



## Encourage Informal Learning



By **Stephen Naso, CPTD**

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I define informal learning as any learning that takes place outside the classroom. I realize that's a broad definition, but it tends to work when I try to get my clients to understand that more learning and development options exist outside of the formal training programs they so often ask for. Typically, clients who come to me with a performance problem believe that formal training is always the answer. My job is to determine the root cause so we can find an appropriate solution, which may or may not be a formal training program.

Formal learning is relatively easy to identify; it is intentional, defined by goals and objectives, planned, structured, and often delivered by a trainer. Informal learning, on the other hand, is diverse and flexible. Among other things, it can be unintentional, driven by the learner, unplanned, unstructured, and spontaneous. It can occur alone or with others. It can even occur without the learner realizing it's happening. For example, an employee's day at the office might include chatting with colleagues, participating in social media, responding to emails, meeting with a mentor, or listening to podcasts. That employee is continually learning via a wide variety of resources, yet may do so without even recognizing they are engaging in informal learning activities.

Most of us can likely say that the majority of what we have learned personally and professionally has been through informal learning. While formal learning may help in establishing foundations with specific subject matter, it's not necessarily what gets us to a proficient level. Sure, a training program may include activities that mimic the performance environment, but we're still in a classroom, not in the real world. We learn by doing, which generally happens outside of the classroom.

Are you currently using informal learning strategies at your organization? If not, here are three things you can do to get started.

## **Find the right opportunities for informal learning**

At first, it may seem tricky to identify opportunities for informal learning. You might wonder how you can achieve specific outcomes using informal learning, especially if your organization is accustomed to formal learning. Informal learning won't always be the answer, but it's worth considering when you are strategizing.

Let's say you are responsible for developing contact center employees at an organization and have identified a need for advanced customer service tactics. Given the nature of the role, it's difficult for these employees to participate in formal learning activities at the same time (or in some cases, even at all, depending on staffing levels). The organization can't simply shut off the phones and send everyone to training. So what can you do? Assuming these employees are receptive to learning and development initiatives, then informal learning might be the answer. Rather than send them to class, perhaps you can create an informal learning strategy that involves a series of quick videos, shadowing, checklists, and sample scripts they can use to refine their skills.

## **Use technology to support informal learning**

Your organization likely incorporates a myriad of systems and platforms that help employees perform their jobs. Although it may not be immediately evident, many of those systems also support informal learning. For example, a project management system might provide a chat feature or a document repository, while a collaboration tool might incorporate video conferencing. These technologies promote informal learning. Take a step back and think about the systems you are using and how you might be able to leverage them for informal learning.

One example is creating and maintaining a corporate intranet. Whether it includes documentation, wikis, bulletin boards, blogs, calendars, directories, FAQs, or instant messaging between employees, an intranet can be an immensely valuable resource for employees regardless of where they sit in the employment lifecycle. New employees can use the intranet to learn more about their benefits, view a video on how to submit expense reports, read more about the company's values, download a new hire checklist, and so on. Existing employees may choose to use the intranet to learn more about upcoming training events, to access a process document, or to communicate with other employees in a collaborative setting. Employees who are preparing to exit the company may use the intranet to download a sample resignation form, familiarize themselves with severance policies, or find the name

of their human resources business partner. These are only a handful of examples of how employees might use the technology for informal learning. Countless opportunities exist with the added benefit of creating efficiencies within the organization; employees can self-serve instead of seeking assistance from others who may not have the necessary bandwidth to answer questions or provide support.

## Develop support for informal learning

Organizations have a responsibility to motivate, retain, and develop their people, and one way they try and do this is through formal learning. However, formal learning is often costly and may not be as effective as is expected. Organizations might spend thousands of dollars on a single workshop for a dozen or so employees, only to find there is little to no return-on-investment in the long run. For example, I once explored a case study on a company that invested \$25,000 in a sales training program for 15 employees. Six months after the program ended, only a handful of those employees were using the model as intended. To effectively build knowledge and skills—and ultimately increase organizational effectiveness—organizational leaders must understand the value of informal learning and then invest in it.

Informal learning may seem strange and unfamiliar to many leaders, which is why L&D departments must play a role in the education process. We must come prepared with data that helps promote the benefits of informal learning, clarifies any misconceptions, and ultimately proves it is worth the time and energy.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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As Director of Education & Knowledge at Liaison International, Stephen and his team help colleges and universities optimize their admissions management processes. Throughout his career, Stephen has enjoyed helping countless people and organizations do things better, faster, and smarter. When he's not trying to save the world from terrible PowerPoint presentations, you can find him enjoying outdoor activities around Boston, MA, learning about historic preservation initiatives, or enjoying a good Sunday brunch. To learn more about Stephen, visit his LinkedIn profile (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/stephenjnaso/>).