ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

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Informal learning: what is it and how is it put into practice?

The popularity of social makes the importance of informal learning increasingly apparent. But what exactly is it and how is it put into practice?

Informal learning refers to a type of autonomous and independent learning that is outside of a traditional training environment such as a classroom (whether physical or virtual), has no structured planning, and is completely at the mercy of the learner's preferences. This type of training can take place through any content vehicle that the learner likes, whether it is a video, podcast, game, or lecture. Nowadays the most popular informal learning content vehicles are undoubtedly social media.
Most likely you often have a friend or colleague tell you about something they learned or saw on social media, whether it be a picture or a video. The spread of social media platforms in recent years is an indicator that people from all walks of life and ages enjoy creating or consuming informal learning content. In fact, it's not just about doing fun dances with a friend or sharing vacation photos. There are more and more professionals from all walks of life sharing tips, tricks and educational anecdotes from their experiences on these platforms.

In this article we explore how you can effectively leverage this trend to improve the learning programs you offer.

Leverage the experts already on your team

The first tip for implementing an informal learning strategy is to ask yourself whether you already have what you need in your hands. In fact, it is likely that your employees follow content creators and some of them create industry-related content. Employees who dislike formal training may be sufficiently intrigued by this training material to watch or listen and learn **independently, voluntarily and outside of working hours**. This is a not inconsiderable power that training professionals cannot ignore if they want to keep up with the needs of learners.

Why take advantage of informal learning strategies

1. Improve student engagement
Educational content that is short and targeted to an industry audience has strong appeal. Here are some of the reasons why informal learning gets so much engagement:

- **Shorter content**
  The need to create smaller content to "tease out" to fit students' busy schedules and short attention spans is well known in the education industry. This trend, called microlearning, is becoming increasingly popular, and informal training fits perfectly with it.
- **A conversation rather than a lecture**
  You have probably been in a situation where a colleague stopped by your desk and gave you advice that saved you unnecessary effort and valuable time. Almost certainly this event had a greater impact on you than the training courses offered by the company. Informal learning resembles these conversational moments more than a lecture in a classroom or via computer. This relational aspect can make it easier to engage the learner.
- **Stories facilitate learning**
  Informal learning often includes personal anecdotes, offering an element of storytelling. Whether it's a colleague or a story on social media, the narrative element through phrases such as "I remember a time when..." make most people perk up their ears in hopes of hearing a story told. It is easier for the human brain to remember information through stories. Informal learning can harness this human affinity for stories to make learning stick.
- **Use humor to create engagement**
  If you are familiar with the use of social certainly you have seen educational content go viral because it is funny. Whether it is through a dance to a famous song or by creating parodies of movies or songs, there are hundreds of hilarious videos, audios, and pictures that teach practical things. You can do the same for the courses you offer. Think about how a safety course, which is usually boring, can become more engaging if conveyed through this type of content

as well. Making connections with students and creating energy in the classroom is critical to successful training, and humor is a great way to do this.

Note: Informal learning has a meaningful time and place. A solid, organized structure with corporate values in line with the training objectives absolutely must be present in the formal training plan. Informal training should be understood as complementary to formal training and not a substitute for it.

2. Build a community.
If you have created a profile to share training content with your colleagues, the faces that appear in the content are those of real colleagues whom your employees know and respect. This recognition and authenticity can facilitate the voluntary involvement of other colleagues and create a community over time. So if you are thinking of hiring actors to create your content think twice: not only will you have to pay them, but you will also eliminate the sense of engagement given by a strong community.

Another benefit is that people love the recognition and the opportunity to be seen and heard. The more they see their colleagues sharing content, the more they will want to participate both as learners and as content creators. Such a context can foster a collaborative and helpful corporate culture in which the roles of mentor and learner are voluntary and interchangeable.

How to introduce informal learning into an organization

Informal learning is a very broad concept. To understand how to implement this concept in concrete steps, let's discuss a very basic strategy that could be started as early as tomorrow that takes advantage of spontaneous video or audio.

1. Identify your content and your samples
The first question to ask yourself is: **what is your company's training priority?** Based on the answer to this question you must ask yourself: who has the reputation for having the experience to be credible and the charisma to be interesting? You can decide or have the employees decide through a vote. The people chosen are the people who will have to create the informal learning content.

The exact number of people to recruit depends on your needs, but it is generally preferable to choose more than one content creator. The advantage of having more than one person in the content you create is that if someone leaves the company or is promoted and is no longer available, you have other people who can fill the role. The ability to choose multiple people also allows you to increase inclusiveness. Including people in the project who are diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, religion, etc. helps make your content more relatable and make all employees feel represented.

2. The strategy for creating content
Asking the people you have selected to create a few short videos without any guidance is not a winning strategy, especially if they are not experienced content creators. A simple but very useful strategy in these cases is to make a list of questions for the selected people to answer in a short video. By creating questions the people who have to make the video will be more comfortable and the content we get will be much more authentic.

1. **Create a list of questions making sure to ask specific questions** (content must be short, so answers cannot be too long).
2. **Ask each of the selected people the same set of questions and encourage a colloquial and entertaining response style.**
3. **Record their responses** (whether video or audio recordings). If you have a long-winded creator, this is not a bad thing: keep the excess content for reuse in the future.
4. **Merge responses with video/audio editing software**. Keep in mind that content should be short. If you have enough content to make an hour-long video, cut it into shorter videos. Each interview question could become a short video with answers from each creator and you would have a whole series to post.

3. How to distribute the content
How, when and where to release this new informal learning content is up to you. You can include the clips in formal training to add a storytelling element, you can use them to introduce a new topic, or you can create a company podcast or post them on an organization's social profile dedicated to employees.

In other cases you can create a regular schedule (monthly, weekly, etc.). Make the publication schedule known and you will know you have hit the mark when you hear people anticipate the next release.

How to distribute it? Consider how your teams communicate and come together. The most commonly used communication channels within the organization are a good idea.

4. How to integrate it with the formal training plan
The most effective way to use informal learning is in close connection with a formal learning plan. Use informal videos in your formal training program. If the formal training is eLearning it will be easier to integrate this content. Use them to introduce or summarize a topic at the end of a training session. This strategy is a great way to create content that serves as reinforcement. Used strategically and implemented in a way that creates a strong community, informal learning has the power to foster a community of willing and engaged learners.

5. Embed it in the corporate culture
If some informal content is out there and is getting positive feedback from colleagues, it is time to incorporate this informal information sharing into the corporate culture. In other words, you need to create an active community within the organization. Ask yourself who else can disseminate the content. What other ways are there to use short videos for the company?
Here are some examples of ideas for engaging people in your organization:

- We are changing the way we train managers. What is your top tip?
- We are creating a training course for salespeople. What are the main objections from customers and how do you handle them? The most comprehensive answer will receive a shopping voucher on X site!
- What follow-up questions would you ask if you had to train your employees on product X?

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