

# Disappointed with Formal Training?



## How Informal Learning Drives Business Performance

*A Blackboard White Paper*



# Executive Summary

While learning in the corporate environment has gone beyond formal training events and the traditional classroom to include online components, formal top-down training still dominates corporate budgets. This type of training is typically used for regulatory compliance, expertise certification, training new employees and skills development. However, learning that truly changes behavior and impacts job and business performance more frequently occurs informally—most often during **teachable moments** when employees have an urgent need for the knowledge required to successfully complete a task or perform their duties.

This is not a new phenomenon. Centuries before the complicated corporate structures we know today, apprentices learned their craft at the feet of the master. This was the ultimate on-the-job training in which new workers learned through “doing” and meeting challenges presented by their mentors. A day at work was essentially a series of engaging teachable moments that carried real consequences. If a hem wasn’t sewn properly or a horseshoe wasn’t forged to exacting standards, it took the apprentice longer to reach the goal of becoming a master himself. The results were that craftsmen learned their lessons well and produced dependable, high-quality goods and services.

Modern corporate managers have drifted far away from this type of learning in favor of formal, highly structured and reproducible forms of instruction. This is understandable given the need for efficiency, training large numbers of employees and producing tangible, verifiable metrics. However, formal classroom events with one instructor, many students and a rigid curriculum usually lack the type of hands-on, interactive learning opportunities that result from fully engaged learners in genuine teachable moments.

The challenge, then, is for organizations to recognize how and where teachable moments occur and to provide just enough structure to facilitate the process without getting in the way.

By providing an environment that encourages the free flow of knowledge and ideas, organizations can enhance engagement, content retention and make knowledge and information more readily available to employees on their own, self-directed terms. Modern learning aids, such as blogs, discussion boards, Wikis and online groups—to name just a few—can be utilized in ways that encourage collaboration and social learning.

This paper will make the case for informal learning and show how organizations can use platforms like Blackboard Learn+™ to greatly enhance learning and drive organizational performance.

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# How Learning Works— The More Engagement The Better

It comes as no surprise that the more engaged learners are (and the more sensory inputs they make use of), the better their information retention and the more job-relevant learning that takes place. Research from Bersin and Associates indicates that learners retain only five percent of what they hear and ten percent of what they read. However, when they become more actively involved, the amount they retain increases exponentially: approximately 50 percent of material covered through discussion and interaction, and more than 75 percent of learning that takes place through on-the-job experience.

## Learning Retention

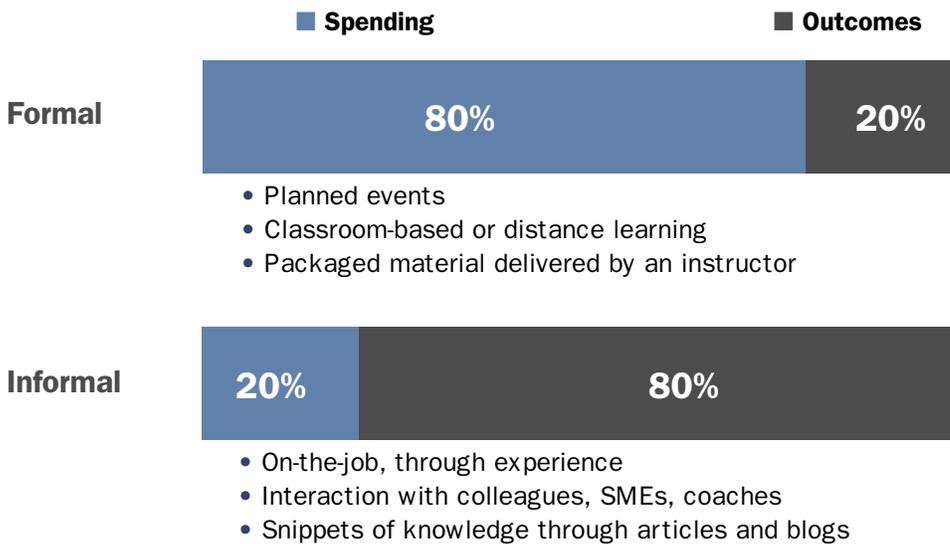


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However, very little emphasis is placed on collaborative and interactive learning in most corporate training and learning events. Regulatory compliance and new employee training, for example, are generally geared toward covering mandated content, not toward ensuring that material is retained or specifically related to employees' actual job responsibilities. The emphasis is usually on demonstrating that required instruction has been completed and that training obligations have been met. As a result, content retention is usually relatively poor.

Further illustrating the lack of attention given to informal learning, Claire Schooley, a senior analyst with Forrester Research, has found that formal instruction covers only 20 percent of corporate learning needs, while informal activities cover the remaining 80 percent. The paradox is that learning organizations continue to spend 80 percent of their resources on formal events and activities.



**A wildly disproportionate share of learning budget is spent on formal learning compared to the amount of ‘true’ learning that occurs in informal settings.**

## What Is Informal Learning?

Informal learning can include any activity that occurs outside of formal classrooms or presentations, although it can be related to them—such as discussions that continue from or are generated by shared formal learning events. It can occur either electronically or in face-to-face interactions, is most often self-directed (ranging from online research to an email exchange with a subject matter expert) and is directly connected to a specific job-related question or function.

Further examples of informal learning include:

- Peer-to-peer inquiry
- Instructor interaction
- Mentoring
- Consulting (single event or limited timeframe) with subject matter expert
- Coaching
- Researching blogs
- Input from discussion boards
- Seeking advice from social networks
- Collaborative group projects
- Exploring employee generated wikis and knowledge databases

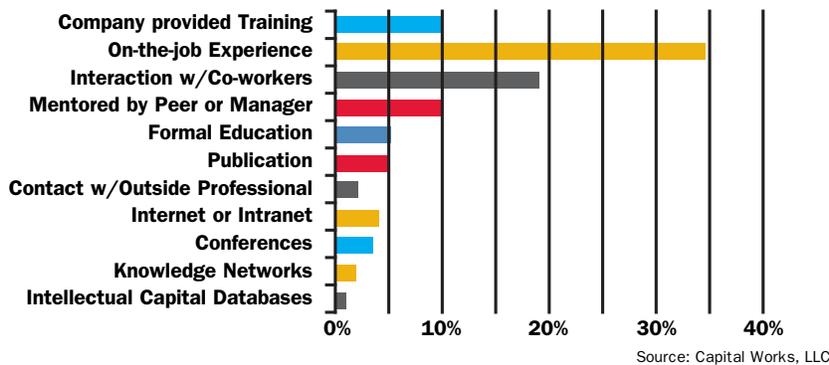
All of these examples require active engagement from the learner, and almost always come about because the outcome of a “real-life” situation is at stake (as opposed to an academic example in a formal learning environment that has no actual consequences). These scenarios present the very best possible teachable moments because content retention and *real learning* are at their peak. Businesses and organizations must be poised to capitalize on those moments whenever and wherever they occur.

The significance of the informal approach is illustrated through a survey conducted by CapitalWorks, a consulting firm outside of Chicago. The results showed that:

- Respondents felt informal learning was three times more important than company-provided training to workers in becoming proficient on the job
- Employees learned as much during breaks and lunch as during on- and off-site meetings
- They often needed to work around formal procedures and processes to get their jobs done
- They developed many of their skills by modeling co-workers' behavior
- Approximately 70% of respondents wanted more interactions with co-workers when there were changes or alterations to their job responsibilities

Further research by Capital Works confirms that workers consider “on the job experience” and “interaction with co-workers” as the best ways to learn.

### Employee Perceptions of How They Learn at Work



## Informal Learning Is Moving From the Water Cooler to the Web

The term “informal learning” often suggests an ad hoc, unplanned approach. However, since it enables employees to reach out for help from online sources, colleagues, mentors and other resources whenever they need it, those very

characteristics make it the most responsive modality for addressing their immediate needs. As such, each worker controls how and where he or she learns—even if, as described earlier, these teachable moments occur outside of formally planned, scheduled and budgeted events.

Additionally, learning that is accessible on an “as needed” basis is critically important for training new and future workers. As baby-boomers retire and subsequent generations of so-called millennial or echo-boomer employees take their places, it is important to recognize a number of distinct characteristics of these younger employees. According to both Stacey DeWitt, CEO of *Connect with Kids* (an educational research organization and multi-media producer) and *Generation Y: The Millennials—Ready Or Not, Here They Come*, a report from NAS Recruitment Communications, these new employees:

- Are much more comfortable and sophisticated with technology than their predecessors
- Have less long-term focus and look for immediate solutions and instant gratification (which technology-based and informal resources can provide)
- Are used to being treated as “special,” making large, formal learning events less appealing to them, and therefore, less effective
- Are tightly connected through online social networking, which exponentially increases the opportunities for informal learning

Clearly, effective learning strategies for these new workers are not the same ones that worked for their parents. For example, teachable moments, mentoring and consultation with colleagues or subject matter experts are more likely to involve multitasking via text messages, searches of knowledge database wikis and online discussion boards than they are conversations around the water cooler. Therefore, even though informal learning may not seem to fit within typical corporate activities, organizations that value learning must realize that proper planning and budgeting can create an environment to help it flourish. One of the main ways to do this is by providing the appropriate technology resources, such as blogging, information exchange and online learning.

## An Informal Approach Yields Better Results

Once the right tools are in place, informal learning helps employees better engage with required material and retain critical content needed to help them do their jobs better.

### 1. Formal Learning Events Are Enhanced

Because they can be better prepared, learners take better advantage of formal events when they do occur—especially the opportunity to

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interact with instructors and with each other. Therefore, concepts are reinforced and shy students (who do not actively participate in the classroom) have the chance to become engaged on their own terms. Students are also able to follow-up with questions for weeks and months following formal events.

The informal approach takes content out of isolation and makes it more available and accessible. In turn, learning becomes more dynamic and more fully integrated on-the-job and into teachable moments.

## **2. Access To Expertise**

Because informal learning is usually accelerated through technology, employees can search for knowledge more efficiently on their own. Without good search tools and knowledge management, Jay Cross (in his book, *Informal Learning*) points out that workers waste one-third of their time looking for information. However, with the right tools, they are able to gain greater on-the-job experience and to share and reinforce best practices.

## **3. Social Components Improve Learning**

Informal learning usually relies on true one-on-one social interaction to reinforce teachable moments. That means (even if the interaction is online), there is more sensory input and stimulation than a traditional, formal environment. Research has shown that learners are more highly engaged and benefit from improved content retention as a result. Maybe that's why there is a lot of truth to the old adage that the second smartest person in the company is usually sitting next to the smartest one.

In addition to reinforcing relationships that are established with colleagues in learning events, access to mentors and other resources also facilitate faster adoption of concepts through behavior modeling, hands-on practice and colleague accountability through peer-to-peer networking.

## **4. Self-Directed Efforts Unlock Hidden Potential**

Direct access to knowledge and resources does more than give employees the opportunity to seek out instruction whenever they need it. It also allows them to focus on new (sometimes seemingly unrelated) knowledge paths that help to hone existing best practices and unlock the potential of new methods and practices. As with other elements of informal learning, this flexible, adaptable agenda increases engagement, retention and empowers workers to seek out new, more productive and more efficient solutions.

## **5. Improved Morale**

As opposed to formal training, which has a “top-down” dynamic, self-directed learning improves morale because workers can control how and what they learn. Furthermore, they feel that they are being trusted to determine the most beneficial ways to master new skills and knowledge, and this builds a stronger relationship with the organization.

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**Improvements resulting  
from better learning position  
learning organizations to  
link their efforts directly  
to specific successes.**

The sum-total of all these benefits is that better learning—and resulting improvements in productivity, performance and efficiency—position learning organizations to demonstrate their value. Therefore, CLOs can more easily demonstrate how their efforts are linked to a variety of specific successes. This, in turn, can be leveraged to improve funding and increase involvement in corporate initiatives and business strategies.

## How To Facilitate Informal Learning

Creating a supportive culture that encourages a constant pursuit of knowledge is key to facilitating informal learning. Here are a few suggestions:

- Create opportunities where employees can communicate, collaborate and gain access to mentors, subject-matter experts and peers through tools like email groups, discussion boards, instant messaging and blogs
- Encourage self-directed learning and provide opportunities for senior management to set examples, such as a mentoring program
- Support and encourage questions rather than penalizing employees for not having all the answers
- Schedule time specifically for on-the-job training
- Create and maintain a current online knowledge base where learners can access content developed for and presented in formal learning events
- Encourage and create opportunities for interdepartmental collaboration and exchanges of ideas

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### *Enlisting Informal Learning: A Case Study*

Business organizations and corporations are not the only ones realizing the benefits of informal learning. The US Army is putting it to use by creating wikis to revise hundreds of its field manuals that cover topics from counterterrorism to how to stay warm during cold weather operations. About 90 percent of these guides are being updated through the collaborative, informal process to capitalize on the experiences of enlisted personnel and officers alike.

Jake Pennington, Head of the Life Long Learning Center at Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, said, “The goal is to tap the battle tested experience of all those in the army rather than just rely on specialists in the Army’s research centers.”

Blog postings are also being used to communicate and share lessons as well. This allows the Army to gather input from a wide range of personnel (not only senior officers) when creating case studies of significant operations.

Through the use of such social media tools, the Army expects to save money, streamline its processes, and establish what James Martin, the Command and General Staff College’s Associate Dean of Academics, calls “learning at teachable moments.”

# The Role of Blackboard Learn™ In Informal Learning

Blackboard Learn is a leader in facilitating self-directed, informal learning. Its features help learners gain access to colleagues, experts and resources as needed (virtually on-demand), and play a major part in helping to establish a supportive learning environment.

Not only does Blackboard offer cutting-edge tools that are continually being enhanced and improved, its ease of use encourages the pursuit of knowledge while keeping technology out of the way. As a result, employees are empowered at the same time that they become more engaged in learning. They understand how concepts and practices are directly related to their job responsibilities and the overall goals of the organization.

## Blackboard Learn Supports Informal Learning

All Blackboard Learn communication tools encourage an ongoing exchange of ideas and knowledge sharing through the use of:

- Online bulletin boards
- Public discussion boards
- Private discussion boards for group projects
- Email groups
- Instant messaging
- File exchange areas
- Easy integration of multimedia content

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## Unlock the Potential of Your Organization

This discussion shows the tremendous benefits that informal learning provides and how Blackboard Learn can help unlock the full potential of your employees. To find out more about how Blackboard solutions can help create a supportive, learning environment visit our Web site at [www.Blackboard.com/ProEd](http://www.Blackboard.com/ProEd) or call (888) 719-6123.

## Blackboard ProEd

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