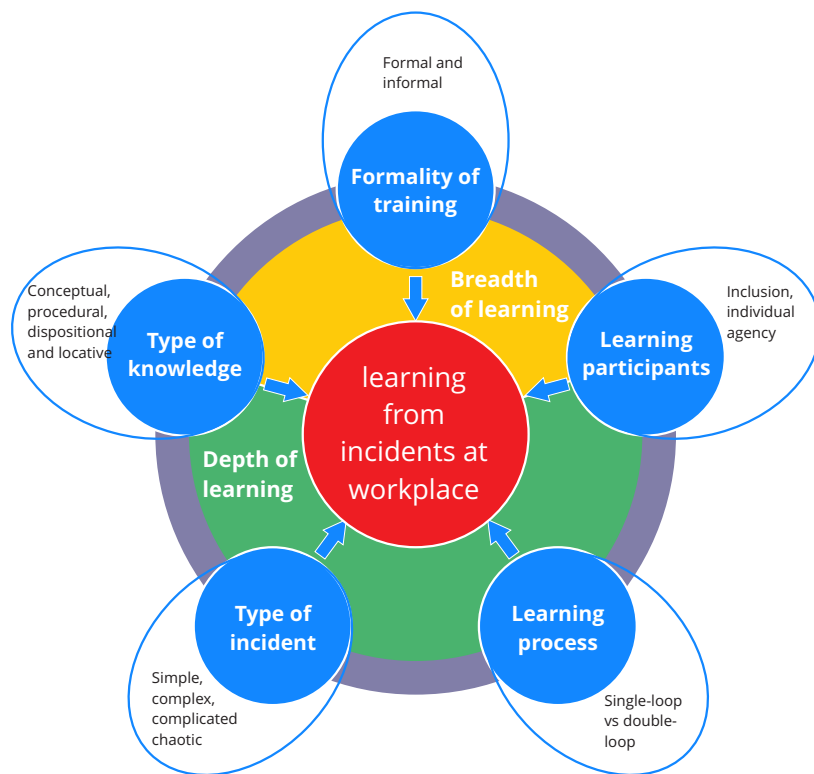




What Is Informal Learning & How To Promote & Harness It Within Your Company



Written by Sean McPheat



Introduction

You've been learning informally since the day you were born.

Whether it be the time you learned to walk, to ride a bike or when you listened to how your Mum answered the telephone.

All of these were examples of you learning something in an informal way.

Then, as we got older we started to learn things in a formal way.

We went to nursery and to school and all of a sudden there was a lesson plan and a structured way of learning.

You might have taken a night school or an online course. Attended college or University courses and you've most likely been on structured courses at work.

All of these are examples of formal learning opportunities.

Studies have shown that about 10% of what we learn is covered by formal interventions and the rest is learned from others or by doing it ourselves.

This special report will cover the nuances of informal learning and how you can promote and harness it at work.

It will look at ways in which we can apply informal learning more formally in the workplace (hope that makes sense!)

Enjoy!



Sean McPheat | 

Chief Executive

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What is informal learning?

'WHAT IF EVERY ENCOUNTER WAS A LEARNING OPPORTUNITY?'

Have you ever taught a child how to tie their shoe-laces? Or talked through a new work process with a colleague? Or shown an older person how to use an app on their smartphone?

These incidental everyday encounters are often carried out and immediately placed to one side as a typical interaction that are often considered 'throw-away' moments. Yet, the learning that takes place in those moments can be profound, extensive and far-reaching.

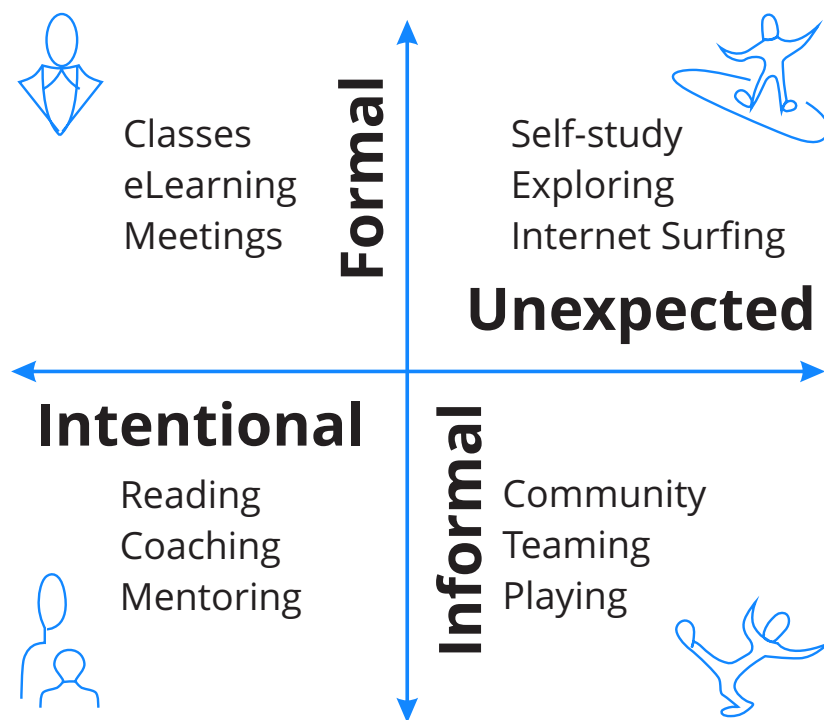
We rarely consider them as 'learning outcomes'. We see them as simple tasks that assist another in carrying out activities. Learning happens when people chat about their experiences, or when you ask someone a question. It happens when you look up information using Google. It happens when you look up an old manual or handbook.

Yet, this 'informal learning' can make a difference in how ideas are created, work-tasks improved and time used more efficiently.

We often associate learning with sending someone on a training course, or allocating a coach to assist them develop their skills. But what if we considered the workplace to be an opportunity for lifelong learning? What if learning, both formally and informally, became a part of your company culture? How would you all benefit?

Lifelong learning includes a combination of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Of these three, informal learning may be the most difficult to quantify or prove, but it remains critical to an individual's overall cognitive and social development throughout their career.

What is informal learning?



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Learning concepts can be divided into various sectors, including the following:

Formal learning refers to development programmes that are built around the needs of people who need specific skills to carry out their job roles and responsibilities. We most often call these 'training courses' or 'training workshops'

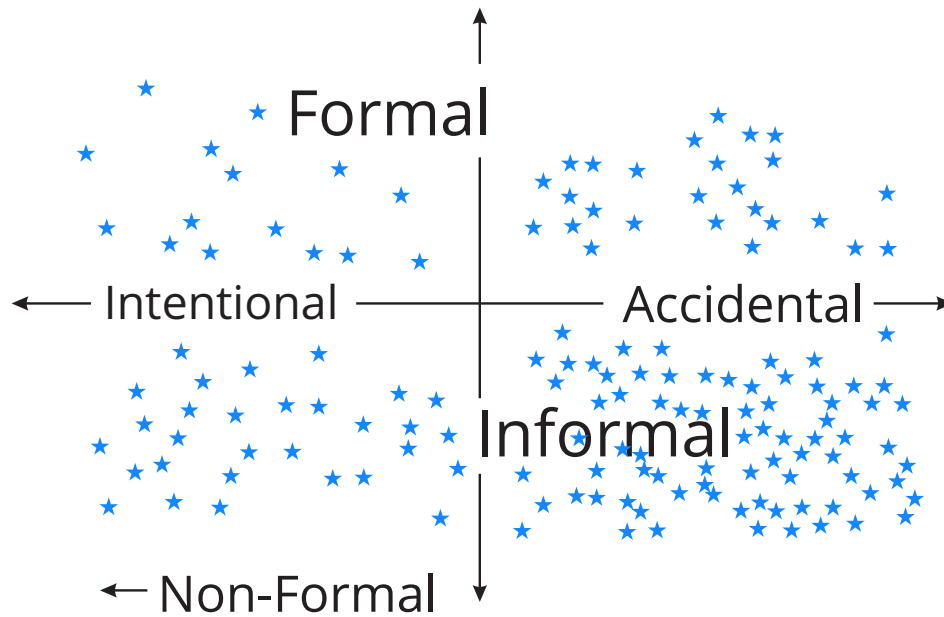
Informal learning refers to those situations where people learn through involvement on the job, picking up ideas and skillsets through experiencing them.

Intentional learning is where somebody receives a learning goal, from their manager perhaps, and takes the initiative in obtaining those goals through their own initiative, with the intention of picking up valuable and sustainable skills.

Accidental learning occurs when a person picks up a skill or some knowledge without purposefully trying to learn those ideas; they simply might be in the right place at the right time.

Non-formal learning involves anything that a person learns maybe through viewing others carrying out a role or seeing the results that another achieves, especially if it's aligned with specific objectives they had previously discussed with their manager or someone in authority

What is informal learning?



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(Conner, Marcia L. "Informal Learning" Ageless Learner, 1997-2008)

Think about how people learn things when they are going about their normal business at work. How does this happen? They watch others; they talk to colleagues; they experiment and try things out. As we'll discuss later, most of people's formal learnings in training courses only make up around 10-20% of what they know overall about their job.

Does your company invest only in the formal training courses, while hoping that the application of those ideas discussed on the course are applied without any formality involved?



American futurist Jay Cross (1944 - 2015) said that **informal learning** is like riding a bicycle: imagine going on a bike-ride. You decide which way you're going to go. You decide the speed, the distance and what you'll stop to admire. You're basically in charge of the journey and you enjoy it based on your own experience.



Cross further said that **formal learning** is like riding a bus: Imagine taking that same route, only this time a bus driver dictates where you go, how fast, when you arrive, and what route will be taken.

The driver is now in control of your journey; you're there and the journey will happen, whether you are aboard or not.

What is informal learning?

Cross said that traditional training departments put almost all of their energy into driving buses.

For experienced workers, most bus rides are as inappropriate as they cover tasks or skills they already know well. Mature learners, typically a company's top performers, never show up for the bus. They want pointers that enable them to do things for themselves. They are filling in gaps in what they already know, and they're in a hurry to do so.

Is there still a place for formalised learning? Of course!

Firstly, what Is Formal Learning?

These are programmes, sometimes lasting a day, sometimes much longer, that are structured to help your teams achieve specific goals along the way. Normally, the training department or another training company will help develop these specified programmes that are designed to achieve pre-determined learning outcomes.

Normally, these formal learning events are classroom-based, delivered through an input, exercise and review routine. People can also be reached if they are remote, though webinars and Skype calls, although the content-driven materials will be very similar, if not exactly the same.

For those companies who need their people trained in certain skillsets, for jobs that need to be done in a certain way, this form of learning is still applicable and ideal to get everyone up-to-speed with new research or ideas within their industry that will give them the cutting edge or will provide opportunities to learn from people who have greater skills or knowledge than they currently do.

So, what is informal learning?

Informal learning allows the learner to be a lot more adaptive in the way they uncover, dissect, develop and absorb the information. It can be applied in a much more informal setting, being applied sometimes immediately in the work setting.

Coaches within the company can be employed to adapt the learning the employee is enjoying to specific situations they will be facing. Questions can be individualised, singled out to the learning style of the person utilising the newly-formed knowledge. The needs of the people requiring the learning can be optimised

What is informal learning?

The convenience of informal learning can be summed up thus:

- ✓ It is personalised to what the person actually needs and wants to know
- ✓ It happens at the most convenient time for the individual
- ✓ It works because it is aimed at what the employee needs to know now and can be applied immediately
- ✓ It can be embedded into what they learned on recent formal learning courses
- ✓ It is usually more cost-efficient than waiting for someone to attend a training course the company has to invest in
- ✓ It means the individual can learn by doing, one of the best ways of retaining and utilising information
- ✓ It links in with the way that humans naturally learn as they grow into the work they have to accomplish
- ✓ It frees up time that would normally have been spent on travelling or being committed to more formal learning opportunities

So, why is informal learning now becoming a focused way of driving knowledge management forward?

Think about how the world of work is changing:

- ✓ The Millennials and Generation Z generation coming into the work force have little patience for micro-managing or autocratic instruction, or for working non their own
- ✓ Baby boomers and Generation X are leaving the work force, taking their knowledge with them unless it is transferred to newcomers by informal means.
- ✓ As the global economy shifts from manufacturing to service work, workers need the human, judgmental expertise and emotional intelligence that people don't pick up spontaneously from rigid training courses.
- ✓ A totally-connected world means global competition, faster production cycles, and more to keep up with.
- ✓ Moore's Law applies even more so now. The massive changes that are happening won't all be supported by a formal learning environment

What are the benefits of informal learning?

Informal learning is so relevant and applicable to today's work environment. You could go on a brilliant training course, but if the information isn't applied in the workplace where you are, it can be written off as nice to know, but useless practically.

Jay Cross again gave some pertinent thoughts in this area:

Informal learning is a profit strategy. Companies use it to:

- ✓ Improve the productivity that each team member adapts to their own environment;
- ✓ Improve the team's overall product and business knowledge
- ✓ Help build new concepts and ideas as creativity is encouraged;
- ✓ Deal with stressful situations that can result in absenteeism;
- ✓ Decide where to invest so that companies can see the best results;
- ✓ Improve growth and development chances for individuals who wouldn't normally experience this;
- ✓ Invest in areas where self-development and self-learning become the key operating drivers.

Formal Training	Informal Learning
Push method, when trainers are available	Pull learning, when learners are ready and able
Rigid learning materials	Flexible learning opportunities
Programme often generic	Platform to build creative ideas from
Normally mandated, with little choice	Self-served, with pro-active ideas and drivers
Formalised, timed, defined	Informal, timeless, non-defined

What are the benefits of informal learning?

Here are six benefits you'll uncover when considering informal learning in the workplace:

1. With so much available information in the public domain, gaining the knowledge you need to do your job correctly doesn't need you to understand or acknowledge mastery or expertise of that subject beforehand.

This means you can spend precious time on identifying the most important things that need to be learned and focus your attention on them, rather than being told what to learn from someone else.

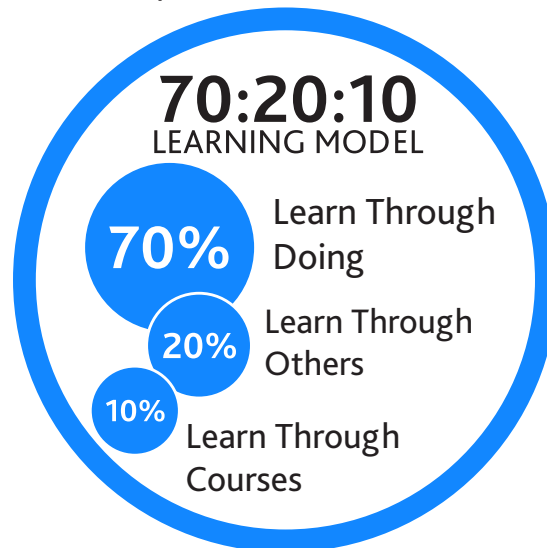
2. When you learn in a relaxed environment, on your own terms and without the stresses of passing exams, you tend to pick up more ideas and are able to apply them in more specific ways, because the brain likes a de-stressed environment and allows you to build learning opportunities with little or no pressure.
3. You'll find that people who already have knowledge of specified subjects in your company will be willing to share their knowledge with others. In some organisations, people who have served a long time have specialised ways of carrying out work and have the capacity to pass on their skillsets to others, as it re-awakens their desire to input to the working environment.

These experienced people will welcome the chance to show off their knowledge and offer informal coaching sessions to staff.

4. When informal learning is part of the culture of the team, people share more ideas, become more creative and share more, because there's less emphasis on knowledge build-up and more on helping others to identify their own learning goals
5. When a person is in control of their learning, it tends to build their own self-worth, self-esteem and self-concept. They're also more likely to want to learn more as time progresses
6. An interesting and comfortable learning environment makes for deeper and more meaningful learning experiences. When a person has the opportunity to learn at their own pace, building the connections between what they knew before and these new ideas, they experience a joy of learning that will encourage them to maintain their optimism for advancement as time progresses.

Where it sits with '70-20-10' in the business setting

The origins of 70-20-10 are often credited to Morgan McCall and colleagues from the Center for Creative Leadership.



According to popular belief, we learn formally and informally at a rate of 70:20:10, i.e., 70 percent of work-related learning occurs informally; 20 percent through coaching; and 10 percent formally.

As you can see from the diagram above, structured training is designed to only account for the 10% of learning that has to be more formalised, in the class, in workshops and through more structured skill development.

The 20% of learning can be placed under more social learning opportunities. This involves less structured but more experiential learning through having coaching and mentoring opportunities, one-to-ones with a manager or peer feedback that encourages a person to learn for themselves and gives a framework of learning that can be planned, but can also be extemporaneous in its nature.

That leaves the whopping 70% of time left for more learning by doing. Some of could no doubt be structured to the needs of the employee, but mostly happens in the 'now', identifying specific learnings catered for, and driven by, the skills or knowledge gaps that exist in the person carrying out the role.

What does this mean to you and your team?

It means you need to take a balanced approach to the learning of development of your staff. The overall costs involved in formal learning may mean you can only invest at certain times of the year in people development. Informal learning isn't a freebie, but can be best invested in personalising the learning for the person's specifically-analysed purposes.

Where it sits with '70-20-10' in the business setting

How can you use the 70:20:10 method in your business to provide a strong base for learning to take place? Here are three tips from the eLearning Industry website:

Take a closer look at the activities that make up the 70% of experiential learning.

This means supporting their learning as it takes place. Granted, it needs to be experiential, but that doesn't mean you can't provide learning opportunities as time progresses. The sites the person needs to visit, the books they need to consult or the brochures they need to be acquainted with, can all be used to offer the individualised support that will hasten learning.

Don't forget about the 20%.

Think of this as informal structured learning. You can provide the tools needed for the peer-to-peer or coach-to-individual process to work efficiently. Just because someone is allocated a coach or mentor shouldn't mean that you abdicate responsibility for ideas or progress.

Be aware of the 10%.

One misconception is that the 70:20:10 is anti-training. This is false. However, since formal training makes up the 10% at many organisations, you want be sure that it's quality training. Think of formal learning as the foundation and starting point from which experiential and social learning can develop. If your formal learning foundation is solid, the experiential and social learning that follows will likely also be more active and successful. MTD training can help you assess your training needs and assist you in developing your formal and informal learning and development needs.

How To Promote Informal Learning & Harness It Within Your Company

PerformanceXDesign identified the five essentials for learning and performance....

The 5 Essentials for Learning and Performance

Effective workplace learning has 5 essential components.

Problem or Task

1

Effective learning involves solving authentic problems or tasks

Connection

2

Effective learning connects existing knowledge to new knowledge and helps learners understand why the skill is important.

Key Knowledge

3

Effective learning informs and demonstrates new principles, concepts, procedures and processes.

Guided Application

4

Effective learning provides many opportunities to apply and practice new skills with conformational feedback and personal reflection.

Performance

5

Effective learning is facilitated when new skills are integrated in the employees workflow.

How To Promote Informal Learning & Harness It Within Your Company

Think about these when introducing the concept of informal learning within your department or company.

- ✓ Make sure people have 'authentic' tasks to perform. Those are real problems that are challenging and stretching, rather than the normal routine work people have to carry out.
- ✓ The connection between what they know and what they need to know to complete the task creates a 'knowledge gap' and enhances the ability to grow in thought processes and comprehension
- ✓ Remember; it's alright to 'know' something, but it's the demonstration of new concepts and ideas that can improve future enhancements that makes the real difference
- ✓ Always allow people to experiment, discover and test new ways of doing things. Provide parameters for them to try new things out, and if they fall short, discuss what the learning points are so they can try again
- ✓ As time progresses with new learnings, those new skills they pick up are integrated into the working systems so they see the results improve.

Ideas on how to apply informal learning in your department:

1. Provide chances for people to learn informally

This may seem obvious, but you'd be surprised how many companies leave informal learning to chance. You can

- ✓ build knowledge stores on your intranet
- ✓ provide blogs or intranet articles that people can add to
- ✓ create a LinkedIn group internally that people can contribute to
- ✓ use your knowledge management system as a repository for learning materials
- ✓ even use boards in the rest areas as learning receptacles for paper-based learning

Whatever you use, make sure people are aware of them and utilise them effectively

How To Promote Informal Learning & Harness It Within Your Company

2. Have people available who can help out

This could be done informally, like asking certain people to assist in certain projects, or more formally by allocating individuals with coaches and mentors.

Pick your people carefully, and offer them assistance in becoming better mentors and coaches. That might mean coaching them, or having them attend a basic coaching course. You don't want them just handing out answers to questions. There is better value in the long term if they adopt a coaching approach.

3. Allow people to build resources for all

Although much material is available online and can be accessed through your intranet or outside sources, don't overlook the value of industry magazines or newsletters in the rest areas. Informal learning is simply that; learning done on the hoof;; but you may offer help and assistance in allowing anyone to browse a magazine from your industry or outside your industry, where learning opportunities may uncover themselves.

4. Provide team-based learning opportunities

People enjoy learning in relaxed settings and environments. And when those involve team-mates with whom they have little day-to-day contact, that opens up occasions and circumstances where they can share knowledge, experiences and new ideas.

By encouraging people from different departments to mix and associate together, you may provide networking options that hadn't occurred before.

5. Measure successes

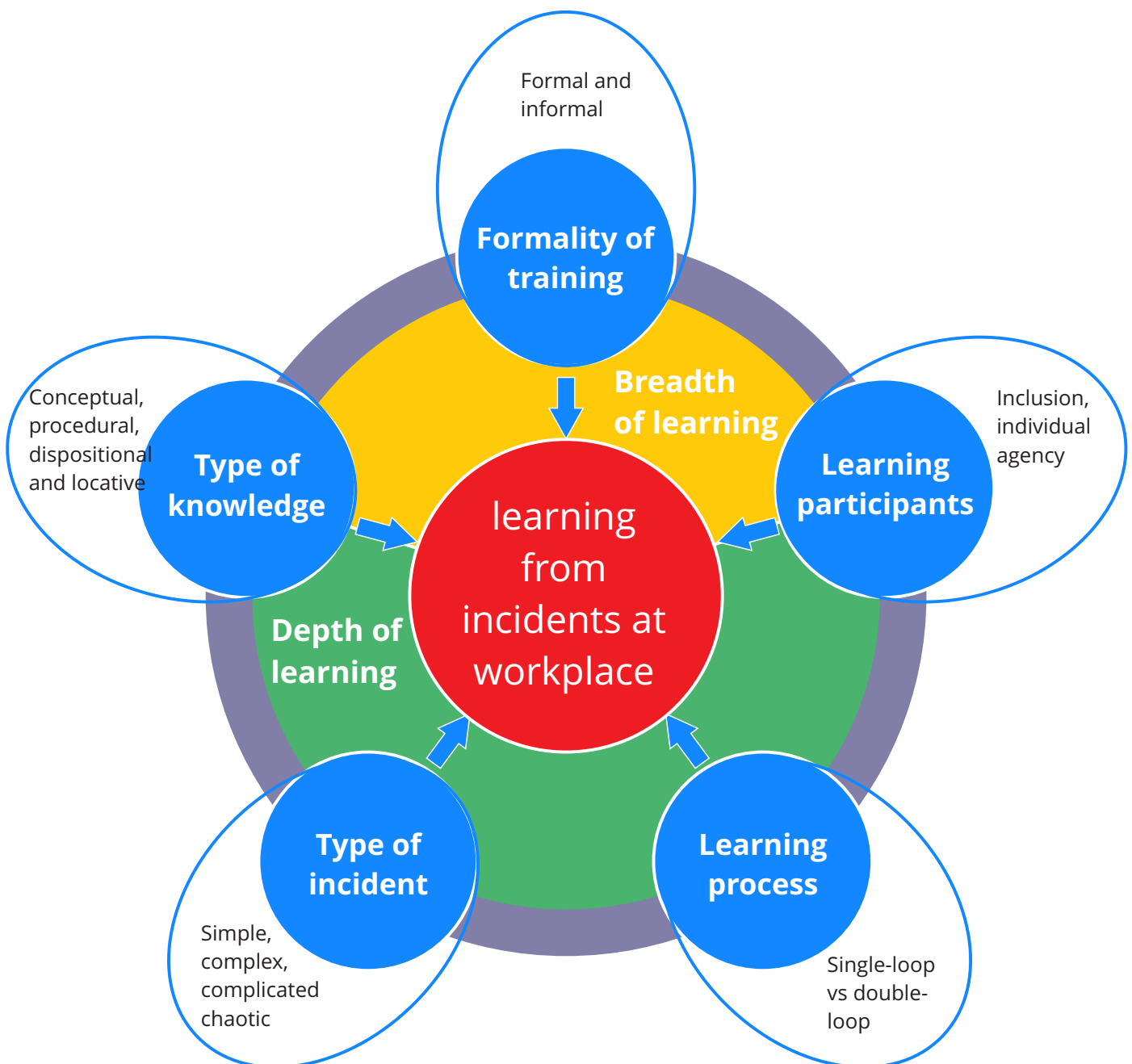
How do you know if what you have introduced is actually working? Is it worth your investment in time and money?

You need to see results in the form of people sharing knowledge and become more inclusive in their communications. How are people engaging with each other? What specifically are they doing that's different to before? How can you synthesise the learning with the doing?

How To Promote Informal Learning & Harness It Within Your Company

Learn from other companies too. Keep an eye on what competitive companies are placing on the LinkedIn group pages or their Twitter feeds. Identify what works quickly and what might take a little longer.

As time progresses, you'll see a buy-in to informal learning that may evolve into a process everyone wants to buy into. If you can share successes with higher management, they may pay a greater interest in what the team is doing to informally learn, and provide you with more support to genuinely assist you in growing your teams.



How To Promote Informal Learning & Harness It Within Your Company

Learning from incidents (Glasgow Caledonian University)

Another form of applying informal learning in your workplace would be to see what people learn from actual incidences and occurrences within the working environment.

As Glasgow Caledonian University's studies showed (see diagram), there are many ways people can learn informally. They saw there were two dimensions where learning could be applied: the breadth of learning (through formality of learning and who the learners were) and the depth of learning (through types of knowledge gained, the type of incident monitored and the process the learning took).

They learned a great deal about how people can apply the learning in real-life situations, relating to specific situations that couldn't have been pre-planned in a formal learning setting.

What can you do to encourage people to take control of their own learning?

Here's some advice:

1) After a training course, encourage people to continue to learn

Running Action Learning Sets after a training session are a good idea. This is where members of the delegate teams sit together to discuss actions relating to what they have learned.

You can also encourage discussions through internal LinkedIn groups or WhatsApp groups, so they can keep each other up-to-date and analyse what has and hasn't been applied, including the results.

2) Provide Self-Assessments to assess awareness and applicability of ideas learned

Use short surveys and questionnaires to ask for feedback on what the team are doing and how they are improving. What has been learned? What results are they getting?

How To Promote Informal Learning & Harness It Within Your Company

3) Identify specific skills that fit individual roles

To assist individuals with their informal learning, you need to be completely aware of what skills the individual's role requires. If you're too generic, you run the risk of the objectives for informal learning being too vague, unclear and undefined; make the skillsets too specific, and you'll risk being too blinkered, narrow-minded and insular.

You decide which is best for the roles you are encouraging to take responsibility for their learning outcomes.

4) Identify what skills they have now

By developing the skillsets of your key workers, you are able to see what opportunities there are for growth and development within your teams. This produces a gap analysis and the ability to justify any extra spend in helping your team to learn informally.

5) Identify what each person needs

What's right for one person may be totally inadequate for another. Look that you provide information in the way the person takes it in. Don't try the sheep-dip approach; be aware of what works for your team member individually.

6) Identify what works and what doesn't

You can't repeat something unless you know it's been successful. You need to know what's working for your team and what isn't. What options might you offer to check the successes of informal learning? You might get them to log when they have attended seminars, completed a learning assignment, note which books they've read, DVDs watched, podcasts listened to, subscriptions made to industry sites, YouTube videos watched and LinkedIn groups joined and participated in.

Doing so will help you monitor the success of certain activities for individuals and share successful ways that others have experimented with.

How To Promote Informal Learning & Harness It Within Your Company

7) Reward progression with tangible and intangible benefits

Certain goals can be aimed for in improving the skillsets of the individual, so learning can be monitored, checked and maintained. When specific goals are achieved through informal learning, you can reward the time spent with some incentives or benefits that the person has been working toward. This encourages a life-long learning climate in the department as individuals see the advantages of working towards specific learning goals

Conclusion

By recognising the different ways that people learn, we give ourselves and our teams the opportunities to advance, grow and learn as we all progress towards goals that will take our companies forward.

Formal learning still has its place and many companies benefit greatly from developing their people over time in certain skillsets that can best be mastered in that environment.

Informal learning can be seen as a complement to formal learning, an additional supplement that can make application in the workplace more efficient and effective.

By placing emphasis on both forms of learning, you encourage your teams to take personal responsibility for their own growth and development, along with and accountability for improved and purposeful results.

About the author, Sean McPheat



Sean McPheat is the **Chief Executive Officer** of the **MTD Training Group**.

Founded in 2001 and having trained over 200,000+ staff since, MTD specialise in management and leadership development and also sales effectiveness programmes.

MTD specialise in **management development**, **sales effectiveness** and **digital content** creation.

Please click on the link below for further details about MTD's services.



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Sean is regarded as a **thought leader within the L&D industry** and has been featured on CNN, BBC, ITV and has over 300 different media credits to his name.

He has created a number of [thought leadership whitepapers](#) that have gone viral throughout the L&D community.

2017 was a very successful year for MTD as they won **2 prestigious L&D awards**.



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Today, Sean continues to lead his team to design and delivery innovative L&D solutions that focus on **getting the results** that you are looking for.

His daily LinkedIn posts and muses receive millions of hits each month and he is often asked to keynote at events worldwide.