

L&D  
Best Practice Guide

# Informal Learning

How to harness  
informal learning without  
killing it

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Paul  
Matthews



PEOPLE ALCHEMY



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## How to harness informal learning without killing it

Informal learning is the powerhouse of learning in the workplace. Studies show that people learn much more about what they need to know to do their jobs informally. So the big question is how to harness 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 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 he mentioned that he had a hobby. It was war games with model soldiers where they recreate 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. He looked a bit uncomfortable and he said that he didn't learn it. To him it was just part of his hobby, and his learning difficulty was irrelevant.

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 murky puddle that is deep enough to go in over their shoes, you learn by watching. You now know there is a deep hole under that puddle in the pavement. When you cross the road, you give that puddle a wide berth. You just learnt something that altered your behaviour yet it is unlikely you would describe it as learning.

Learning 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.

Learning is happening all the time, and yet most of it people don't think of as learning.

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 roughly 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 all the informal learning as learning, or even thought of it at all?

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. Maybe we should call it a side effect of their working life.

I have heard the term 'accidental learning'. 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 often it is not a matter of want or not want.

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

Shouldn't we be focusing attention on the 80%?

### Why it's important

By its nature, informal learning has some immediate benefits . . .

- It is targeted because it is focused 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 learners on demand rather than pushed at them regardless of demand or need.
- 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 a colleague's 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 misunderstand the information obtained.
- Different people can gather inconsistent information about the same problem, leading to inconsistent action.
- Like formal learning, people are more or less skilled in learning this way and need different channels for it to be effective.

### 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.

If people do not have the information or tools that they need to do a job, they learn how to get by without. If people want something, they learn how to 'work the system' in order to get it. If people don't like a colleague, they learn how to get through their day in a way that avoids that colleague.

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. Think back to something you remember well. Chances are there was a high emotional loading at the time of the event.

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 e-Learning module. New information used in the moment, in context, in a real live

situation is far more likely to be multi-sensory and 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 and the solution. This is similar to Pavlov's response, or anchoring as the term is used 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'.

They will listen to the conversations in the lunch room about work, about old work stories, about things that went well and things that caused problems. They will notice what makes a team supervisor angry and what makes them easy to work for. In time, they will contribute their own stories to the pool of knowledge about 'how we do things around here'.

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.

These concepts of emotion, diffusion and fly paper leave some clues as to how to improve and harness informal learning without making it formal, and thereby killing it.

### What's in a name?

It is important to remember that people do not think of informal learning as learning. To them learning is something else. 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. They won't agree with you anyway.

Labelling something is the first step in forcing it into a strait jacket, and disempowering it. Let your learners call it what they like, or just do it without calling it

anything, 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 they are more time intensive. 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?' or 'What is the first thing you do when abc happens?'

Also ask about the stories people tell about work, and who tells them. Who do they listen to in the lunch room because they always have something interesting or useful to say. Ask people who are good at work tasks where and how they figured out how to do the task so well. Ask the new hires where they found out about things they need to know.

As people open up about where and how they find out things, also ask how that process could be made easier for them. Ask about what they did in other jobs or previous companies that they wish they could do here. If you are lucky you will find some quick wins and things that you can implement immediately.

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 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?

Another part of the output is a map of the information input channels. Where does information come from and how easily does it flow?

Now that you have a snapshot of what is going on currently, think about how to intervene . . . gently! First, let's look at the philosophy behind what you are doing.

### Learnscape

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 Learnscape and the tending of this Learnscape is called Learnscaping.

A Learnscape 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 Learnscape.

### Leadership and the Learnscape

So what influence do we exert?

If people need information, which is one of the key 'fertilisers' for a Learnscape, 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 Learnscape by lowering the barriers between workers and the information they require.

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 unconsciously 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. They won't scale the barriers to get at the information they need. See the Alchemy Best Practice Guide #4 for more on the effect of leadership on learning.

### 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, a plethora of new social media platforms for internal use, 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 because adding to them becomes a 'chore' and a job in its own right rather than something done to help with their current task.

There is a story about a power company where there was an old battered exercise book held behind the counter at a café outside the main depot where most of the line workers stopped for lunch or a coffee after their shifts.

People would ask for the book, 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. With a great flourish, 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 knowledge management 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. 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 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, and some won’t because they see their superior knowledge as a source of power and security of job tenure. The real power these days is freely sharing knowledge.

Pick your people carefully, and offer them assistance in becoming better mentors and coaches. That might mean coaching them, or having them attend a basic coaching course. 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. Provide 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 e-Learning which typically falls under the banner of 'formal' learning. I am talking about e-Reference 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 e-Learning and e-Reference, see our [Alchemy Best Practice Guide #1](#).

#### 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. An astonishment log is a valuable learning opportunity.

And of course, formal training courses are an opportunity for learning. Despite their shortcomings, they are still a valid part of the mix of information input channels into the Learnscape.

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, and remove the barriers.

#### 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 should not be 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 suggestion will spread. It is also an opportunity to post something on an internal social platform. If one person wanted the information, others probably need it as well.

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.

If you have a marketing department, go and ask for their input on how they would handle your marketing campaign. Go through the standard marketing steps of defining target audience, channels to 'speak' to them, compelling message and so on.

### 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, especially in social media, 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 you could subscribe to and 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, just like gardening, 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.



# PEOPLE ALCHEMY

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This is not an LXP. Or an LMS.

This is a Learning Workflow Platform and it's instigating real change in learning.

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## **Paul Matthews**

is the founder of People Alchemy and an internationally recognised author and speaker on L&D.

Thanks for reading this Best Practice Guide. I hope you found it useful. You picked up this Guide, which means you are keen to find new ideas and new ways of doing things to get better results. I can help you. Together we can look at what you want to achieve and then develop your strategy to make it happen. What is your L&D goal? What do you want to achieve? Let's talk about it :-)

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