



## Kineo Insight

# 13 Ways of Managing Informal Learning

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## 5 Minute Insight

Limited time? In short, here are the key recommendations:

### Get a common definition of informal learning

Informal learning is all the learning that takes place away from the world of organised formal training.

It is:

- **deep and pervasive** (representing over 80% of learning that occurs in organisations)
- **uncontrolled** (most is through colleagues and self discovery – without the training department in sight)
- **powerful** (this is the driving force of the real learning culture of the organisation, influence this and you will radically change the way your organisation learns)

### Realise how much informal learning goes on out there

The % of learning represented by informal learning

Type of informal learning	%	Type of formal learning	%
Experiencing on the job	45%	Workshops	10%
Networking	30%	Training programs	8%
Mentoring & coaching	3%	Special assignments	2%
Manuals & instructions	2%		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20%</b>

Source: Atos KPMG Consulting

## Understand why you should be tackling informal learning

It is effective, because:

- it makes a change when people make time to learn and are really keen to find things out
- it always tends to happen in context just when someone is able to try the idea or new skill out for real
- it's quick
- it's cheaper than formal learning

It's sometimes ineffective because:

- it can take up colleague time, usually asked when the learner needs it and not when it is convenient for the neighbour or expert on the phone to help out
- it can be inconsistent and sometimes wrong

For both reasons, it has to be part of an organisation's learning strategy.

## See where new technology can help informal learning

The traditional ways	The new technology ways
Ask a neighbour	Workflow learning
See the boss	Search the Internet or Intranet to find online knowledge sources
Talk to an expert	Email an individual
Look at a manual or a book	Instant Message or Skype someone
	Listen to a Podcast
	Interact with others online via discussion forums

## Work out who will use informal learning most

- The Information or Knowledge Worker
- Senior managers
- Established and experienced staff
- New Starters or Novices

Recognising that different groups use informal learning differently is the key to promoting and managing informal learning.

Informal learning is natural. We learn from things we get wrong and from things we get right. We learn from seeing people around us doing things wrong and right. So, everyone learns informally to some degree. This Insight is about tapping into that natural behaviour.

## Find out what informal learning is going on in your organisation

- Find out what informal learning is taking place in your organisation
- See how effective it is, so you can learn from where it works
- See where it isn't effective, so you can help improve it
- Talk to people within the organisation
- Review the usage of formal methods within your organisation
- Observe people at work
- Cross reference the personality types/learning styles of selected learners against the type of informal learning they favour
- Collate learners views on how their informal methods might be easier for them to access and use
- Build up a map of all the informal resources or tools used in your organisation

## Promote effective informal learning

What can you do to encourage more effective informal learning?

- Help learners to be better informal learners
- Use part of the formal learning programmes to help learners work out to continue to build knowledge and skills informally back in the workplace

## Create better resources for informal learning

- Put the high quality knowledge resources where people easily find them
- Create areas where knowledge can be easily added by experts and everyday practitioners
- Get feedback on usage and value – but do this informally

## Help develop the ‘local’ experts

- Help local ‘experts’ by providing easy to use resources and guidance on coaching skills to support the informal learners. Provide learning resources for those who act as informal coaches or mentors. Help them to realise that they shouldn’t be too helpful

## Regularly review what’s going on and adjust your strategy accordingly

- Recognise that the whole process is iterative:
  - **Find** out where Informal Learning is occurring
  - **Observe** it in action
  - See if you can **improve** it
  - **Promote** the value of any new resources or job aids
  - **Manage** it all very sensitively, providing support when appropriate

And then start the cycle all over again on an ongoing basis.

## First Thoughts

Informal learning is a big deal. If you aren't thinking about it, you should be. It probably accounts for 80% of the learning that goes on in your organisation. And there's nothing you can do about it. Or is there?

### Fundamental paradox

In this Insight, we deal with this fundamental paradox: how do you control the uncontrollable? Informality, as soon as it is touched or controlled, can become formality or be lost altogether. That's why when we talk about controlling the uncontrollable, we are really focusing on the light touch of facilitation and galvanization. It is these two dimensions which will help you to expose and promote how informal learning is delivering organisational performance. We begin by setting out our stall for what informal learning is.

### Cataloguing the uncontrollable

Part of the challenge is cataloguing a moveable feast. In our second section, we look at the different types of informal learning and give examples of how they can be used.

### Fact and figures

If you have to make a case for supporting informal learning, you might want some data about what it is and how frequently it is used. And how it compares to all the formal learning going on in your organisation. We give you the low down in our third section.

### It's your call

Promoting informal learning requires an understanding of not only the types of informal learning going on in the organisation but who uses it the most. We show how different groups may use informal learning and how you can tap into what people might be naturally doing.

### **Limitations and liabilities**

It's critical that you understand how informal learning can work well, and what the downsides are. We take you through the potential pitfalls and what can happen if you don't make it part of your learning strategy.

### **An inspector calls**

Finding out what's going on at the moment is a necessary starting place. But how do you go about identifying what informal learning is going on in the organisation? We have some practical tips on auditing your current approach.

### **Not falling at the first hurdle**

Once you've got to grips with where your organisation is at with informal learning, you can make plans. Plans to champion and promote informal through all the appropriate channels. This is perhaps the biggest value add you can make for informal learning. But it needs to be handled sensitively.

### **Manage the unmanageable**

We are passionate about making learning available at the point and time of need. If there is one thing you can do with informal learning, it is to help ensure that the communications channels remain open for informal learning to take place. We also show how it can all go wrong.

## 13 Ways to Manage Informal Learning

### 1. Get a common definition of informal learning

It's increasingly the hot topic in the learning world. Why? It's hot because it is:

- **deep and pervasive** (representing over 80% of learning that occurs in organisations according to a ATOS KPMG Consulting survey – see more on this later)
- **uncontrolled** (most is through colleagues and self discovery – without the training department in sight)
- **powerful** (it is the driving force of the real learning culture of the organisation. Influence this and you will radically change the way your organisation learns)

Ignore informal learning at your peril! You may be failing in your role as a learning professional in your organisation. You can and should get involved in it. Think about it - 80% of learning going on and you can't take any credit for it – until now!

What's more is it is growing in its influence as the use of the Internet becomes the standard way people learn. Godfrey Parkin, an e-learning analyst in the US, put it:

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Informal Learning is going on all the time without you.

Avoid it and you are ignoring the most powerful form of learning in your organisation

**“Corporate learning has to follow the Google ‘search & connect’ model instead of the General Motors “produce & sell” model.”**

You need to know how you are going to track this elusive side to the learning culture within your organisation. So, here are some definitions agreed right up front.

- **All that is not formal (obviously!)**

Informal learning is all the learning that takes place away from the world of organised formal training. So, it is more sensible to say what it is not. It does **not** include:

- Workshops
- Coaching
- E-learning (if this has been scheduled and time set aside for it)
- Workbooks (again if it is part of a programme of study)

- **Unconscious learning**

It's the **unconscious** learning that we all do on a day-to-day basis. It might be getting a quick answer to a problem or speedily gathering some information prior to doing some activity. It's not something that people regard as 'training' or 'learning', simply because it is informal.

Here are some definitions that were suggested by participants at a recent seminar on informal learning run in the States by Bob Mosher of Microsoft :

**Informal Learning is:**

“Learning that is not structured and typically initiated by learner themselves”

“Something that happens even if it wasn't what you set out to do”

“It includes everything you do every second, and all your senses!”

“It's at need, to solve a problem or situation”

“It's content sensitive”

“It's the stuff that training people can't have control over and isn't tracked”

## The stuff training people can't control

All of these are good descriptions but it's this last definition that we will be trying to look at in this Insight. It's the 'stuff training people can't control'. So, does that mean we should just ignore it? Can you control the uncontrollable?

Even promoting it might spoil its power as promotion may turn the whole thing into the 'formal stuff'. We'd like to know what's going on out there and get involved, but can you ever 'manage' what is by definition unmanageable?

## And the answer is...

We have some answers to those questions as you'll find out later on... but before then, let's just focus on what kind of activities make up informal learning.

Informal learning is nothing new. We've been doing it for years. For example:

- Don't know how to find a report? You call and ask someone.
- Can't open a file? You turn round to the nearest person to you (sometimes regardless of their competence) and ask them how to do it.

A vast amount of what we learn as a new starter or in a new role is picked up through informal learning. When we get more experienced, the learning doesn't stop. It's just more subtle and the curve less steep.



## 2. Recognise the traditional forms of informal learning

Approach	What happens
Ask your neighbour	<p>The most popular approach of all.</p> <p>Informal learners will more often look to someone within a few metres of them than seek out the advice of someone who really is the expert.</p> <p>It's a simple matter of convenience – a key thing to remember in getting informal learning right.</p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <p>You want to find out how to format content tables in Word. Ask a neighbour</p>
See your boss	<p>An extension of the ongoing coaching role that many managers adopt with their staff.</p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <p>You want to find out how to apply a financial procedure correctly. Ask the boss.</p>
Talk to an expert	<p>Can be more difficult as experts tend to be exceptionally busy and hard to track down through traditional means.</p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <p>You need to set up an internal mailing list on new product line which includes FAQs. Ask the expert.</p>
Look at a manual or a book	<p>The first port of call for the more introverted theorist. It just takes time and doesn't always supply the answers you want.</p> <p><b>For example:</b></p> <p>You want to do double sided photocopies. Look at the manual.</p>

### 3. Realise how much informal learning goes on out there

Atos KPMG Consulting conducted a review of how people actually learnt to do their jobs within their organisations. The results are startling:

Type of Informal Learning	%	Type of Formal Learning	%
Experiencing on the job	45%	Workshops	10%
Networking	30%	Training programs	8%
Mentoring & Coaching	3%	Special Assignments	2%
Manuals & Instructions	2%		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20%</b>

US Bureau of Labor Statistics recently did a similar study and found that **70%** of learning met their criteria of informal learning which was:

**“the improvised, unplanned instructional efforts that are part of the everyday fabric of business operations”**

When learners are asked what value they get out of different approaches, you begin to see the high value that some give to the most popular elements of informal learning. These are the results of a survey carried out in 2001 by Cheetham & Chivers:

Type of Informal Learning	Average Rating (out of 5) for contribution to competence
On the job learning	4.2
Working alongside more experienced colleagues	3.9
Working as part of a team	3.7
Self analysis or reflection	3.6
Learning from clients/customers/patients etc	3.5
Networking with others doing similar work	3.4
Learning through teaching/training others	3.1
Support from a mentor of some kind	3.2
Use of a role model	2.6

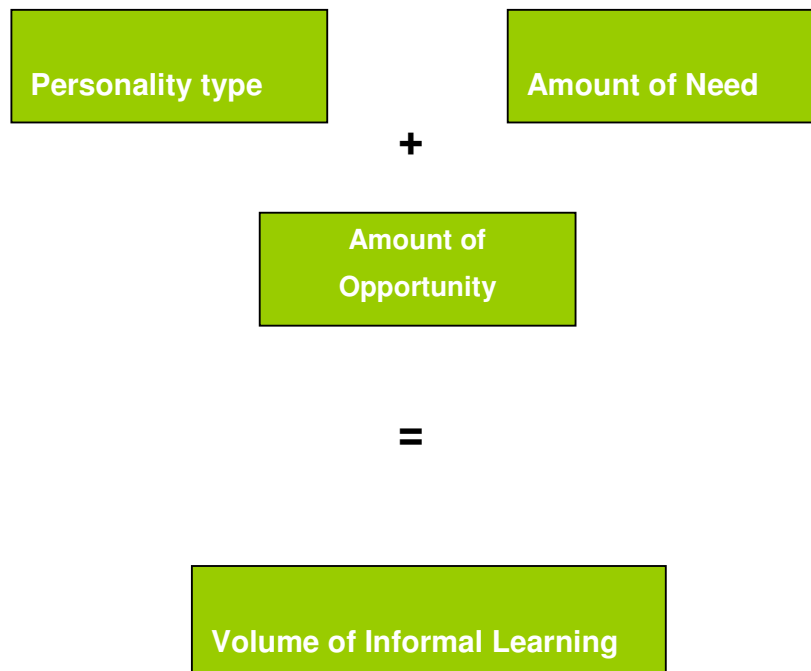
Extract from: How professionals learn in practice: an investigation of informal learning amongst people working in professions. Journal of European Industrial Training 25/5 [2001] 248-292

## 4. Recognise that Informal Learning is inevitable

Human beings can't stop learning. We learn from things we get wrong and from things we get right. We learn from seeing people around us doing things wrong and right. When we are privileged to work with very effective and professional colleagues we learn by just seeing them in action on a day to day basis.

Informal learning in all its many guises taps into this natural process.

Some personality types like shy reflectors will also strongly favour an informal approach over more formal models as face-to-face encounters are difficult and unproductive for them.



## 5. Weigh up the value of Informal Learning - Is it Good or Bad?

At first glance this might seem like a stupid question. But it does capture two clear mindsets within the training world:

### **It's good because...**

Informal learning can make a change. It's good when people make time to learn and are really keen to find things out. It can be frustrating for trainers to see how committed their target audiences are to learning everything about hobbies. And to see how hard it is to generate the same commitment within formal programmes. That kind of learning has always been informal and self-managed. You experience this motivation when you really feel you need to know something this very minute.

### **It happens at the time and point of need**

Learning tends to happen in context just when someone is able to try the idea or new skill out for real. This means the learning sticks and if successful the new approach to a task becomes embedded in day to day practices

### **It's quick**

There's no wait for a place on a workshop. You seek out what you need to know and immediately apply that knowledge

### **It's cheaper than formal learning**

Most (if not all) of our learning and development budgets are spent on supporting formal learning. Yet formal learning only delivers between 20-30% of the learning that goes on in an organisation. Informal learning is great value for money.

### **It's bad because...**

It can take up **colleague time**, usually asked when the learner needs it and not when it is convenient for the neighbour or expert on the phone to help out. Even if it is carried out asynchronously via email, it can be a major problem getting e-tutors who are prepared to devote the time required.

### **It can be inconsistent and sometimes wrong**

A key worry around informal learning is about the fact that it is dependent on the quality of local advice and support. This is fine if the margin or error is acceptable – compare a letter being filed incorrectly and a doctor prescribing the wrong drugs! It is difficult to control this risk, and it's probably happening anyhow!

## 6. Understand Why You Should Be Tackling Informal Learning

### It works

Formal learning in your organisation may not be delivering the goods. Informal Learning has much going for it. So, if it's a great way for people to learn things, we should be adding it to our overall strategies and building it into our blended learning solutions.

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According to CIO Magazine, workers spend over 7 hours per week seeking information. What can you be doing to make that a quicker and easier process?

### It doesn't work

The quality of informal support and guidance can be very varied. Informal advice and guidance can then give poor direction or undermine the messages of your formal programmes.

If it is an unsupported activity, it can also be very inefficient if done by a less experienced employee. According to CIO Magazine, workers spend over seven hours per week seeking information. The IDC Information Worker Survey in April 2003 found that 15-30% of the work time is spent actively seeking information.

In our information-led age this is clearly part and parcel of the job and not just a learning activity. But shouldn't this be something that learning professionals should be helping? How could you reduce the time it takes for people to find the information they need to do their job properly. If it isn't your job, whose is it?



### **It is your job... and your worth it**

If your role is to ensure that learning in your organisation is aligned and effective and we only know a maximum of about 20% of what learning is going on out there, you're not doing your job! If you tackle it and improve it and mix formal and informal successfully, you should make sure every knows about it. It'll help prove your worth.

### **Learning and development are closer to real life**

The learning and development profession has to get closer to its customers to help them learn informally more effectively. This can only be a good thing for a service that is too often criticised at being divorced from the real world.

## 7. See where new technology can help informal learning

Approach	What happens
Workflow learning	<p><b>Workflow</b></p> <p>This the ‘big thing’ that is coming and coming fast.</p> <p>Most of what we do now uses computer software in some way. So, whilst we use these tools we can be told how to carry out the task effectively just when we are carrying out that task.</p> <p>At its simplest, this is an extension of the help option in standard software.</p> <p>But it can also be a quite sophisticated short burst of learning offered to the user just at the moment they need it. It can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a walk through the task</li> <li>• a chance to practice it safely</li> <li>• learning more about the issues and background surrounding any decisions they might be making at the time.</li> </ul> <p>This approach has been used for some years in customer-facing processing areas such as call centres.</p> <p>Step-by-step process flows with customer ‘scripts’ are embedded in the software that sales or customer support agents use with context-sensitive information databases available to aid any decision-making required.</p>

This is informal learning in the respect that it is not scheduled or directly planned. It is quite rigid though and can be irritating for experienced users when it can't be turned off.

**The latest developments in workflow learning will make a difference.**

It's very simple. For the majority of standard procedures like processing information, you can model best practice quite easily. Once you know what key presses users should be making, the systems can automatically register when they stray from the most effective and efficient path. Instant help can then be offered or a short 'How to' tutorial perhaps with a quick simulation-based check.

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Is your organisation looking at Workflow Learning yet?

In the US every major software supplier is planning to embed these systems in their future releases.

Are you geared up to take advantage of this?

**Just in time**

So, learning can be embedded in work-based systems and provided just when people need it. Roger Schank and others have always stressed that we learn best when we make mistakes.

Workflow learning catches people when they are most **open** to new information or ideas.

*(See Lessons in Learning, e-Learning, and Training: Perspectives and Guidance for the Enlightened Trainer by Roger Schank published by Pfeiffer for more ideas*

	<p>on all of this)</p> <p><b>Competent performers</b></p> <p>The other benefit of this new generation of workflow learning is the fact that the competent user never sees any of this. The system registers that they are able to do the task efficiently and effectively and so never intervenes unless the user wants to brush up their knowledge.</p>
<p>Internet or Intranet to find online knowledge sources</p>	<p>The needs of the information worker are driving a shift from formal learning programmes to more searchable information-based models.</p> <p><b>Books 24x7</b></p> <p>Skillssoft's Books 24x7 is a very good example of this trend as we can see that a major provider of formal resources has shifted their offering from e-learning courses to a far less structured offering. (For more see <a href="http://www.skillssoft.com">www.skillssoft.com</a> )</p> <p><b>FAQs</b></p> <p>Even simple FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) pages can cut out hours of unnecessary duplicated inquiry. Subject matter experts (or the popular sources of help) document the main questions as soon as they are answered.</p> <p>Soon, by way of the old Pareto Principle, 80% of what people tend to ask and need to know is covered by the core questions (Pareto's 20%).</p> <p>You then need to market this service, without making it feel</p>

	<p>too formal, thereby killing the Golden Goose (more on this later though).</p> <p><b>Google</b></p> <p>Google has been described as the most powerful learning tool and it gives a model for how learning will take place in the dominant informal learning world. But how many people in your organisation know how to use it properly?</p>
<p>Email an individual</p>	<p><b>E-tutoring</b></p> <p>In the past, Informal Learning was mainly face-to-face of course.</p> <p>Technology has of course changed things. It makes it easier for our informal experts to be contacted, even if they are on the other side of the planet.</p> <p>E-tutoring is easy from a technology point of view (though not so easy from an organisational point of view – but more of that later). An internal learner survey within PwC showed that emailing subject matter experts was the most effective form of learning offered within the organisation.</p>
<p>Instant Message or Skype someone</p>	<p><b>Instant messaging</b></p> <p>Instant Messaging has been around for sometime. It's a standard way for teenagers to communicate and its beginning to be used in organisations as well.</p> <p><b>Audio conferencing</b></p>

	<p>Audio conferencing is a great way of sharing knowledge but it needs organisation and planning ahead. So, it doesn't justify an informal learning tag. But what if you had the value of group conversations but on an adhoc basis. Then Skype is your thing.</p> <p><b>Skype</b></p> <p>Skype is a VoIP (voice-over internet protocol). Now, using your computer as a phone is not new technology. But Skype has some big things going for it over earlier generations of VoIP: It's simple to install. It allows a group of people to set up instant conference calls. It tells you when any of your colleagues or friendly experts are online and ready to take calls and, most importantly, it's free.</p> <p>See <a href="http://www.skype.com">www.skype.com</a> for more information.</p>
Listen to a Podcast	<p><b>Podcasting</b></p> <p>Podcasting simply means creating audio (and increasingly video, or Vodcasting) content and sending it out into the world for anyone to listen to. There's nothing inherently new in this idea. Ham radio buffs were doing this decades ago. But Podcasting has come into its own, for a few reasons. As usual, low cost, high impact is the key. Anyone with a computer and a microphone can create a Podcast. Anyone with a computer can listen to a Podcast. Anyone with a computer and an MP3 player can listen to one anywhere.</p> <p>Here are some examples of the ways in which resources can be created for people to access when they feel the need:</p> <p><b>News</b></p> <p>Take the water cooler conversations and put it in a Podcast – obviously ensuring everything is legitimate information to</p>

broadcast of course.

### **The expert interview**

Many people are doing this already. Talk to your subject matter experts, but record it and podcast it. If they're the head of compliance for example they can record the new issues in compliance every week or every month, and let people log in and download it.

### **SME as celebrity**

Subject matter experts with new expertise and insight can share their knowledge on a weekly or even daily basis – Cisco have dedicated role-based portals which offer exactly this kind of access to 'on the ground' knowledge.

### **Drama documentary**

It doesn't all have to be monologues or even dialogues. Dramatists know how to take a sensitive topic, like a major change and create a compelling storyline. It can be a regular show that people tune in to

### **Any Questions?**

Take radio formats that work (like Radio 4's Any Questions) and make them work for you. Bring your management, your board, your vendors, your partners together and invite an audience to ask them the tough questions. Record it and distribute it to those who need it. It could make procurement a lot more interesting.

### **The call-in show**

Why not have a live skype session (see above) and invite comments on particular topics, then record it as a show? This

	is SkypeCasting.
Interact with others online	<p><b>Online discussion</b></p> <p>The world of collaborative learning facilitated by an e-tutor has been an integral part of Further Education for the last decade, pioneered by organisations like Open University in the UK. There is a vast amount of literature on the subject and there is real scope for its use in the world of training as well. (One of the best researched is The Online Report on Pedagogical Techniques for Computer-Mediated Communication By Morten Flate Paulsen in 1995. You can find it at <a href="http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/cmcped.html#1">http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/cmcped.html#1</a>.)</p> <p><b>Committed learners</b></p> <p>The simple fact though is that it works best within a curriculum with committed learners - the complete opposite of our informal learning model. The informal domain demands quick answers - just in time information. Discussion forums can be very interesting ways of sharing ideas but are attractive to those who have the time and inclination to chart and network online. One very successful example is the community of practice on Microsoft's site. Programmers contribute to the knowledge base for problem solving and are awarded valued and increasing status in the community for the volume and quality of their contribution.</p>

## 8. Work out who will use informal learning most

For some, learning in the workshop is the last thing they want to do. For others it is the only way they feel comfortable.

It's dangerous to generalise around learning styles but some groups of employees are likely to be happier with informality than others:

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Recognising that different groups use informal learning differently is the key to promoting and managing informal learning successfully.

Group	What they do
<b>The Information or Knowledge Worker</b>	<p>Top of the list will be the <b>Information or Knowledge Worker</b>.</p> <p>They tend to look to build on existing knowledge. They don't want courses/ classes. They don't talk to the learning and development any more. They just need to find out things, now.</p> <p>It's actually good and quite natural that you have lots of these people in your organisation. Good instruction earlier in their employment history created these people. They have evolved into self managed learners who have grown out of the traditional formal model. Try as you might, you just won't get them into any scheduled programme, so don't fight it. Work with their preferences.</p> <p><b>Informal learning they use:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to or email Experts</li> <li>• Look at a manual or book</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Search the Internet or Intranet</li> <li>• Listen to a Podcast</li> <li>• Interact with others online in discussion or in a learning community</li> </ul>
<p><b>Senior managers</b></p>	<p>Like the Information worker, <b>Senior managers</b> tend to look to build on existing knowledge. The trouble is they have little time to do it so although they are candidates for Informal Learning, in practice almost all their learning is done on the job, unconsciously from day to day experience.</p> <p><b>Informal learning they use:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at a manual or book</li> <li>• Search the Internet or Intranet</li> <li>• Listen to a podcast</li> <li>• Network with each other</li> <li>• E-mail</li> <li>• Trade or leadership magazines</li> </ul>
<p><b>Established and experienced staff</b></p>	<p>Once people have mastered the basics of their job, they will almost exclusively use informal methods to grow their knowledge and skills.</p> <p>These are the people you seldom get into a classroom or enrolling in any formal programmes of instruction. The key lever for them though can be <b>accreditation</b>, especially if they do not on paper have the evidence they need to prove their competence so they can progress in their career.</p>

	<p><b>Informal learning they use:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask a neighbour</li><li>• See the boss</li><li>• Talk to or email Experts</li><li>• Look at a manual or book</li><li>• Search the Internet or Intranet</li><li>• Listen to a Podcast</li><li>• Interact with others online</li></ul>
<p><b>New Starters or Novices</b></p>	<p>As learners mature in the workplace they leave the instructional side behind, so you will naturally have a sliding scale of dependency and self-management.</p> <p>At the bottom you will have those new to tasks or systems or the organisation. These <i>New starters</i> will be looking for a great deal of hand holding. Learning will mainly be supported after the initial induction by a buddy or immediate colleague.</p> <p><b>Informal learning do they use:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask a neighbour</li><li>• See the boss</li><li>• Look at a manual or book</li><li>• Search the Internet or Intranet</li><li>• Listen to a Podcast</li></ul>

## 9. Find Out What Informal Learning Is Going On In Your Organisation

Informal learning will deeply permeate through an organisation's structures. Whatever your culture is, it will reflect in the nature of the informal learning that goes on. The methods used in informal learning will also be constantly changing as new topics, new experts and new technologies emerge.

So, here is step-by-step approach that you can take to explore the use of Informal Learning in your organisation:

Step	What to do
<b>STEP 1</b> <b>Talk to people</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to people, for example in focus groups.</li> <li>• Don't overtly mention blended learning.</li> <li>• Explore the whole area of how they learn to do their jobs and probe for evidence of where they have used informal models</li> </ul>
<b>STEP 2</b> <b>Review the usage of formal methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the take-up of workshops?</li> <li>• Observe the patterns of usage of e-learning and other distance learning.</li> <li>• Work out if they are used on a just-in-time basis or when they have time to absent themselves from the workplace.</li> </ul>
<b>STEP 3</b> <b>Observe people at work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work out for yourself how often different groups use informal methods and how effectively they seem to work.</li> </ul>

<p><b>STEP 4</b></p> <p><b>Cross reference the personality types/learning styles of selected learners against the type of informal learning they favour</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Build a picture of what different groups and types of learners like to use</li><li>• Ask them what they find suitable and easy to access within the informal knowledge resources within the organisation.</li><li>• Be careful in your surveys. People can express preferences to general categories of learning but may not really understand what that category really means.</li><li>• For example, an IDC report found that classroom training was twice as popular amongst learners as any other, however when this was explored deeper, the learners view of the ideal 'classroom' did not resemble the majority of such occasions. It was more like peer to peer learning with individual access to experts.</li></ul>
<p><b>STEP 5</b></p> <p><b>Build up a map of all informal resources or tools used</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create a matrix relating this data to the different types of learners, their maturity in learning terms, their job roles and the quality/perceived effectiveness of each method.</li></ul>

**STEP 6**

**Collate learners' views on how their informal methods might be made easier to access and use.**

- This information will help you identify development areas for coaches, improvements to online systems or completely new models to replace ineffective and inefficient existing informal methods

## 10. Promote Effective Informal Learning

So, you know what's going on out there and you may not like what you see.

What can you do to encourage more effective Informal Learning?

### Help learners to be better informal learners

Help people learn to search for information. Provide advice on:

- information gathering
- self development
- reflection and 'conclusions'
- setting learning goals

### Use formal learning to help learners continue to build knowledge and skills informally back in the workplace

Introduce how to take things on in the formal programmes – use formal learning to launch informal activities.

## 11. Create Better Resources for Informal Learning

Work with any existing knowledge management programmes. Find out what has worked and what hasn't. And then fill that gap.

You can start by finding out who is willing to devote time to support their colleagues. Check their reputation as a subject matter expert and qualities as a communicator and coach. You can then set up a simple information service, presented via a page on the organisation's intranet. Brand it (e.g. **Who are you going to call?**) And make sure everyone knows about it.

### Put the high quality knowledge resources where people easily find them

You have got to be clever when you assemble learning resources. Remember that informal learning works because it is not structured. It works because it is typically initiated by learner themselves.

### Learners call the shots

Like a good marketing person you should always ensure that any learner is convinced that they are calling the shots. It is their choice to access exactly the learning opportunities that you wanted them to look at all along!



### **Make it accessible and automatic**

These resources have to be where the learners normally go on as they do their job. It is just like placing your shop where the customer flows are at their highest.

Observe people at work, check the stats with your Intranet guys. Where do people regularly go to get information, carry out tasks or connect with others?

### **Locate and monitor**

When you find it, put your knowledge nuggets or Podcasts, right at the point it is needed. Not hidden away on a learning portal which instantly turns the whole exercise into a formal experience.

Then check the usage stats: Which nuggets were looked at? Which were ignored? Keep the popular ones and replace the ones no one wanted to look at or listen to.

## Avoid the kiss of death

You might be tempted to ask them directly what they found useful, carry out a survey or time and motions study. Be careful, as soon as you make it clear it is a managed initiative, it could be the kiss of death. Be subtle in your canvassing of opinion.

## Case study: when informal becomes formal

### **Power company gets disconnected from learning**

#### **Background**

In the 1980s, a knowledge management expert within a major power company in the UK spotted that maintenance men kept going behind the counter at a local café to consult what seemed to be a tatty old exercise book. Once in a while they would scribble things down into it and put it back in its place. On further investigation, the expert discovered that it was a collection of tips and advice (some of it technical but some of it about different customers and how to handle the difficult ones).

#### **Action**

The organisation was delighted that its field staff had taken it upon themselves to share knowledge but were worried not everyone was getting the benefit of this. They were also a little worried that it was unchecked and unapproved.

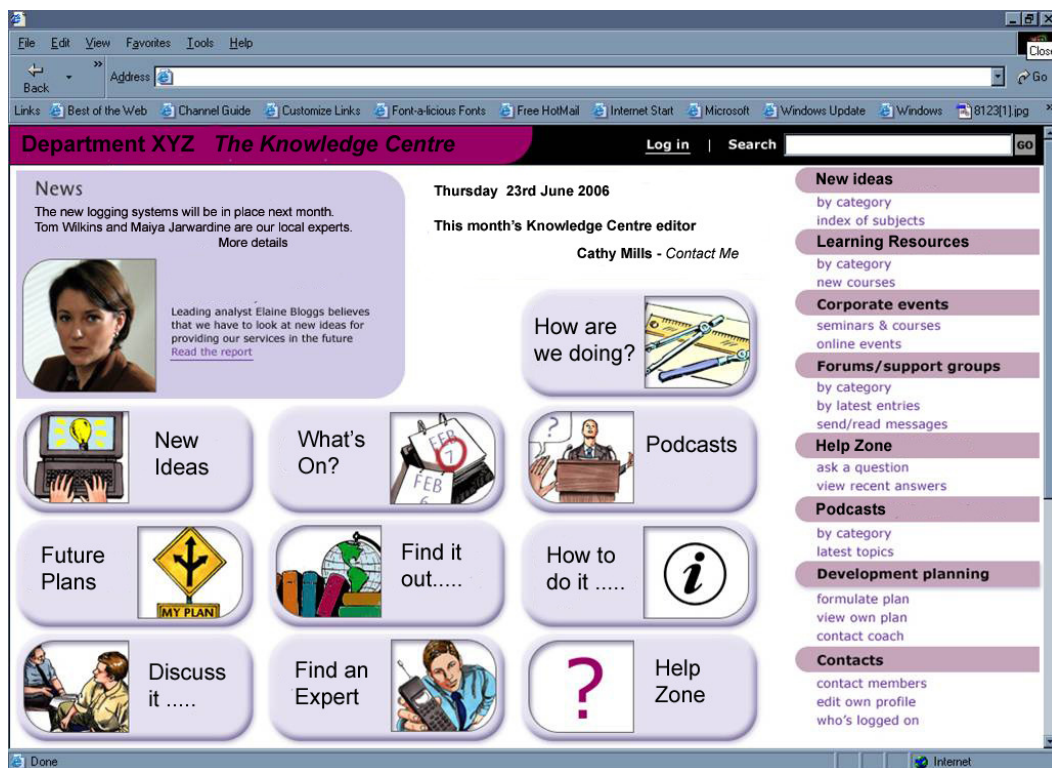
#### **Outcome**

The end result was inevitable. The exercise book became an online knowledge management system which was then unused by most of the target audience, notably those who used the traditional approach. Ownership had been lost and so the enthusiasm and commitment to the system was lost with it.

## Create areas where knowledge can be easily added by experts and everyday practitioners

Cisco Systems have led the way in doing this digitally since the early 1990s. Each part of the business has its own portal providing news, ideas and learning. It is a highly decentralised model but is based on the use of tools and structures provided from the Centre.

## Example informal learning centre



All of the main informal learning methods can be concentrated within a single communications area which can be managed by the employees themselves. (Note the right hand navigation is for 'power users' who want to go straight to specific areas and the rest is simple to encourage even the most techno-phobic informal learner)

## 12. Help develop the local ‘experts’

### Provide easy to use resources

Provide learning resources for those who act as informal coaches or mentors. Help them to realise that they shouldn't be too helpful.

A central information area such as the example on the previous page can act as a highly effective informal learning resource for specific parts of the organisation. They can also be a very effective resource for those who have to act as local experts or coaches.

Quick search facilities and very clear menus can make it easy for them to bring up the aides-memoire that they need to advise their colleagues.

### Provide help with coaching skills

Local informal guides need encouragement and help to move them away from simply giving answers to building up greater self-sufficiency over time.

On-the-job training is choosing when to encourage the trainee to deal with things themselves, rather than providing solutions all the time. It is not always easy though to know when you should put the problem back to them.

Clearly the person they are helping will need to have the resources and know-how to analyse the problem and resolve any questions they may have. This has to be decided on a person-by-person basis.

## Example of informal coaching

Here are some options open to a local coach. A colleague has asked what a complex document means. The options open to the coach might be:

Say “What do you think it means?”

Explain what it means (if you know that fact!)

Explain what they need to do to get to the answer (check manual or contact a named expert)

Do it for them

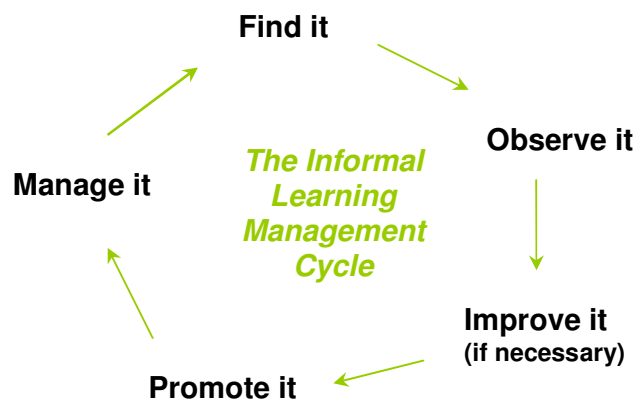
Tell them that they should know and should go back to the e-learning/manual to find out (assuming it is a relatively simple problem)

Any of these responses is possible. It just depends on the complexity of the problem and the stage of development of the employee.

The key thing that the local informal coach has to remember is that they should encourage the employees to learn for themselves whenever possible. Even though it is tempting to provide the answers or intervene immediately because you have a demanding workload to meet.

## 13. Regularly review what's going on and adjust your strategy accordingly

The whole process is an iterative one. You will seldom get it right first time nor should you. It has to be something that evolves through a continuous feedback process. **Find** out where Informal Learning is occurring. **Observe** it in action. See if you can **improve** it (but don't intervene if it ain't broke). **Promote** the value of any new resources or job aids. **Manage** it all very sensitively, providing support when appropriate. And then start the cycle all over again on an ongoing basis.





## Take this further

At Kineo, we are passionate about informal learning. We'd be very interested in hearing how you apply these ideas and the challenges you face in getting more involved in promoting and managing informal learning.

If you are willing for us to contact you for a case study, drop us a line at [info@kineo.co.uk](mailto:info@kineo.co.uk) or call us on 0870 3830003 or just let us know what you thought about this Kineo Insight.

If this Insight has hit the spot, why not check out others in our series, available at: <http://www.kineo.co.uk/publications/insight-reports-home-page.html>