



# Informal Learning: Overlooked or Overhyped?

New research indicates that companies are recognizing **formal pieces** to the **informal puzzle.**

By Andrew Paradise

**Informal learning represents a unique and somewhat mysterious method in workplace learning and performance.**

So how much informal learning is actually occurring in contemporary workplaces? Is it helping or hindering performance on the job? Do learners even realize the opportunity for gaining actionable information through casual interactions?

Organizations have begun to realize that the breadth of knowledge gained through informal channels is comparable to that gained through traditional formal methods. However, the specific steps needed to harness the vast potential of informal learning remains puzzling.

To better understand the effect of informal learning on organizational performance, the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) and the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) recently completed an exploratory study on the topic. The core was an online survey of 1,104 human resources, and learning

professionals, who completed the survey between March and April 2008.

The majority of them (86 percent) were managers, directors, vice presidents, or C-level officers. Most of the respondents represented large enterprises (60 percent had workforces of at least 1,000 people) that operate in multiple nations. Findings from the survey suggest that many organizations face a variety of issues in their handling of informal learning.

In fact, feedback from the survey respondents, as well as learning executives advising on the study, indicated that many organizations are struggling with how to define the concept. After careful deliberation, the researchers arrived at the following definition: “In this survey, we define ‘informal learning’ as a learning activity that is not easily recognizable as formal training and performance support.

Generally speaking, it takes place without a conventional instructor and is employee-controlled in terms of breadth, depth, and timing. It tends to be individualized, limited in scope, and utilized in small chunks.”

Survey respondents clearly agree that informal learning as defined is prevalent in their organizations. Nearly half of the respondents reported that it is occurring to a high (34 percent) or very-high (7 percent) extent in their organizations. Only 2 percent claimed that their workforce experienced no informal learning at all.

The survey data established the presence of informal learning in almost all organizations, so what are some of the specific tools and processes for its usage? As many in the modern workplace would expect, email emerged as the top-ranked informal learning tool. Accessing information from a company intranet was a close second, with 65 percent of respondents citing use to a high or very-high degree.

More than half of the respondents reported collecting “fingertip” knowledge, such as Google searches, as having high or very-high use. Some of the notable low scorers included communities of practice, which was cited to a high or very-high degree by only 20 percent of respondents. Voluntary mentoring scored a little higher at 28 percent, and coaching was slightly above that at 30 percent.

In light of these findings, learning professionals face the challenge of leveraging informal learning to achieve organizational goals. Workers are clearly accessing knowledge through channels besides official company platforms, so is there any way to ensure that the information acquired is effective?

Many of the best practices identified by survey respondents fell into two classes at opposite extremes—embracing new technology for information exchange and creating time for face-to-face interactions. Workers are often encouraged to compile information through any technological platform that proves useful.

One respondent mentioned that her company created a unique social networking site similar to Facebook, specifically for their employees. Multiple respondents also noted successful knowledge transfer through employee-driven

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podcasting, placement of televisions in common areas, and reliance on internal wikis.

On the other hand, a large portion of the best practices involved escaping the hectic pace of technologically intensive environments in favor of personal connections. Many respondents stated the need for teams to have regular lunches together to keep ideas and experiences fresh. Rearranging the office layout to facilitate conversations was also mentioned frequently.

Informal learning seems to be especially valuable for onboarding, since many respondents identified casual conversations with experienced workers in a “buddy system” as the best source of knowledge for new hires.

As workplace learning shifts from the traditional model of event-based, instructor-driven content, to a continuous knowledge-acquisition paradigm, the focus on informal learning will remain sharp. Although many organizations seem to be in the discovery phase, facilitation of informal platforms, channels, and technologies for learning is becoming mainstream. And despite the difficulties inherent with encouraging, regulating, or even defining the nature of “informal,” examination of recent trends suggests that it is the natural learning complement to a world that is increasingly on-demand. **T+D**

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For more detailed results from the Informal Learning Study, as well as ASTD’s other reports, visit [www.astd.org/content/research](http://www.astd.org/content/research). For more information on i4cp and their research library, please visit [www.i4cp.com](http://www.i4cp.com).

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