mesh), how it was going to be learned (consultation with subject matter experts and internet research), and the effectiveness of the knowledge obtained (presentation to the project owner to gain approval for product substitution).

### ***Toward Recognition of Incidental Workplace Learning***

Incidental learning is unintentional or unplanned. In the workplace, incidental learning is the result of performing other activities or tasks. Incidental learning is acquired through observation, by engaging in conversation, or by watching or talking to colleagues about tasks. Incidental learning is a surprise or byproduct of another activity. The learner discovers something while in the process of performing or learning another task. Schugurensky (2000) defined incidental learning as follows:

Incidental learning refers to learning experiences that occur when the learner did not have any previous intention of learning something out of that experience, but after the experience she or he becomes aware that some learning has taken place. Thus, it is unintentional but conscious. (p. 4)

While we learn formally in some very specific situations and periods of our lives, incidental and informal learning are responsible for the skills and knowledge we have learned during the vast majority of our lives (Beamish, 2007).

***Exemplification of incidental workplace learning:*** A construction project manager settles down in the lunchroom for a break and overhears colleagues discussing the sort feature on the project management software. The construction project manager was unaware that the program allowed activities to be sorted and had been using a highlighter on a hard copy of the report to sort the activities. Unintentional as this learning was, the construction project manager now uses the sort feature and saves a significant amount of time and resources.

### ***Toward Recognition of Socialization, or Tacit Workplace Learning***

Tacit knowledge is knowledge that we may be unaware that we have. It is embedded in our day-to-day work activities. We tend to take tacit knowledge for granted. It is rather implicit. Schugurensky (2000) defined tacit learning as follows:

Socialization (also referred to as tacit learning) refers to the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, etc. that occur during everyday life. Not only do we have no prior intention of acquiring them, but we are not aware that we learned something. (p. 4)

Tacit learning involves knowing how to do something rather than knowing who, what, or why. It involves learning and skill but not in a way that can be easily written down.

***Exemplification of socialization, or tacit workplace learning:*** A senior construction project manager reconciles labor cost codes at the conclusion of each project. This process involves compiling information from a myriad of sources and performing countless mathematical calculations to reconcile labor expenditures. After many years, the senior project manager has become remarkably adept at this task without noticing that it was a comprehensive learning process.

### **Practices that Foster Informal Workplace Learning**

The workplace context opens a new door to research on informal learning experiences because informal workplace learning is largely hidden within the confines of the office walls and is therefore difficult to identify. Organizations are realizing that valuable learning happens when employees are allowed to freely engage in intelligent and effective communications and are therefore promoting social networks in which employees can interact and find the tools and resources they need to gain the skills and knowledge relevant to the task at hand.

The construction project manager's self-directed learning in the example provided was reliant upon access to the internet and the ability to communicate with subject matter experts. Lack of access to computer technology and the internet at the appropriate times and locations could hinder communication with others and the ability to collect information when the need to do so arises (Tobin, 1998).

The construction project manager's incidental learning in the example provided happened not as a direct result of seeking work activities that could have resulted in learning but as taking a break from it. Greater opportunities for informal learning are fostered by simply allowing unencumbered time to be built into a professional's work day (Hargreaves, 1992). Allowing times and places for employees to interact increase the possibility of informal learning exchanges.

The complexity of the senior construction project manager's tacit knowledge makes its transfer to other employees seemingly difficult. The senior project manager follows no written procedure and may find this implicit knowledge difficult to verbalize. Effective transfer of tacit knowledge generally requires extensive personal contact and trust. One way organizations can foster relationships among employees to promote learning is to encourage interaction. Research by Dobbs (2000) suggests the following:

Work areas need to be strategically designed so that employees, especially those in their early stages of development, are located near colleagues in the same technical or professional area. Strategically assigning workstations in this way should decrease the strength of two environmental inhibitors to informal learning (lack of time and proximity to others' work areas) and thereby promote collegial interaction and sharing. (pp. 52-7)

### **Support of Informal Workplace Learning**

The challenge in supporting informal workplace learning is to develop content rapidly, make it highly accessible and integrate it into the workflow. The first step in meeting this challenge is recognizing that employees are a main source of creativity and organizational improvement. Designing, developing, and implementing performance support for informal

learning produces a medium that enhances workplace performance. Cross (2006) suggests that we "think of a worker as the sum of employee and support systems, combining the strengths of each into a whole greater than the sum of the parts" (p. 8). Research by Nijhof and Nieuwenhuis (2008) suggests the following:

Studying the learning potential of the workplace is investigating the interaction of conditions to promote learning at work. The learning potential of the workplace may therefore be defined as the power of a work setting to integrate learning at work with the result of behavioural changes and the generation of new knowledge. Such a workplace offers accessible information, opportunities to learn and real support by peers and managers. (p. 7)

Giving equal value to informal workplace learning implies that it be transformed into components of teaching to enable its integration into a blended learning site. Most organizations rely on employees who possess the knowledge necessary to perform at an optimal level to teach others. However, these optimal performers are not always the best teachers. The implication is that HRD professionals must adopt methods of extracting individual knowledge into content and then deliver it so that it can be drawn upon by the entire organization. Performance support tools are depositories for information gained from informal workplace learning. Rossett and Schafer (2007) identify planners and sidekicks as two types of performance support. According to Rossett and Schafer (2007), "While Planners support performance just before or after the challenge, Sidekicks are right there during performance" (p. 99).

The information gained from the construction project manager's self-directed research on the differences and similarities between .011 and .013 aluminum mesh screen can be developed into a sidekick, referenced while a presentation is made to the project owner. The incidental learning acquired by the construction project manager on how to use the sort feature on the project management software can be developed into a sidekick that is referenced while performing the sort. The process of reconciling labor cost codes can be made explicit by developing a performance support system to include a planner to guide the learner in compiling the necessary information and a sidekick to aid with the step-by-step mathematical calculations. Development of performance support resulting from the knowledge and skills gained by these employees as individuals can be implemented to enhance the performance of all project managers within the organization.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Smith and Ragan (2005) suggest that performance support tools offer an alternative to training and are often preferred because they are usually less expensive to develop and implement than equally effective instruction. Because learning how to perform a task can consume more time than just performing a task, performance support tools can save both time and money. The performance objective should determine the decision to implement performance support tools or conduct training and development. Rossett and Schafer (2007) draw a conclusion related to this decision as follows:

Of course, most workforce learning professionals are devoted to improving performance and work. If performance support contributes, as it can and does, that is great. If training is essential, because employees must know it by heart or require skills to take advantage of resources or not knowing threatens professional standing, so be it. The point is not to

cast off training and development, or even to advocate for it, but to use it judiciously, appropriately, often in concert with performance support. (p. 10)

Because the great majority of learning in the workplace is acquired informally as suggested by Kim et al. (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007), it is reasonable to advocate that informal employee-driven, employee-led learning and its ensuing performance be recognized, embraced, integrated, supported, and shared as a necessary component of amalgamated workplace learning.

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