

## Informal Learning

# How to manage it without killing it.



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**I**nformal learning is the powerhouse of learning in the workplace. Studies show that people learn much more about their jobs informally. So the big question is how to manage informal learning in a way that improves what is happening without destroying the informality – without destroying the very thing that makes it so powerful.

I worked in a factory with a warehouse once, many years ago when I was a student. It was an ice cream and frozen foods factory and the warehouse was set to 18 degrees below zero. There was a guy there who drove a fork lift which is quite a skilled job given that the floors were solid ice. His name was Phil.

Once, when we were sitting outside in the sun warming up after a shift, I asked Phil why he was still driving a fork lift in a job where most people moved on. He said he had a learning difficulty, and he was grateful for the job. We got to chatting and I learnt from a chance comment that he had a hobby. It was war games with model soldiers where they re-create historical battles. He had an amazing knowledge of famous battles, not just the tactics, but also the history attached to them and the psychology of the commanders.

I remember after he described in detail the life of a particular general he admired, I asked him how he learnt all this stuff... and he said that he didn't learn it. To him it was just part of his hobby.

***It is learning that just happens.***

***It is not scheduled.***

***It is spontaneous.***

I thought of Phil, and sitting in the sun with him all those years ago, as I started to pull together this guide and thought that what he did is a pretty good definition of informal learning. It is learning that is going on when we don't think of it as learning.

It is learning that just happens. It is not scheduled. It is spontaneous.

It happens when we make a mistake. It happens when we observe others doing either well or badly.

If you see someone walk across a wet road and they step in a puddle, but go in over their shoes, you learn by watching. You now know there is a deep hole under that puddle in the pavement. You just learnt something that would alter your behaviour if you also needed to cross that road.

It happens when people chat about their experiences, or when you ask someone a question. It happens when you look up information using Google, or on specialised sites. It happens when you look up an old manual or handbook.

It is happening all the time.

For example, assume that I need to buy a new photocopier. I will look on the internet and find out what's available. To me it is gathering information. I don't consider it learning. I don't think to myself, "I will learn about photocopiers".

An Atos KPMG study found that 80% of learning in the workplace is informal and 20% formal. Many other studies have come up with similar results. Some work by Princeton University led to the oft quoted 70:20:10 concept which acknowledges that 70% of learning is on-the-job, 20% is through others, and only 10% is through formal learning.

Think about that; most of our L&D budget goes into the formal learning, the 10-20%, and the rest is usually left to chance. Perhaps it is because we have not traditionally thought of it as learning?

That's changing. There is a growing focus on the informal learning that goes on, even though the people doing it don't call it learning, and don't think of it as learning. To them it is just part of their working life, or maybe we should even call

it a side effect of their working life.

I have heard the term "accidental learning". I don't like that. I think it was coined by L&D people who think that any learning that happens outside their direct control is accidental. "We didn't do it, so it must be just an accident". The term accident also has the implication of unwelcome or unwanted. This is not the case with informal learning where it is not even a matter of want or not want. It just happens.

I have also found that some people treat informal learning like many doctors treat spontaneous remission in patients. They didn't do it, so it is just an unexplained thing that can be ignored.

Shouldn't we be focussing some attention on the 80%?

## Why it's important

By its nature, it has some immediate benefits...

- It is targeted because it is focussed directly on what needs to be learnt.
- It is timely because it typically happens only when something needs to be learnt.
- It is efficient because it tends to be pulled by the learner on demand rather than pushed on them.
- It is very cost effective when compared with the cost of a training course to embed the same piece of learning sufficiently strongly for it to last until it is needed.
- It is contextual, meaning that it is usually used almost immediately, thus ensuring better retention of anything learnt through doing.
- In these days of such rapid information growth, there are fewer and fewer jobs where someone can learn all they need to know for the job. Most jobs now need an element of on-going learning.

However, there are some potential downsides...

- It can take up colleague time so there is a cost compared with what else that colleague could be doing.
- It is possible to get the wrong information from a colleague or the internet, or to misunderstand the information obtained.
- Different people can gather inconsistent information about the same problem, leading to inconsistent action.

## What's going on when we learn informally?

Let's look at a few ideas around learning, especially informal learning, because then we can see better how to empower it.

I believe that we are programmed to learn. If we were not, evolution would have discarded us as an evolutionary dead end. So here we are, evolved to learn, and in my opinion, always learning. We cannot not learn - it is a survival instinct. It is part of living.

We are always learning. So the question is not "How can we make people learn?" The question really is "How can we use the learning that is going on anyway, so that people learn what is beneficial to the organisation?"

There are a couple of things about learning that are important in this context.

**“ How can we use the learning that is going on anyway, so that people learn what is beneficial to the organisation? ”**

### Emotion and diffusion and fly paper

Learning depends on memory. Memories get encoded most strongly when they are composed of a range of sensory information. If we hear and see something, we remember it better than just seeing it. When **emotion** is attached to a memory, it really sticks. Just think back to something you remember well. Chances are there was a high emotional loading.

What relevance has this for informal learning? There is a far greater chance of a multi-sensory experience when getting and using information in a real live situation, than in a classroom or from an eLearning module. New information used in the moment, in context, in a real live situation is far more likely to be remembered.

It is also far more likely to be coupled within the neural network to the situation/problem. That's important as well. The same situation in the future will trigger the memory of the required information. This is akin to anchoring in NLP.

Do you remember what **diffusion** means? I remember experiments at school where gases or liquids spread from areas of higher concentration to areas of lower concentration. The way the smell of cooking wanders through a house is an example.

If people at work hang around others more experienced, there will be information transfer. It does not even have to be explicit or done on purpose. It will just happen, even if it is only down to observation. The new employee will notice how the more experienced people hold a particular tool, or the order in which they do things, and copy it. They may not even realise that they are copying. It can simply be an unconscious desire to 'fit in'.

Now, **fly paper**. I bet you are wondering about this. We become 'sticky' when we know a bit about something. We have the basics of a neural network to attach new information to. We will then notice things around us that are relevant to this fledgling neural network and add them to what we know. You may have heard of a part of our brain called the Reticular Activating System. That is the mechanism that causes this fly paper effect.

What we have seen so far leaves some clues as to how to improve and manage informal learning without making it formal, and thereby killing it.

### What's in a name?

One of the keys seems to be that people continue to not think of it as learning. For many people, the term learning seems to come loaded with baggage; and is associated with difficult, forced, exams, boring, school, irrelevant and time consuming.

So my advice to you is to keep the term informal learning to yourself, and don't let your learners know that learning is what they are doing.

Labelling something is the first step in forcing it into a strait jacket, and disempowering it. They can call it what they like, because results are what you are interested in.

### Process for getting better results

The first steps you need to take are to build up a picture of what is going on currently.

- What resources do workers use; where do they turn to first, then next? What is their default pattern to solve a problem?
- Notice what the differences are between new employees, and experienced people.
- Notice if they get frustrated when they can't find what they want, and why.
- Are there departmental differences?
- Are there differences in computer access and or computer literacy?
- Are there ad hoc repositories of information squirreled away by workers?
- What is culturally acceptable, and what is not? In one culture, looking up information on the web can be seen as enterprising and the right thing to do. In another, surfing the web could be seen as skiving.

You can use focus groups, interviews and questionnaires though these should always be used with caution. People will often give the answers they think are wanted, or that will suit their own agenda. If you measure something, or are even just perceived to be measuring it, people will change their behaviour based on what they think the targets might be, even if you don't have any targets.

Observation and casual conversation are always the best methods, though it they are more time intensive, and when you do your research this way, you can explain that you are just trying to find out what is going on and how you can help. When you are talking to people, don't use the word learning because people don't typically think of learning occurring during their day-to-day work. Use questions like "Where do you find out xyz" or "How do you know what to do if the widget machine fails?"

You will see patterns emerge, but be careful and don't jump to conclusions. Just because one method is commonly used does not mean it's the best one.

Part of your output from this process should also be a map of the types of information that people need, and when. Do the problems that people need to solve break down into groups? Is the search for information just related to problems, or is it more general?

Now that you have a snapshot of what is going on currently, think about how to intervene.... gently!

Let's consider this at a higher level first. Let's look at the philosophy behind what you are doing.

## Learnscope

You can't force informal learning. All you can do is provide a backdrop and environment in which it is more likely to occur. I have seen this called a Learnscope and the tending of this Learnscope is called Learnscaping.

A Learnscope is a learning ecosystem. You don't create it. It is already there. You tend it to enhance it. This is analogous to a garden. You don't create a garden, it is already there; but you can tend it to bring harmony and beauty. You provide nutrients, water, seeds, and growth happens. The gardener does not control the growth directly any more than a manager can control learning. But we can still end up with beautiful gardens.

We don't expect to control the plants. Influence yes, but not control. And then we are delighted when a plant bursts into bloom unexpectedly. It's the same with a Learnscope.

## Leadership and the Learnscope

So what influence do we exert?

If people need information, which is one of the key "fertilisers" for a Learnscope, then making it readily available makes sense. The easier it is to get at needed information, the less motivation or tenacity is required from the person wanting the information.

The opposite is also true. The harder the information is to get at, the more a worker has to invest in time and energy to get it, and they just may not bother. Then what they learn, because they are always learning, is how to get by without the needed information, and how to make sure they don't get blamed for the mess that results.

You exert good influence on your Learnscope by lowering the barriers between workers and the information they require.

By the way, this is where leadership comes in. The stronger the vision, the more compelling the vision, the more people will want to swing in behind the leader. They will automatically and un-

consciously seek to learn to enable themselves to follow and contribute to the vision. If the vision is weak, there is no motivation to do this and learn what the organisation needs to pursue the vision.

## Practical things to do

### 1. Knowledge management

Create places where knowledge can be deposited and accessed. There are many ways to do it, some high tech, and some low tech.

At the high tech end there are things like wikis and blogs, and full blown knowledge management systems. The more "formal" these get, and the more company owned, the harder it will be to get people to use them.

There is a story about a power company where there was an old battered exercise book held behind the counter at a café where most of the line workers stopped for lunch or a coffee. People would ask for it, scribble some notes in it, and hand it back. The company found out about the notebook and in it were lots of tips and tricks that would be really useful for any new line worker. They put the contents onto a company system, and nobody used it. The line workers had lost ownership and the company had made informal knowledge management into something formal – and killed it.

People will use these tools if they are seen as owned and managed by the users, not interfered with by the company, and they provide genuine benefits to the users. The tools must also be easy to use and access so that there are minimal barriers between the users and the knowledge bank. The easier a system is to use, and the higher the perceived ownership of the system by the users, the more it will be used.

However, be careful. There is an incredible desire by organisations to control, and clean up this kind of user generated resource to make sure it only has the right messages, and so on. This tends to make it look company controlled.

And remember that there are also very effective low tech options. For example a small team may have a notice board with items of knowledge pinned up on cards. We often use these ad hoc and low tech systems at home in the family with notices pinned on the kitchen wall.

### 2. Establish subject matter experts

Subject matter experts are the natural hubs of information. They are the "go to" people who will always have an answer, or know where to get it. And their time is valuable, very valuable. They are valuable when doing their own work, and valuable when assisting others to do their work more effectively.

Some of these information mavens will be good at helping other people less experienced, some will not be any good at all. Some will delight in doing it, some won't. Pick your people carefully, and offer them assistance in becoming better mentors and coaches. That might mean coaching them, or having them attend a coaching course on the basics. You don't want them just handing out answers to questions. There is better value in the long term if they adopt a coaching approach.

### 3. Provide good resources of information

This is not the same as the wikis and blogs which are repositories of user generated knowledge. We are talking here about company provided information that could be internally generated, or it could be bought in.

The form it will take will vary. It could be lots of information on an intranet - everything from tips and tools to company updates.

It could be a library of books, manuals or industry magazines, perhaps provided where people have lunch and breaks. Add in magazines that are peripheral to your industry, and the annual reports of competitors and other industry information. And of course, you may have your own in house magazine.

It could be online information libraries that are relevant. There are general ones on things like management, and more specific ones on things like auditing rules, or food hygiene, or construction safety. Some are free, some are subscription services.

Note that I am not talking about eLearning which typically falls under the banner of 'formal' learning. I am talking about eReference which is different. It is used differently and should have a very different user interface. If you want to know

more about the differences between eLearning and eReference, there is another Alchemy Best Practice Guide about this. Ask us, and we will send it to you.

#### **4. Opportunities for learning**

Some companies, and their cultures provide many opportunities for people to pick up knowledge, others do not.

Some obvious methods are to encourage cross team working, events that throw people from different departments together, and moving people between offices.

By the way, if you do that, or take on a new hire, have them write up an "astonishment log" during their first few weeks. What do they see that astonishes them? It may be something you do well, or do poorly in their opinion, or it may be that you don't do something they would have thought was obvious given their previous experience in other offices or other jobs.

Create areas where people can just chat, and make it OK culturally for this to happen. Look at what barriers the organisational culture throws up against opportunities for informal knowledge exchange.

#### **5. Promote what you are doing**

Setting something up is not enough. People need to find out about it - but the way you promote it is important. The ideal way is that awareness of the resources and methods available spreads virally within the workforce. It is not some announcement from on high which says "you will do or use this".

This is where the support of your subject matter experts is critical. They are the ones who are respected internally for their knowledge and experience. When they are asked a question, and they say go to xyz on the intranet, or use this online resource, or check out this industry magazine, then that will spread.

Any promotion must focus on benefit to the user or participant. It is a subtle sales job. The way you do it should be multi-channel, and consistent and persistent over time. Promoting what's available to assist with informal learning is best done with a softly softly approach. Think about who might be the early adopters and focus on them first.

#### **6. Monitor and refine**

You need to measure what you are doing, and measure what you are getting in return. This is obviously critical if you are seeking or justifying budget.

A lot of your measurement will be subjective and anecdotal, especially in the early days. It will be about how people are reacting and engaging. It will involve talking to them and observing.

Also look outside your organisation. What is going on with technology that could be used? What are others doing now that informal learning is on the agenda of so many more organisations? Could any of this be useful? Are there groups or forums I could attend to share ideas about it? Follow the phrase "informal learning" on Twitter and see what is going on there.

Notice that we are back to the same activities as we did in the first steps which were about assessing what was going on.

#### **7. Do it again**

Go round the cycle again because this is an iterative process. Managing your Learnscape requires a continuous effort and gentle nudges that go to make informal learning much more valuable than just leaving it to chance.

#### **If we can help...**

Feel free to give us a call if you would like to know more about managing informal learning to get the most from it. We would be happy to help.

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