Informal Learning: Accidental vs. Intentional

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Social or informal learning is effective, but has limits. Including mentoring and other intentional learning models can help ensure employee development is comprehensive and complete.

Whether it occurs during a formal training session, through an impromptu meeting with team members or in a casual conversation with a colleague, learning happens. Both formal and informal learning bring value to employees and help organizations spread critical knowledge to the workforce.

“Experts have estimated that information is doubling every two years, and this wealth of information leads to increasing complexity in finding the right information or knowledge,” said Karie Willyerd, co-author of *The 2020 Workplace*. “If you join forces with others through social networks, you’re more likely to find what you need with a little help from your friends.”

Learning With Intent
Leveraging friends and peers for information is what modern mentoring networks are all about. In these networks, informal learning needs are formalized through intentional learning connections. For example, an employee who needs to learn how to upsell an idea to management could tap into a modern mentoring network — ideally anywhere from five to 15 advisers from various functions in the organization — and learn techniques from people who have firsthand experience, which can then be applied directly to the employee’s situation and job. This intentional and focused approach is significantly different from the accidental learning that occurs in social networking, where random occurrences of learning may pop up, but they are not tied directly to on-the-job application.

Financial services provider State Street Corp. assessed the ease and comfort of using social networking for learning against employees’ need to reflect on what they learned and apply it on the job. “The advent of social networking and instant information streams such as Twitter has become an exciting opportunity to engage employees by supplying them quick information,” said Maribeth Nash, chief talent officer at State Street. “However, we have to be mindful to not rely too much on social networking tools, because often change is made and learning is embedded when it is reflective.

“That is why we believe in providing our employees a mix of traditional learning experiences and robust development that centers on reflective practice. This includes coaching, mentoring and formal education experiences.”

As Willyerd and her co-author Jeanne Meister discovered when conducting research for their book, millennials prefer to learn through mentoring. Willyerd also said that in less than three years, people in this age group — those born after 1977 — will make up nearly 50 percent of the workforce. “The only way to address such a massive need for mentoring is through modern methods that allow mass customization to fit the needs of the new workforce,” she said.

ON THE WEB
Whether accidental or intentional, CLO columnist Jay Cross believes informal learning can provide job enrichment by allowing employees to choose what they learn and why. Find out how at CLOmedia.com/materials/view/239.
For informal learning to have impact, organizations have to make learning intentional rather than accidental. “As talent professionals, it is critical that we equip our employees with the tools they need to take advantage of accidental learning events by making them intentional, heightening their awareness of the learning opportunity and helping them build a reflective practice,” Nash said.

One way companies can do this is by using enterprise mentoring technology, thus enabling all employees to partake and knowledge to flow unimpeded throughout the company.

“Dr. Edwards Deming used to do a demonstration of dropping a ball inside a hoop, and then moving the hoop each time to make the new center where the ball had previously dropped,” Willyerd said. “After 10 drops, the hoop would have moved across the room. He used that experiment to show what happens with accidental learning: accuracy and the understanding of truth shifts. Intentional learning is important because it has an anchor in expertise, such as a knowledgeable mentor.”

Enterprise mentoring software is built to facilitate people-to-people learning (Figure 1). By using organizational competencies such as financial acumen, dealing with difficult situations or presentation skills as the nucleus for mentoring engagements, partici-
Corporate trainers and college faculty share a goal to spark enthusiasm, prepare students for success and foster a positive learning experience that will boost engagement, promote collaboration and yield content mastery. Guided by a vision that 21st century learning space design can push traditional boundaries and inspire learning, the Herman Miller Education team examined these building blocks for positive learning experiences as part of its Learning Spaces Research Program (LSRP).

Since 2007, Herman Miller has partnered with more than 25 colleges and universities to design pilot spaces for 21st century learners. Called learning studios, these experimental spaces include flexible furniture that is easily rearranged, allowing educators to manipulate physical spaces to support different learning objectives. Students and instructors were surveyed three times — before, during and after their learning studio semesters — to gather feedback. When LSRP data from 2007 through 2011 were analyzed, students and instructors reported an 18 percent increase in engagement in the learning studio versus a classroom, and said increased collaboration was a highlight of the learning experience.

Susan Whitmer, a Herman Miller strategic education consultant, said one of the intentions for the learning studio was to get instructors out from behind a podium and connected with the class, which ultimately resulted in a better experience for everyone. Benefits translate to the corporate world in two ways. In learning studios, students learn to master skills in more collaborative ways, making them more effective. Second, learning studio design elements can be implemented in corporate training environments and meeting spaces.

Learning studios help to break down barriers that can impede workplace success, such as fear of public speaking or discomfort with collaboration. By design, the furnishings — maneuverable chairs and tables with casters, which accommodate roundtable conversations and group discussions — encourage engagement by removing traditional boundaries. Participants are more likely to ask questions and discuss and even defend their position with instructors in these environments, which they likely will do in an office. According to survey responses from participants, those in LSRP learning studios felt relaxed and comfortable learning in these spaces. They also reported feeling more confident when delivering presentations in front of a group.

The LSRP findings also emphasized the importance of collaboration. Educators have long understood that social, collaborative spaces keep minds, voices and projects moving, while stimulating, engaging spaces draw people in and spark creative thinking. According to the research, 86 percent of participants felt that learning studios supported this collaborative spirit and were conducive to group work, up from 48 percent of participants who enjoyed group work in traditional spaces.

Corporate learning environments can leverage this model with space designs that promote possibilities rather than restrictions, and flexible furnishings, technology and instructional design play a big role. For example, as needed, trainers can “strike the set” when a different learning space is desired to support new objectives.

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In Practice: Rethinking Learning Spaces

Participants in an enterprise mentoring program can take targeted action to meet specific work-related goals and remain focused on learning objectives — how to deliver a budget plan to leadership or how to confront a colleague who steals an idea.

Further, since all connections are competency-based and have an intentional learning focus, organizations can more easily measure things such as speed to competence — how quickly individuals become proficient in specific competencies — and better understand the impact the process has on individuals and the organization as a whole.

For example, a company could look at data collected through mentoring software to see how people are improving in an organizational competency area, such as serving the client, and then chart improvements over time. These types of measures provide the hard data that learning leaders need in their quest for ROI.

The need for mentoring, knowledge sharing and skill building continues to grow. A November Accenture Skill Gaps Study found that 55 percent of workers in the U.S. reported they are under pressure to develop additional skills to be successful in their current and future jobs, but only 21 percent said they have acquired new skills through company-provided formal training during the last five years. This could be because skills needed today are evolving quickly, making formal training a poor fit for a more on-demand reality.

With formal training methods, it can take 12 to 18 months to design and implement a course, by which time employees may no longer need to address that...
skill because their priorities and job tasks have shifted. Instead, more companies are embracing informal learning practices that help employees connect with one another at the point of need to share knowledge and information, and immediately apply new insights back on the job.

Modern mentoring networks offer one tool organizations can use to address the growing need for intentional learning in a more informal process. State Street uses mentoring software to run a self-directed global mentoring program that is open to all employees.

“The goal of this program is to allow employees to be able to find mentor matches that best fit their needs, regardless of locations or seniority,” Nash said. “Employees are able to select one-on-one relationships or group mentoring depending on their preference.” The program is also helping the organization to develop future leaders and build a more robust talent pipeline.

Personalized Learning
One of the greatest benefits of modern mentoring rests in the personalized nature of the learning. People can customize their engagements so learning goals focus on their most pressing issues, and they can create a defined learning agreement that outlines goals and objectives for the learning engagement. Conversations with advisers are focused on those goals and allow information to be applied within the job context, creating real value for the mentee and the organization.

In the aforementioned Accenture study, 52 percent of respondents reported they added technology skills in the last five years, but few had updated other in-demand skills such as problem solving (31 percent), analytical skills (26 percent) or managerial skills (21 percent). Further, 68 percent of workers said they believe it was primarily their responsibility to update their skills, not their employer’s.

However, organizations would be remiss if they did not provide ways and means for employees to improve the skills they need to be effective. As companies grapple with the shortage of qualified workers to fill jobs, more have determined that they must look internally for candidates. This makes it even more important for companies to provide access to skills and knowledge.

The Accenture study offered advice for companies trying to close the skills gap: “Mine your own organization for hidden talent by identifying the skills in your existing workforce in a searchable skills database, creating an open and fluid talent market and establishing programs and incentives that foster internal talent mobility.”

Willyerd agrees. She said modern mentoring can act as a catalyst enabling companies to take advantage of the talent they already have in-house as opposed to being used solely as a tool for individual career growth. Further, mentoring can provide the appeal of informal learning with the structure learning leaders need to prove business impact.

“Imagine, for example, that a company wants to penetrate an emerging market, such as China,” she said. “How powerful would it be to have 20 to 30 people join a leadership circle with someone who is an expert at doing business in China, where they can collaborate virtually and learn from one another as they make their plans?

“They could invite people in as visiting experts and leverage resources across a broad set of learners, instead of the typical one-to-one relationships that occur in traditional mentoring. Hard outcomes of this approach can be retention of top talent, accelerated time to market, measured time to find information, and so on.”

As intentional learning via modern mentoring expands, the key for all companies will be how to take the benefits seen in mentoring engagements and tie the results back to organizational goals. That critical connection will provide proof that intentional/informal learning efforts have a real impact on the bottom line.

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