Tales from the Field: Informal Learning as a Training Transfer Strategy

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"Tales from the Field" are reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.

The Field - Full of Informal Learning Opportunities!

We all know it – training is not a panacea. Even when training is necessary, training *alone* is rarely effective in improving learning and performance. In order to ensure that the lessons learned in training are applied on the job and the intended results are delivered, training often needs to be accompanied by a suite of supporting interventions. One element of this suite worth considering is informal learning opportunities for further learning that occur after the training event.

It is estimated that approximately 80% of workplace learning occurs through informal means, while only 20% of what organizations invest in learning is dedicated to enhancing informal learning (Cross, 2007). Another estimation is shown in the 70:20:10 rule – that is, 70% of organizational learning occurs while working on the job, 20% of learning comes from informal learning such as mentoring, coaching, direction from managers and colleagues, and the last 10 percent is from formal learning activities such as training (Jennings, as cited in Terry, 2007). This suggests that many organizations are missing out on the opportunity to help employees take learning to the next level.

Research Findings

What informal learning methods do workers use most frequently to develop and sustain their job knowledge and skills? In our recent survey study with 125 learning and performance improvement professionals, we found out that reflection, talking with coworkers, and emailing coworkers were the three most frequently used methods to learn something new to perform their job tasks. Table 1 lists 8 informal learning activities, ranked-ordered by mean frequency of use (see Berg & Chyung, 2008, for a full research report). The web-based survey we used is available at http://ipt.boisestate.edu/InformalLearning.htm.

Table 1. Rank-Order of Informal Learning Activities

Rank-Ordered Activities	M	SD
1. Reflect on my previous knowledge and actions	5.90	1.09
2. Talk with other people at work face to face	5.61	1.34
3. Interact with other people at work via email	5.54	1.40
4. Learn from my own trial and error	5.32	1.24

5. Search the web, including intranet	5.12	1.63
6. Read professional magazines and/or journals	4.23	1.75
7. Observe others without interacting with them	3.70	1.62
8. Ask questions in professional listservs	2.74	1.73

This is consistent with the work of Marsick and Watkins (2001), which discusses the important role of reflection in informal learning. Furthermore, Eraut (2004) points out that a great deal of informal learning takes place through social interaction, such as participating in group activities and working alongside others. For audiences in which these forms of informal learning are prominent, the lessons learned from training might be effectively reinforced and elaborated upon through follow up activities that are designed to prompt trainees to reconnect and reflect upon the newly gained skills and knowledge together.

Evidence-Based Practice

Plenty of literature suggests that in order for the lessons learned in training to transfer to the workplace, they must be reinforced beyond the training event. Implementing a post-training informal learning strategy not only functions to reinforce what has been learned, it also has the potential to stimulate learners to develop further.

A post-training informal learning strategy can be developed by including the relevant data collection and analysis in the training needs assessment. In conducting the learner analysis, determine how the target audience typically learns informally. As with any good needs assessment, don't just make assumptions about how they learn on the job – collect data to validate those assumptions. It does little good to provide learners with a list of websites they can visit to advance their knowledge if their internet access at work is restricted.

If you want to employ a questionnaire to assess informal learning engagement in your workplace, consider using a grid similar to the one we designed based on our research findings, which is available at this link - http://ipt.boisestate.edu/InformalLearningAssessmentGrid.htm. It will help you plan future analysis and facilitate your evidence-based practice.

References

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