FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING
IN THE KNOWLEDGE BASED ORGANISATION

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Abstract
Today's world is bringing increasingly complex challenges, exponential growth of information
boosted by the new technologies and acceleration and unpredictability of the pace of change, new
generations of employees have different ways of learning and working. Most of private and public
organizations, face the challenge of zero growth of human resources and the multiplication of
different types of organizations dispersed all over Europe and the world. Moreover, they face
budget cuts or frozen budgets due to the global financial crisis, meeting these new challenges
becomes increasingly difficult, particularly as proper training for effective management is often cut
from the budget. This paper is a comprehensive presentation of the three types of learning in the
knowledge based society, with a deep look on the informal learning analysis.

Keywords: formal learning, informal learning, knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION
Learning is entering a new era of social, collaborative and talent-driven methods of
learning. We passed from an industrialized world, dominated by certainty and precision, to
a new society characterized by complexity and unpredictability – knowledge based society.
In the past we could imagine a clear distinction between the training period and the
following time of effective work, but now professional development is characterized by a
never-ending learning which could not necessarily be structured. In the industrial age
workers were told that they are not paid to thing, just to work. In the knowledge based
society workers are paid to thing, create, and generate more and more knowledge. Today's
work and also of the future one is the knowledge work. Knowledge itself is moving from
the individual to the individual and his contacts. Employees expect the freedom to act,
learn and manage their careers. That way, from all types of learning, informal learning is
more recommended for the knowledge workers.
Many organizations have been committed since years to support on-the-job learning and to
become learning organizations. Delivery of learning and development has gradually been
shifting away from the traditional classroom training to a more learner-centred and
organizational development approach. Responsibility for learning is more and more put on
the learners and our organization must create the conditions to enable our staff to learn
what they need when they need it and in the most adapted way.

2. LEARNING IN THE KNOWLEDGE BASED SOCIETY
2.1 Formal, informal and incidental learning
A new challenge regarding HRD practices consists of the concept of the learning
organization, which is closed linked to the concepts of knowledge society and lifelong
learning. Therefore, there is a growing need for organizations to develop into learning
organization. Together with these new trends we are facing a changing and more
individualized civil society which is characterized by new demands, ideas and needs
regarding to job expectations, mobility or work – family balance. This much more
individualistic approach is also very well reflected in the field of training, where the
catalogue philosophy in the sense of standardized training activities is increasingly
replaced by tailor – made action programs, which are more frequently based on concrete
individual needs. The pedagogical concept is based on the idea of an interactive exchange,
while the methodologies used are case studies, group discussions, applied exercises,
coaching, role games and experiences from practitioners. Training is being replaced by learning practices where collaborative approach is the main way of acquiring new knowledge and skills. Many studies have been developed in the last 20 years because of the transformation of learning methods. Bentley (1998) has examined ‘learning beyond the classroom’; Coffield (2000) ‘the necessity of informal learning’; Marsick and Watkins (1990) and Dale and Bell (1999) ‘informal and incidental learning in the workplace’; and McGiveney (1999) ‘informal learning in the community’. However, this interest has not been reflected in any significant way thus far in policy statements and reviews. As Coffield (2000: 1) notes, for all the talk of lifelong learning and the learning society the focus remains on formal provision, qualifications and accountability. Many researchers divide 21 Century learning activities in 3 categories: formal, informal and incidental learning. Formal learning is typically being paid by organizations, classroom-based, and highly structured. Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the earner. Informal learning is closely related to incidental learning - learning that happens tacitly. Incidental learning is defined as a by-product of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning. The figure below summarizes the main characteristics of the 3 types of learning: incidental, informal and formal.
2.2 Informal learning

From all these types of learning, there is just one that is more present in recent studies, but also in practice because of the many advantages offered to organizations – informal learning. Informal learning was used and analyzed, for the first time, in 1950 by the well-known Malcom Knowles and describes a lifelong process whereby individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and educational influences and resources in his or her environment: from family and neighbors, from work and play, from market place, libraries and media.

![Diagram showing the timeline of learning societies from 18th century Agriculture Society to 21st century Knowledge based society with 1950 - Malcom Knowles introduced the term informal learning highlighted.]

In the context of corporate training and education, informal learning is widely used to describe the many forms of learning that takes place independently from instructor-led programs: books, self-study programs, performance support materials and systems, coaching, communities of practice, and expert directories.

Informal learning is the lifelong process through which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of families and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally informal education is unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974). Informal learning is a part of everyday work or personal experience. We learn consciously or not as we interact with others and with our environment. In formal learning occurs as a function of everyday life, resulting from human interactions. In the workplace, informal learning often is simply the results of a quest to complete a task, fulfil a need or to develop your career. But let's see what is informal learning and why is it very important for us now. First of all, learning methods are very much connected with the characteristics of our society and the evolution of work style (hand work or intellectual work). As I was mention before, knowledge itself is moving from the individual to the individual and his network. They expect the freedom to act, learn and manage their careers. Knowledge workers don't like to be told what to do. They work best when working with other people in social networks, and are better led by example than by explicit management (Davenport, 1998). For Margaret Dale and John Bell (1999) informal learning is learning which takes place in the work context, relates to an individual’s performance of their job and/or their employability, and which is not formally organized into a program or curriculum by the employer. It may be recognized by the different parties involved, and may or may not be specifically encouraged. After a review of several studies done on informal learning in the workplace, Marsick and Volpe (1999)
concluded that informal learning can be characterized as integrated with daily routines, triggered by an internal or external jolt, not highly conscious, haphazard and influenced by chance, an inductive process of reflection and action and linked to learning of others. Veronica McGivney used the following definition in her study: Informal learning is learning that takes place outside a dedicated learning environment and which arises from the activities and interests of individuals and groups, but which may not be recognized as learning.

Informal learning is any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria. Informal learning may occur in any context outside the pre-established curricula of educative institutions. The basic terms of informal learning (e.g. objectives, content, means and processes of acquisition, duration, evaluation of outcomes, applications) are determined by the individuals and groups that choose to engage in it. Self-directed or collective informal learning is undertaken on our own. Informal learning is usually intentional but not highly structured. Examples include self-directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring, and performance planning that includes opportunities to review learning needs. When people learn incidentally, their learning may be taken for granted, tacit, or unconscious.

Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning. Incidental learning, on the other hand, almost always takes place although people are not always conscious of it (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). Today’s workers still need formal training that is built around specific problems and talent needs; however, they also need the availability of a “learning environment” in which they can find information, collaborate and build their own learning plans. While formal learning is considered successful if the participants pass the final exam, informal learning helps people to become all that can want and in “on going exam”. Informal learning needs not and probably should not, exist in an organizational void, separate from an organization's formal learning programs. We acquire the knowledge and skills we need at work naturally from talking to and observing others, through trial and error, or simply by working with people "in the know". The two processes, formal and informal learning, must be closely related. Informal learning significantly contributes to the long-term success of an organization. For example, classroom training can be complemented by informal learning. To fulfill their learning needs, learners can make smart use of both informal and formal learning opportunities:

- Formal learning helps learners to discover what they will want to further explore through informal learning resources.
- Vice-versa, what learners discover through informal learning might lead them to a formal learning event.

There are several reasons for the growing importance of informal learning in organizations, but I believe that the most important are:

- growing importance of informal learning in organizations,
- power of new technologies to both deepen and hasten the flow of information across organizations;
- changing needs and expectations for learning on the part of new generations of employees;
- increasing speed at which the human capital needs of the organization are changing;
- increasing inability of current practices to solve all of these new challenges;
Facts about informal learning
People learn informally most of what they need to do their job. Although every situation is different, recent studies had demonstrated that 80% of learning in organization is informal as the latest studies showed (Institute for research on Learning, The Education Development Center of Massachusetts, etc.). Ironically, 80% of corporate spending goes to formal learning and only 20% to informal learning activities (Cross, 2006). The 2010 CIPD Annual Survey Report on Learning and Talent Development demonstrates that informal learning is more present in organizations. Overall, it appears that organizations have switched to more cost-effective learning and talent development practices, perhaps in order to compensate for the reduction in all forms of external training brought about by cuts in external costs. Three in five of all organizations had used e-learning (62%), or in-house development programs (58%) more in the last two years, and over half (56%) increased coaching by line managers. The practice which has decreased the most is indeed the attendance to external conferences, workshops and events, with a quarter of organizations (26%) doing so less, and one in five having reduced their use of instructor-led training delivered off-the-job and coaching by external practitioners (20% and 19% respectively). Also, the 2008 research by Bersin and Associates showed that 70% of employee learning occurs on-the-job in many different ways.

Knowledge based organizations need to create a proper work environment for employees that encourages learning and sharing knowledge, experiences, ideas, etc. To do this, organizations need to take into consideration some key success recommendations that could help them creating an informal learning environment:

□ Embracing a continuous improvement approach by focusing on helping high performers and old hands work smarter; novices aren’t the only workers who need to learn;
□ Encourage personal responsibility on learning and high individual involvement;
□ Create a knowledge map that enables people to locate who knows what;
□ Apply the 80/20 rule to critical functions and seed communities of practice around them;
□ Make mentoring and coaching part of everyone’s job;
□ Use information technology to pull knowledge out of individuals and file cabinets, making it available to all;
□ Set up wikis1, collaborative platforms and micro-blogging to collectively create documents and manage projects;
□ Organize café conversations. Café conversations are an easy-to-use method for creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that matter in service of the real work. Cafés in business have been named in many ways to meet specific goals, including Creative Cafés, Knowledge Cafés, Strategy Cafés, Leadership Cafés, Marketing Cafés, and Product Development Cafés. Most Café conversations are based on the principles and format developed by The World Café (see www.theworldcafe.com), a growing global movement to support conversations that matter in corporate, government and community settings around the world.2;
□ Avoid duplication of effort in keeping up with news and research by providing shared information flows;
□ Reduce costs and increase relevance by replacing formal training programs with user-generated content;
□ Where possible, substitute self-service and peer learning for workshops;
□ Timeliness is more important than perfection. Use amateur video and blogs to distribute information while it’s still fresh;
□ Use mind maps3 to generate new idea that can help individuals to share experiences and to learn together.

1 A Wiki is a collection of web pages designed to enable anyone with access to contribute or modify content. Wikis are often used to create collaborative websites and to power community websites.
2 http://www.theworldcafe.com/articles/cafe-to-go.pdf
3 Mind map is a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea. Mind maps are used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas, and as an aid to studying and organizing information, solving problems, making decisions, and writing. This orientation towards brainstorming
3. CONCLUSIONS

Today's world and knowledge-based society is bringing increasingly complex challenges, exponential growth of information boosted by the new technologies and acceleration and unpredictability of the pace of change, new generations of employees have different ways of learning and working. This affects all types of organizations. Considering world financial crises, organizations face the challenge of zero growth of their human resources and the multiplication of different types of organizations dispersed all over Europe and the world.

Organizations must develop their capability to meet these new challenges. They need to keep innovating better ways of learning and working together to make the most of the knowledge and competence of staff at all levels at the same time as fostering commitment and engagement. In this fragile context, managers should become a learning mentor who facilitates individual and group improvement. This involves creating an environment where collaboration, exchange, contribution, mutual assistance, personal responsibility are fundamentally important.

Private sector, public institutions as well as NGOs have been committed since years to support on-the-job learning and to become a learning organization. Delivery of learning and development has gradually been shifting away from the traditional classroom training to a more learner-centred and organizational development approach. Responsibility for learning is more and more put on the learners and organizations must create the conditions to enable staff to learn what they need when they need it and in the most adapted way. In addition, in the fast-paced and fast-changing workplace, employees simply cannot wait for the next piece of formal learning to come around.

To support employees in their activity, organizations must offer flexible delivery learning options such as better use of new technologies, e-Learning, variety of learning resources, networks and communities of practice, collaborative platforms, knowledge sharing initiatives, hosted conversations, etc. Nowadays, the different fields of social life are more and more bound one another. Economy, politics and society in general are by this time interconnected sectors which change at steady speed. Internet and new technologies are definitely useful tools that help us to keep up with the times. They are means of connection which allow a continuous and immediate exchange of knowledge which, nowadays, can’t be underestimated. In a competitive society as the one we live in, the value of knowledge is equal to the economic benefits that it brings /causes. This is the reason why informal learning could be seen as a “strategic investment” of every professional activity.

**Informal learning is the way forward.**

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