

Findings from a structured review  
of the literature on informal learning.  
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# 7 Informal Learning Lessons

“Informal learning is emerging as one of the most powerful disciplines in our industry,” writes industry observer Bob Mosher.

Not really.

Yes, informal learning is powerful, but it’s not new. As long as people have learned how to perform work-related tasks by observing and interacting with others, informal learning has played a significant role in training and development. But its role in the context of the modern workplace and the content-rich and often social Internet has spurred renewed interest in the last decade as an alternative to the formal classroom.

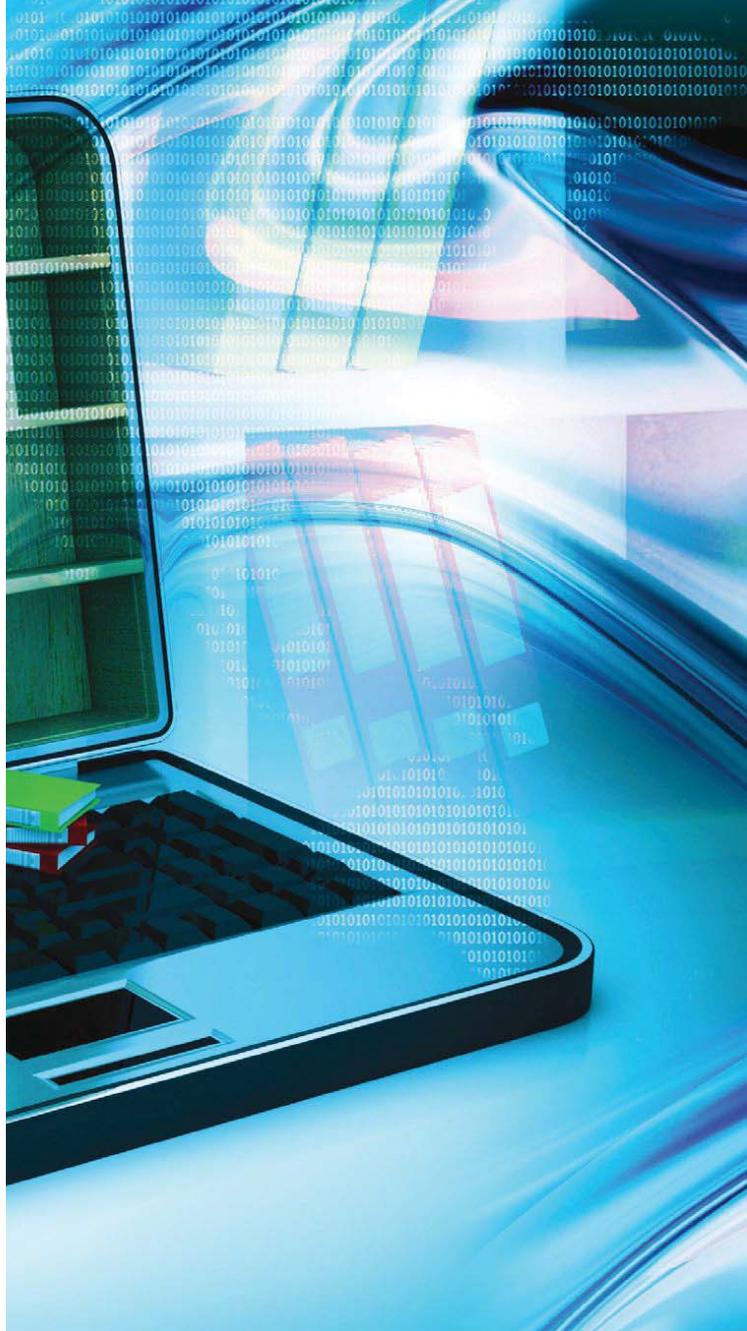
This article summarizes the research by describing seven assertions about informal learning that have emerged from the literature review. A sidebar on p. 32 explains how the research was found, as well as the difference in nature between research on formal and informal learning. For the full list of

references noted in this article, visit: [www.trainingmag.com/trgmag-article/7-informal-learning-lessons](http://www.trainingmag.com/trgmag-article/7-informal-learning-lessons).

**1. Informal learning in the workplace differs from true informal learning.** True informal learning is learning in which learners establish the objectives and determine for themselves when they have achieved them. For example, a training manager might need to develop a strategic plan for her department. Lacking experience in one, she seeks the advice of colleagues on a LinkedIn group and reads some of the articles and books suggested in the discussion.

As suggested by this scenario, most of the material that workers learn outside of the classroom either happens as the result of an intentional act by the employer or addresses procedures and policies workers must follow in a particular way. So British researchers Helen Colley, Phil Hodgkinson, and Janice Malcolm clarified the definition of informal learning in the workplace.

Rather than complete control over objectives and completion,



Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm noted that informal learning includes shared control over:

- Who controls and assesses learning (called process).
- Where learning occurs (called location).
- Whether learning is a primary or secondary goal of the activity in which learning occurred (called purpose).
- The extent to which content is practical (considered informal) or conceptual (considered formal) (called content).

Canadian researcher Christine Wihak and her colleagues identified a fifth characteristic: consciousness, which is the extent to which learners are aware that learning occurred.

**2. Rather than separate, formal and informal learning are interrelated.** Although some people think of informal and formal learning as separate from one another, researcher Victoria Marsick—who once thought that herself—now suggests that the two are interrelated.

One of the advantages of formal learning is its efficiency. With prescribed objectives, structured learning activities,

and built-in feedback, workers can master one or more work-related responsibilities in a brief period of time. Formal learning lacks context, however.

Informal learning provides that context. Researcher Michael Eraut noted that workers practice tasks in the context in which they actually perform them, and that, in turn, facilitates learning.

The interrelationship of formal and informal learning plays a central role in training for health-care professionals. Because doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, lab technicians, and similar health-care professionals must follow particular protocols when performing their work, they require classroom training.

But because they learn to perform these tasks when working with real people who have real problems and real fears, the education of health-care professionals includes a component called clinical education, in which students work under closely supervised conditions in real hospitals and similar settings. Doctors' residencies and student nursing are examples of medical education.

Similarly, internships in instructional design and training roles serve as clinical education in many adult education, educational technology, and similar academic programs serving our field.

**3. “Triggers” spur workers to initiate learning informally.** Generally, something in the work context spurs people to initiate the process of informal learning. For example, in a 2013 study of aviation trainers, Michael Grant Wofford, Andrea Ellinger, and Karen Watkins observed that either a technical problem or a difficult social interaction caused trainers to seek out learning. One trainer in the study, for instance, realized that a student simply could not “get” what the instructor tried to teach. So the instructor sought ways to strengthen her teaching.

According to the latest version of their model of informal learning, Victoria Marsick, Karen Watkins, Mary Callahan, and Marie Volpe noted that workers identify the need for learning when they recognize a problem exists, try to develop alternative strategies for dealing with it, and realize they need to learn more before they can successfully address the problem.

**4. Informal learning is a circuitous and possibly inefficient process.** Marsick, Watkins, Callahan, and Volpe cautioned that workers might not always realize the need to learn on their first attempt to solve the problem.

Even if they do, the first solution they devise as a result of learning might not succeed. For example, researcher Robyn Millar tells the story of some motivated fast-food workers who, after being told to make 10 hamburgers an hour and also be as productive and innovative as possible, figured out how to make 12 per hour. What the young workers did not realize was that the restaurant might not be able to sell 12 per hour, and the remaining burgers might spoil.

Similarly, researcher Joe Downing studied the habits of customer support representatives. To try to solve problems as quickly as possible, they would conduct a Google search and suggest one of the first results as the fix to client problems. In

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many cases, however, the suggestion did not fix the problem, resulting in repeated calls and increasingly angry clients.

Downing addressed the problem by suggesting that customer support representatives follow a prescribed protocol to diagnose callers' problems. This protocol would solve 80 percent of the problems. If they used a search afterward, representatives were trained in methods for conducting the search.

Robin Kay even found gender differences in the ways that people try to solve software problems on their own: Women tend to ask for help soon after realizing a problem arose, while men try to solve the problem, often consulting several sources if needed.

Although informal learning might be the only realistic way to solve an immediate work problem, it is not always the most efficient form of learning.

**5** ■ **Workers need time and other resources to learn within the context of the job.** One of the reasons workers might try to solve problems on their own is that they feel they are doing so as efficiently as possible.

## REVIEW METHODOLOGY

The conclusions in this article emerged from a structured review of the literature on informal learning. A research team conducted a search of several databases such as ERIC and PsychInfo using keywords informal learning, incidental learning, and nonformal learning to generate a list of articles on research and theory about informal learning since 2000. In addition, the team conducted a manual search of journals *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *Human Resource Development Review*, and *Journal of Workplace Learning* to locate research and theory. The team reviewed the articles and identified themes in the research.

When reviewing the research, the team observed one major difference between general research on formal and informal learning processes. Most of the research on formal learning is experimental. It involves manipulating a condition and observing how people respond. These studies usually have a control group—one that did not participate in the experimental condition—and researchers reach their conclusions by comparing the results of the experimental and control groups. These studies involve scores, if not hundreds, of participants.

In contrast, the research on informal learning is based on observations and in-depth interviews describing their informal learning processes. These studies do not involve a manipulation of a condition nor a comparison between two groups. Instead, researchers collect in-depth descriptions of situations. The broader observations about informal learning, then, come from patterns consistently emerging in different studies conducted by different researchers.

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They might feel the need for efficiency because, as Thomas Westbrook and James Veale found, some workers do not feel like they have permission to learn on work time.

In her 2005 study, Andrea Ellinger found that workplaces where senior managers do not indicate that they learn informally on work time nor express support for doing so further discourage workers from learning on the job.

In other words, two of the most fundamental ways employers can support informal learning by their workers is to:

- Provide formal permission to learn on the job, especially when it's the only way to solve an immediate work problem.
- Make sure managers promote informal learning by modeling the behavior and vocally expressing their support for doing so.

**6** ■ **Workers need access to appropriate resources to support their informal learning.** One of the reasons workers might go through several processes of learning and re-learning is that they lack needed resources.

That's certainly the case in the study Downing conducted. In that instance, workers needed three essential resources. The first was an effective strategy for searching the Internet. In fact, S. Bennett, K. Maton, and L. Kervin reported that even younger people—assumed to be “digital natives”—lack effective skills for searching the Internet. They often do not know how to use advanced search capabilities nor how to distinguish the most useful information from the least useful.

The second resource workers needed is access to high-quality content. Kay noted, for example, that manuals are among the most valuable resource for learning software.

Although the Internet has much free information, sometimes the most valuable information needed requires a subscription. For example, most companies limit access to their technical support databases to authorized workers and customers. Many magazines, research journals, and research reports require a subscription before people can view them. In addition, some of the most useful and accurate material for your workers needs to be custom developed, such as internal policies and procedures guides and specialized knowledge bases.

The third resource needed is access to coaches with whom workers can explore the lessons learned informally. Although trainers have formalized the role of coaching in recent years, in the context of informal learning, coaches are any supervisor or co-worker with whom the worker can discuss and validate lessons learned.

In fact, some researchers have found that workers interact with as many as a dozen people in the process of learning informally in the workplace. This social aspect of learning has spurred interest in communities of practice—that is, formal and informal networks of people who discuss work-related issues and learn from one another.

The social aspect of learning also has spurred interest in the role of social media in informal learning. Some research suggests that groups such as LinkedIn groups and

listservs can play this coaching role.

For organizations to facilitate informal learning, then, they might provide workers with training on Internet search skills, access to coaches who can help workers validate what they have learned and synthesize it, subscriptions to information sources needed on the job, and custom-developed content.

**7** Despite the proposition of 70-20-10, no one really knows how much workers learn informally. According to popular belief, the relationship is supposed to be 70:20:10, meaning 70 percent of work-related learning occurs informally; 20 percent through coaching; and 10 percent of learning occurs formally. The idea was proposed by University of Toronto professor Allen Tough in the 1960s, revived in the mid-1990s by consultants from the Center for Creative Leadership, and revived again in the last few years.

But management researchers Scott DeRue and Chris Myers noted there is no research evidence to support this model. In fact, the only research evidence that attempts to identify the extent to which workers learn on the job was provided by the Conference Board of Canada, which determined that only 56 percent of all work-related learning occurs informally.

In practical terms, this means that training professionals

should take a balanced approach, providing formal and informal learning and appropriately investing in each. Because formal learning involves the purposeful development of resources and the use of set-aside time and places for instruction, the investments needed for formal learning usually exceed those for informal learning. But because informal learning requires subscriptions, custom-developed content, and work time, and could involve seemingly unproductive trial and error, it isn't free.

## IN OTHER WORDS

Informal learning plays particular roles at particular stages of development within a job. As I note in my book on informal learning, informal learning helps workers transfer the first training lessons to the job.

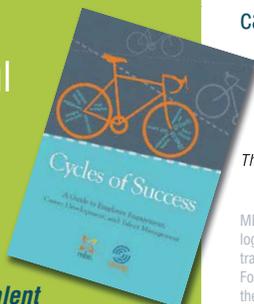
Once workers become proficient in the basics of the job, informal learning helps workers expand the scope of tasks they can handle and the efficiency and effectiveness with which they do so. As workers become experts, informal learning helps them deepen their expertise.

And as workers outgrow their jobs, informal learning helps them identify possible new jobs and begin the process of preparing for them. **■**

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