In an era of ongoing change, workplace learning has taken on an increasingly popular role as a vehicle through which organizations can achieve not only their short-term goals, but also their long-term, strategic visions. Under the umbrella term of workplace learning, organizations can categorize their efforts as either formal or informal; the focus of this Brief is those categorized as informal. Although readers may have an intuitively clear picture of what informal learning may be, it is in fact a complex subject area. This Brief explores the meaning of the term informal learning as defined by several authors, reviews the results of research conducted by the Education Development Center (EDC) Inc., and describes the planning strategies and implications for practice offered by EDC and others.

**What Is It, Exactly?**

The term informal learning was first introduced in 1950 by Malcolm Knowles, in his pioneer work *Informal Adult Education* (Cseh, Marsick, and Watkins 1999). Since that time, many authors have written about informal learning, offering their unique perspective on the meaning of the term. However, for the purposes of this Brief, the focus is on informal learning in the workplace; for over a decade Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins have led the charge in this area of research. Rusaw (1995), referencing Marsick and Watkins, suggests that informal learning “is a process of learning that takes place in everyday experience, often at subconscious levels” (p. 218). Marsick and Watkins (1997) add that, not only is informal learning unique to the individual, but control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner. Informal learning, as defined by EDC, is that “in which the learning process is neither determined nor designed by the organization, regardless of the formality or informalinity of the goals and objectives toward which the learning is directed.” (Stamps 1998, p. 32).

It is important to note that the research supports introducing informal learning not as a replacement for formal activities but as a complement to them. Bell (1977) uses a metaphor of brick and mortar to describe the relationship between formal and informal learning in an organization. He explains that formal learning acts as bricks fused into the emerging EDC model of “personal growth.” Informal learning, he adds, serves as the mortar, facilitating the acceptance and development of formal learning, adding that it is this synergy that produces effective growth. In support of the earlier notion that informal learning should not replace formal learning activities, it was found that the two elements support one another (Bell and Dale 1999). In addition, research has found that reliance on informal learning alone has some drawbacks, including difficulty in accrediting or using it for formal qualifications, and informal learning “may be too narrowly based so the employee only learns part of a task or superficial skills which may not be transferable” (Bell and Dale 1999, n.p.).

**Strategies for Facilitating Informal Learning in the Workplace**

**Career Development and Planning**

Referencing the work of Mumford, Marsick and Watkins (1997) encourage the use of personal development plans. These plans are developed in concert with managers, their managers and/or staff, and an external learning facilitator. These plans emphasize natural learning, outside of the classroom, along with more structured courses or activities. Marsick and Watkins (1997) point out that informal learning can be planned, and overall learning is enhanced by planning, either before the fact or in retrospect to learn from past experience. This theme is echoed by Bell (1977), when he encourages taking advantage of the career development process to build in
planned opportunities for informal learning on behalf of the employee. This may include serving as a tutor for a trainee, taking responsibility for a staff meeting, or designing training as a member of a training steering committee (ibid.). In addition to these strategies, front-line supervisors and managers should encourage membership in related professional associations. Rusaw (1995) describes the opportunities for informal learning inherent in membership in professional associations. Professional associations serve as a place to identify a mentor; a mentoring relationship is often a great source of informal learning for both the protégé and mentor. In addition, the opportunity to serve in a position of leadership (i.e., an officer, chairperson, or task force leader) allows members to gain a perspective on management processes and practices by doing them (Rusaw 1995). Learning opportunities that extend beyond the barriers of an employee’s job description may offer exposure to knowledge, skills, and abilities required for future assignments, and/or opportunity for promotion.

Information Exchanges

Rather generically named, a “structured learning exchange can encourage employees to share their intellectual wealth” (Marrelli 1998, p. 26). The structure and conditions surrounding these information exchanges are limitless. One option is to set aside time where people come together in for the purpose of exchanging information. These exchanges can be scheduled at a number of different times. They can exist as stand-alone sessions, designed solely for the purpose of exchanging information, or they can be adapted to staff meetings (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.). Bell (1977) offers an example of a stand-alone opportunity when describing the opportunity for cross-unit sharing. By conducting an hour and a half session first thing in the morning, one organization brought together employees from two separate units to learn more about each other. Coffee and donuts were served, and each group was given one half hour to present, leaving another 30 minutes for a “cocktail-party”-style discussion and networking (Bell 1977).

Bell also suggests reading and study groups as means for facilitating informal learning in the workplace. Brown bag discussions and book clubs are opportunities for informal learning, but they require planning. Employers can support these initiatives by providing meeting space, resources to purchase the books, and even food, if the discussions are held during the employees’ lunch hour. The important point is that the time be scheduled and “honored,” resisting the temptation to let more “urgent” matters result in the cancellation or reduction of time allotted for the exchange. Participation can be voluntary or managers, supervisors, and/or peers can nominate an employee. Whatever the mechanism, it should be suitable and reliable. What kind of information should be exchanged? Marrelli (1998) offers the following list: software shortcuts, how to use new software, time management, how to handle difficult customers, information resources, preferred models for training evaluation, and benefits of belonging to a professional association. Employees may also consider a brief discussion and/or presentation on coursework reduction of time allotted for the exchange. Participation can be voluntary or managers, supervisors, and/or peers can nominate an employee. Whatever the mechanism, it should be suitable and reliable. What kind of information should be exchanged? Marrelli (1998) offers the following list: software shortcuts, how to use new software, time management, how to handle difficult customers, information resources, preferred models for training evaluation, and benefits of belonging to a professional association. Employees may also consider a brief discussion and/or presentation on coursework recently completed through a company-sponsored tuition reimbursement program.

These are examples that might lend themselves to more traditional means of exchange (e.g., face-to-face). However, with the advancements in workplace technology, distance learning, and online communications, other media may be equally if not more effective (suitability and reliability relevant to the organization is a key factor). Other media through which this exchange of information can occur include but are not limited to intranet websites, chat rooms and/or discussion boards, e-mail listservs and/or mailing lists, and other vendor-supplied distance learning software and technology.

Summary

As evidenced by the findings of the Education Development Center’s study, the formidable advantages of informal learning cannot be denied. But this is not to suggest that every corporation rush off to implement strategies for facilitating informal learning. Informal learning is merely one intervention that, with its known successes, may be the solution to an organization’s problems. Consideration must be given to organizational context and culture. A combination of the right environment and mix of strategies (those discussed here and others) are a great foundation for an organization’s workplace learning efforts.

References


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