


# Knowledge Delivered in Any Other Form Is... **Perhaps Sweeter**

Informal learning is becoming a standardized part  
of a complete, balanced workplace regimen.



*By Aparna Nancherla*



**In some companies, people hoard information to get ahead. The future is moving toward a workplace in which employees who are not sharing information and mentoring will not get promoted.**

**A**t a bimonthly Friday happy hour, a group of employees shares stories of baseball games and baby showers, interspersed with bits of knowledge about their jobs. Amazingly, people still remember these random pieces of learning come Monday morning, despite being mixed up with personal anecdotes.

Tim notes that Donna would be a good future resource on figuring out the new email system. Stephanie invites Aziz to the internal marketing group that brainstorms catchy slogans. To generate further discussion, Trevor posts a wiki summarizing the company's revised mission statement and the process behind it.

Informal learning, or social learning, has been around for eons, and was the first method of sharing information within and between groups of people. Suffice it to say it's not going anywhere anytime soon.

"Formal training and workshops account for only 10 percent to 20 percent of what people learn at work," says Jay Cross, one of the foremost experts on informal learning and systems thinking. On his blog, he compares formal learning to passively taking a bus whereas informal learning is like riding a bike, in that "the rider chooses the destination and the route. The cyclist can take a detour at a moment's notice to admire the scenery or help a fellow rider."

Pervading many a workplace in various guises and fast becoming a staple of today's employee diet, the tools of informal learning are being harnessed both inside and outside the training function, infiltrating all parts of the organization.



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### An upward trend

In November 2008, ASTD and the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) conducted “Tapping the Potential of Informal Learning,” and according to their research, 41 percent of respondents believed informal learning was already occurring to a high or very high extent within their organizations, while 34 percent said it was occurring to a moderate extent.

For the purposes of the survey, informal learning was defined as “a learning activity that is not easily recognizable as formal training and performance support...[taking] place without a conventional instructor and...employee-controlled in terms of breadth, depth, and timing.”

Results also showed that 56 percent of survey respondents predicted that the use of informal learning will increase in proportion to all the learning at their organizations, in comparison to only 4 percent who thought it will decrease.

“There was an especially large gap between the degree to which employees share knowledge and the degree to which they think they should,” says Kevin Oakes, CEO and co-founder of i4cp. In other words, seasoned employees share their insights at a lesser rate than that which was expected by respondents.

Bridging this gap would come through building an environment of open communication whereby after employers provide the tools, workers are encouraged to use them. Employees will often go around companies if senior leaders do not step up and embrace change.

Oakes says that it’s about finding the people who are knowledge centers within the organization, and then building a database around them to capture this knowledge.

The study, which was based on a survey of more than 1,100 business and learning professionals, also found that informal learning has a large impact on organizations, despite little investment in it. For instance, 36 percent of participants said their training budgets don’t allocate any money for informal learning, while 42 percent noted that only 1 to 10 percent of their company’s training budget is allocated to informal learning. The implications of this finding indicate that though investment in informal learning may be low, it actually provides high impact at low cost.

Cross voiced his opinion in an interview at the 2009 Learning Technologies conference. He noted that the most cost-effective methods of informal learning he has encountered thus far include wikis, blogs, and other easily accessible, open source methods in which people are finding out what they need, when they need it.

### A shifting context for knowledge transfer

Informal learning is becoming more prevalent because of an evolving workplace environment that needs its speed and wide span of effectiveness.

A report by Claire Schooley of Forrester Research titled “Informal Methods Challenge Corporate Learning” honed in on three trends that

necessitate adopting new informal learning practices at corporations: information overload in the workplace; the immediacy with which information is desired; and the workstyle of the Millennial generation (for example, the desire to drive one’s learning, rather than being a passive recipient of knowledge).

Schooley emphasizes that the idea behind all of these informal methods is user-initiated learning, whether it be through harnessing social networks, blended learning solutions, or creating employee knowledge centers for just-in-time learning. She also sees value in aligning learning with whatever is going on in the company, which includes having senior executives encouraging young employees to directly contribute to the learning culture.

Another reason for embracing informal learning is the current financial climate in which budget pressures sway company decisions toward solutions that are low in cost and high in cost-effectiveness.

Traditional methods of training have shown rapid knowledge loss, says Tom Hogland, a senior executive who runs the collaboration and knowledge management practice on a global basis for the consulting firm Accenture.

For example, he notes that 60 percent of material can be forgotten 24 hours after a formal class is given. Hogland also cites a study from the State University of New York where students who listened to a podcast of a class scored 15 percent better on a test than students who attended the live class.

Informal learning fits the context of today's knowledge-on-the-go world, where information is best processed in small information bites. "It's a perfect storm of pressures from the budget and newer generations of workers, and companies that have had success with informal learning are seeing good results," says Hogland.

Josh Bersin, CEO and president of Bersin Associates, a research and advisory firm for enterprise learning and talent management solutions, also agrees that learning needs to be primarily driven by workers. "Formalizing informal learning is coming up with a learning architecture and a plan on how people can communicate with each other and share information in a structured firm," he says.

In some companies, people hoard information to get ahead. The future is moving toward a workplace in which employees who are not sharing information and mentoring will not get promoted. There are already many examples of companies that are utilizing informal learning successfully.

### The informal virtual classroom

Faced with some serious challenges regarding its training budget and how to face increasing demands, Sun Microsystems, a network services and solutions provider, instituted an open learning exchange called Sun Learning eXchange (SLX).

According to Joe Campbell, director of global sales and services and leadership learning at Sun, it was created with a few goals in

mind—giving leaders an alternative to formalized learning, taking advantage of expertise within the community, and harvesting knowledge within the community.

SLX is now a platform containing more than 5,000 pieces of informal learning, the majority of which are objects aimed at increasing productivity, aiding sales and technical support, and providing internal marketing. Any employee can contribute to the site, and the formats of learning bites include PDFs, podcasts, and video. The media is also downloadable via iTunes, thereby creating a mobile platform.

One interesting result that came out of the site launch was the creation of "five-minute Fridays," which was a video method in which senior executives could communicate directions and strategy to the rest of the employees. SLX has been easily embraced by Sun's employee learning audience, more than half of which works from home.

Another aspect of Sun's learning innovation is that their formal course curriculum leverages their informal content. Their course player is a compendium of informal information including links to books and news, tag clouds, and media, much of which has been launched formally by being broken down into course-like structures. In doing so, Sun's learning team cut its program development time by 90 percent.

Sun works to use the appropriate tools to solve the relevant problems, using "a changing conception of learning to leverage what we are looking for, which depends on what

the end user wants to accomplish," explains Campbell.

Evidence of Sun's customization of their learning solutions can be found in their multitude of CLOs. There is a different CLO for each major region of business operations, 16 in total, to help fulfill a multitude of learning needs in global markets and at various stages of development.

To attract future employees, Sun works to create web-based communities for high school and college students. The organization also aims to eliminate the digital divide by offering OpenOffice, MySQL, and other open source community training offerings.

### Formalized coaching equals impact

At one time, Computer Associates, an IT management and solutions company, suffered from a poorly run sales environment. Within the sales staff, revenue was low, attrition was high, and there were low levels of employee satisfaction. After some investigation, the problems were identified as communication-related rather than skills-related.

Thus, a formalized coaching program was created, in which managers were forced to coach sales representatives on a weekly basis. The results showed dramatic improvement. There was a huge uptake in employee engagement; turnover went down, and revenue went up. The interesting element about the program structure is that there is





## Intrapreneurship: Championing Employee Innovation at Qualcomm

From a company standpoint, growing a culture that highlights informal learning often leads to positive byproducts such as engaged employee intrapreneurs.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, an intrapreneur is “a person within a large corporation who takes direct responsibility for turning an idea into a profitable finished product through assertive risk-taking and innovation.”

One illustrative example would be that of Qualcomm, a wireless technology solutions company that prides itself on encouraging innovation from its employees.

Tamar Elkeles, the company’s CLO, created a presentation called “Fostering Intrapreneurship in Challenging Times,” in which she elaborates on the many creative learning opportunities available at Qualcomm.

One corporate storytelling program titled “52 Weeks at Qualcomm” represents a collection of short historical stories that illustrate the spirit of the organization, and are captured from interviews with the most senior employees. During the onboarding program, new employees are sent one story a week for their entire first year to teach them about the culture.

Qualcomm also has programs called the Employee Tradeshow, the Qualcomm Technology Forum (QTech), and the Venture Fest.

The Employee Tradeshow is an annual event that occurs both on site at the company headquarters in San Diego, California, as well as online through video demos and an interactive web experience.

The idea behind the event is to expose employees across the organization to the various projects occurring across different levels and functions. Each company division is provided with a booth to educate others about their work.

QTech is an annual three-day conference that allows engineers to collaborate on ideas, share best practices, and listen to keynote speakers. Only 30 percent of submitted presentations and papers are granted admission to the conference, which is streamed live to all company offices.

Venture Fest is an annual business plan competition open to all employees, the winning ideas from which are then funded internally. The principle behind the contest is that every employee should have the opportunity to create and develop potential business ideas.

In addition, Qualcomm Innovation Forum is a simple web tool built into the company system for idea generation. Employees, the majority of whom are engineers, are able to submit, discuss, rate, and tag ideas, and a subject matter expert database is available as well. Currently, the site has more than 600,000 views and counting, and more than 1,800 ideas generated.

None of these tools and programs is a cost-heavy investment, but the payoff is dramatic and multifold. Qualcomm’s culture is one that encourages the main tenet behind informal learning—the sharing and exchanging of knowledge that in turn benefits the organization.

not much formal training involved. The majority of it is informal, but it’s harnessed within a formal structure.

Though there is a place for formal learning within the workplace, Cross notes that there is always an informal component to it.

### Other methods and measurements

An alternative to formalized coaching is the case study method, which can be implemented top-down within an organization to capture institutional knowledge. “You can make coaching 1,000 times more effective by using live case studies,” elaborates David A. Fields, managing director of Ascendant Consulting.

The case study method works by using direct, timely examples to help an employee improve a skill or work at a problem. Meetings with a supervisor occur on a monthly or weekly one-on-one basis and provide a time to discuss what worked, what didn’t, and what changes could be made as a result. The tenets of the method are follow-up and use of ad hoc case studies rather than rehashed, dated examples.

“If you look at employee reviews after a year of this system being in place, it’s like you’re in a different company,” says Fields. The payback is highly positive, and this system can be implemented at any level or in any function within an organization.

Lane4 Management, a management consultancy that incorporates sports psychology, utilizes a similar idea called action learning groups. The groups are formed across different functions but within similar levels of an organization. Their purpose is to help facilitate the transfer of new ideas into an applied setting in the workplace. The ideal number to a group is five or six people, who meets for half-day sessions and discusses real issues and their solutions.

“People have the opportunity to reflect and crystallize learning in the workplace and put things into practice,” says Jamie MacPherson, head of learning for Lane4 Management. Employees have the chance to incorporate new knowledge in the presence of those with similar experiences. They can share and revise best practices in the company of their peers.

The return-on-investment of action learning groups can be measured

through a high-performance environment scan, which is a barometer of leadership and performance culture effectiveness done before and after the method is first used. Other types of measurement are coaching or leadership 360-degree feedback mechanisms, as well as seeking both qualitative and quantitative feedback from delegates in the programs.

One company’s very purpose is to aggregate informal learning bites as an online job resource for any employee. EmployAid.com is a site founded on the principle of “extreme learning,” or informal learning at its highest level. It provides skills and strategies in the form of articles, videos, and podcasts. Issues covered include how to sell, how to negotiate, working with peers, working with supervisors, and work-life balance.

“Employees learn from each other what I would call ‘basic survival skills,’” says Barbara Poole, founder of EmployAid. “I see a real abandonment in organized functions, and people are searching for informal learning.”

### **Setbacks to informal learning**

In inverse proportion to the economic

situation, informal learning is in a boom phase rather than that of a bust, due to its cost-efficiency and high-impact. And yet, there are still companies lagging behind in embracing it. According to Bersin, the main hold-ups in its adoption can be attributed to three areas—a lack of skills in the training department, a lack of technologies within the company, or an underdeveloped organizational learning culture.

Training departments that are not given a strategic role within an organization often do not feel empowered to innovate or evolve. Another reason could be ineffective leadership that does not prioritize well, in which case the training function is ill-equipped to deal with growing demands.

In terms of lack of appropriate technology, the important aspect for any company to consider is that a solution should be created first before a technology is adopted. However, technologies sometimes infiltrate companies from the bottom-up, in which case, impact can be measured from direct experience rather than projected analysis.

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Though Phillip Kim, executive vice president of marketing at VoIP provider M5 Networks, adds, "I think it's detrimental to formalize something before you even know what it is, and then try to teach it." Kim notes that having a culture of collaboration is essential before necessarily running out and investing in the latest tools that are not the be-all and end-all of informal learning, which takes place at any given moment.

Finally, an underdeveloped organizational learning culture is one in which functions are highly centralized and the training function is not aligned with any of the other business functions. "To do informal learning well, you really have to study the patterns of communication inside the company and understand how the roles interact until you get a sense of where people *do* go for information and where people *can* go for information," says Bersin.

Furthermore, sharing informal knowledge should be implemented into a company's reward structure, says Mark Salisbury, author of *ILearning: How to Create an Innovative Learning*

*Organization.* These rewards can come in hard or soft forms—for example, a compensation package or a promotion—but the important piece is that disseminating knowledge is a regular part of the formal appraisal process.

The idea is to move toward a culture that celebrates sharing information. "You should spend 20 percent of your day creating informal knowledge and documenting it," notes Salisbury.

### What's next: words of wisdom

So what does the future hold in terms of the formalization of informal learning?

Tony Karrer is an e-learning technologist and CEO of TechEmpower, a web and software consulting firm. He acknowledges the paradox in defining the form of informal learning, which is, in name value at least, without form. Though he notes, "I am personally not a big fan of definitions. Trying to define it doesn't matter; what matters is how to help people learn faster and get their jobs done better."

Karrer encourages companies to start adapting to the current trend in informal

learning because otherwise, they will find themselves marginalized in the business.

Cross notes that the near future is a place where the word "training" will be retired. "These days, where knowledge work is at the discretion of the knowledge worker, I think learning is a more appropriate concept to go with." He visualizes the fast-changing work environment as "a world of intangibles," where inside knowledge is better shared and retained via peers or social networking platforms rather than communicated in the classroom.

"It's not informal learning taking over everything; it's a modernization of the learning function," says Bersin, whose company is working on a visual framework that describes what this learning world will look like, to help people see where they are and where they need to go.

He adds, "It's more of an evolution than a revolution." **T+D**

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