



UNIVERSITY OF LIFE?

Gary Weinstein (pictured) explores how HR professionals can make better use of informal learning.

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When my wife qualified as a school teacher I bought her a fridge magnet bearing the Japanese proverb: "Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher". This was to remind her that whilst she is responsible for teaching her pupils the foundation knowledge required by the national curriculum, she must also inspire them with a love of learning and imbue them with the skills to pursue knowledge and take advantage of life's opportunities.

Think back to your early school days and ask yourself the question "how many days did I spend with a great teacher?" Now fast forward through your secondary and then tertiary education. Was it more than a handful?

Consider your career thus far. How many courses have you attended during your career where the teaching has really been relevant to what you do? The likelihood is that it is not that many. It's the time you spend engaging with your colleagues, managers, partners, clients and business associates that has the greatest impact on developing your business knowledge and skills. Without even realising it, this implicit informal learning process constitutes the most significant part of your knowledge acquisition.

Research by Princeton University into how we learn confirms this and lead to the 70/20/10 formula. This states that 70% of learning and development takes place from real-life and on-the-job experiences, tasks, and problem solving; 20% comes from feedback and from observing and working with role models; BUT only 10% of learning and development comes from formal training.



If this is the case then why do organisations invest the majority of their learning and development budget on formal training rather than informal learning? It is because we are conditioned to invest our money where we will receive a tangible Return on Investment (RoI) and this translates into training courses with explicit objectives, duration, cost and measureable quantitative results. It is ingrained into our psyche from an early age that teaching and testing must be the principle way to impart and acquire knowledge. In fact, a recent study from Cambridge University shows that English primary school children are subjected to more testing at an earlier age than almost any other Western country. This is mainly due, the research suggests 'to a system uniquely "preoccupied" with ... accountability,' or in our terms RoI and quantitative results.

According to Jay Cross, author of *Informal Learning* published by Pfeiffer, "informal learning is the unofficial, unscheduled, impromptu way people learn to do their jobs." Today, before you meet a prospect, you "Google" them to learn more about who they work for and what they do. Before long you have surfed a dozen web pages; downloaded and read a PDF document; listened to a podcast and watched a vodcast. This is informal learning.

The conversations you have over coffee; research you conduct on your competitors; attending new product presentations; quarterly company performance update meetings; the assistance you receive from a colleague when you can't create a Pivot table in a spreadsheet; collaborating with your colleagues to solve a customer's problem with an elegant solution, are all forms of informal learning. It is gaining the knowledge that you need at the moment you need it, that enables you to improve your performance of the task-in-hand.



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The term 'informal learning' suggests that it is unstructured, undisciplined and un-results orientated which does not fit comfortably within the business world, and is one of the primary reasons that it hasn't been embraced by many organisations.

Given that 90% of our learning already takes place outside the formal training environment, it seems obvious that organisations should invest in facilitating this process if they really want their staff to develop.

This is why I've coined the term 'ongoing learning support environment' (OLSE) with its emphasis on a continuous learning environment that encourages our natural propensity for informal learning and supports it through the use of Web 2.0, Mobile, and Information Management technologies.

An OLSE is both a strategy and platform to support informal learning.

In order for an OLSE to be successful, you must have a strategy and the commitment to capture knowledge within your organisation and a willingness to disseminate it amongst your employees. You must help your employees understand and experience the value of sharing their knowledge. The feedback they receive from their colleagues and the opportunity to see how they are applying this knowledge to their job, will demonstrate quantitative value. Once the giver of knowledge experiences this, they in turn will be receptive to gaining knowledge from others. This creates a virtuous cycle.

By implementing an environment built upon Learning Management System (LMS), Content Management (CM) and Document / Knowledge Management (DM/KM) software, you will provide your employees with the latest tools and methods for capturing as well as imparting knowledge using Podcasts, Vodcasts, Wikis dynamically linked to Glossaries, Blogs, RSS feeds, Forums, Surveys and Virtual Classrooms with Collaborative Board capabilities, Webinars and Chat.

A positive aspect of implementing an OLSE is that you will create Communities of Practice (CoPs) within your organisation. According to Wikipedia, itself an excellent example of a community collaborating to create a dynamic knowledgebase, a CoP is "...the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem, collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations." Thus an organisation can use CoPs to bring together Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to work on business problems and develop elegant solutions in an environment where their knowledge is recorded (using the above mentioned tools and methods) and then made accessible to their colleagues to learn from, and apply to other situations.

Information Overload

One of the biggest concerns is how to prevent information overload by employees who engage in too many informal learning groups. It's a problem most of us have experienced when we subscribe to email newsletters; RSS feeds; and social networking clubs in Facebook etc. Before long we stop engaging with these information sources because we can't allocate an appropriate amount of time to them. This could become a problem if employees are allowed to enrol in an unlimited number of CoPs, therefore I recommend implementing rules restricting the number of CoPs that individuals can be enrolled in and appointing what I call Knowledge Monitors and Managers (KMMs). KMMs are responsible for monitoring the appropriateness of the content, as well as managing how it is catalogued to make locating it efficient.

So why aren't all organisations doing it?

We all know how hard it is to get approval for training projects and the difficulties in justifying the investment for developing new learning programmes. Irrespective of economic and market turbulence, the time is always right to invest in your most valuable asset - your employees - and provide them with an OLSE to expand their knowledge and skills to strengthen your organisations capabilities and market position. Ram

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Charan, a leading management guru reflecting on a possible business downturn, recently wrote in Fortune magazine “Another area to build on is personnel. It may seem counterintuitive...but...Rewarding excellence – through new challenges, public recognition ...– in bad times as well as good builds loyalty”.

Why not follow the Jesuit principle of “it's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission” by building a pilot OLSE (using Open Source software) and trialling it with a limited group of employees. This will enable you to demonstrate the practical benefits and value of an OLSE when asking for further funding to roll it out across your organisation.

“Build it and they shall come”

In the film “Field of Dreams” Kevin Costner states the central premise “If you build it, they shall come.” referring to building a baseball pitch in the middle of nowhere, and attracting players to it. Let us consider what can be done to make the OLSE so attractive that your employees feel compelled to ‘come’ to it.

You can create competitive challenges for the CoPs to resolve with elegant solutions and reward the best solutions; Rather than bring employees physically together for a sales price book update meeting, run a Virtual Classroom session and have them interactively participate through the OLSE. Award a prize for the best question; encourage active listening by setting a quiz about it.

To encourage employees to watch the session while it is current, record it and set a short expiration date after which the session will be archived and not readily accessible. These employees will become ambassadors for your OLSE and by spreading the word they will help to make it a popular success.

Benefits of an OLSE

As you can see from the above, there are many reasons for, and benefits that can be gained by your organisation implementing an OLSE. Here are some of them:

An OLSE

- provides an environment where your SMEs are encouraged to share their knowledge and help others become experts themselves and apply this knowledge to other situations.
- helps raises the self-esteem of the SMEs by recognising their expertise.
- dramatically improves the speed and spread of knowledge to disparate groups of employees throughout your organisation.
- increases your employee retention by showing them they are valued and looked after in your organisation.
- captures and catalogues business knowledge, and guarantees it is retained within your organisation, even if your SMEs leave.
- facilitates the adage that “many hands make light work” through the collaborative power of many employees working together to solve problems with innovative solutions.
- improves the quality of client solutions resulting in lower support overhead and increased client satisfaction leading to repeat and referral business.
- enables easy access (24/7/365) to that knowledge through the latest communication channels for your time-starved employees.
- can be used as part of your continuous professional development (CPD) strategy.

No doubt you can think of many other reasons why an OLSE would benefit your organisation. I would welcome you sharing these with me. You can do so in my blog at <http://olse.blogspot.com>

In summary, as 90% of our learning actually takes place outside the formal training environment, it seems obvious that you should be encouraging your organisation to implement an OLSE and invest in your most valuable asset - your employees. By providing them with an OLSE to expand their knowledge and skills you strengthen your organisations capabilities and market position. “If you build it, they will come.”