



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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13 January 2004

### **Informal Learning in the Workplace**

Today, organizations are realizing that staying competitive requires continuous improvement. However, organizations want to accomplish this while avoiding spending a lot of time keeping their employees' skills up-to-date. In these circumstances, informal learning can be a viable strategy to organizations in pursuit of continuous learning.

More and more organizations today are building mentoring and other informal training into their strategy. It is estimated that 70 % of workplace learning occurs informally, often during spontaneous conversations at a water cooler or a coffee machine. Researchers in the US have discovered that nearly three-fourths of what employees knew about their jobs had been learned informally from colleagues.

The importance of informal learning has become a regular topic of corporate conversation for a decade. However, informal learning is hard to measure. Interestingly, in today's culture it is important to measure everything.

Organizations, therefore, have to find out where informal learning takes place and then how to bolster it. Such initiatives are typically rooted in the concepts of mentoring and teaming, or "communities of practice." In this approach, management sets the goals, but employees help decide the team's methods.

Setting up such team efforts can be a straightforward process. Employees can be grouped into small teams and encouraged to break from their routines for team discussions. Sometimes these meetings consist merely of social chatter, but often work finds its way into the discussion because it is something all the members have in common.

Informal learning is often determined and directed by learners themselves as an active and relevant learning process. Learning is often better attained and retained through informal learning than through formal learning, which can be less relevant.

Karen Watkins and Victoria Marsick define informal learning as:

- Learning from experience that takes place outside formally structured, institutionally sponsored, classroom-based activities.
- Involving some degree of conscious awareness that learning is taking place.
- Including elements of action and reflection.
- Happening as a result of confronting non-routine situations.

Informal learning takes place as part of an effort to achieve organizational results and as a way to meet individual goals. Contextual factors include organizational culture, industry factors such as the competitiveness of the industry, and organizational factors such as incentives, promotion criteria and job security.

Organizational culture has the strongest impact on informal learning. The culture of the organization can often determine its ability to thrive in a competitive environment. The



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norms, beliefs, values and practices that pervade an organization determine the extent and variety of informal learning.

Cultural variables that are essential to informal learning are divided into two main categories, which together create a corporate culture.

- Organizational practices – actions that employees perceive as representing the ideas, values and beliefs of the organization, established from top to bottom.
- Social norms and values – the rules for acceptable behavior, values and beliefs, generated from within the organization's employees.

Research indicates that an individual's motivation, personality, mental capacity and perceived level of experience affect informal learning. For example, employees who are motivated to learn will learn more than those who are not motivated. Organizations that create a climate of learning and growth are more likely to internalize the value of learning.