

Learning Beyond the Classroom in Asia – The Rise of Informal Learning and How to Integrate it into your Organization



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BEYOND KNOWLEDGE*

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Executive summary

While much has been written about informal learning and informal networks in the past, less has been written about how successfully they have been taken up within organizations and what the key steps are to a successful implementation.

This paper will attempt to redress this by looking specifically as to how companies and, in many cases, Asian companies are managing to incorporate informal learning within their organizations. This is important due to our own recent Workplace Learning Trends 2014 Survey which uncovered an explosion of informal learning across the region. Partly due to Learners taking control of their own development, partly through desperation at receiving nothing from their employers and partly as a collaborative attempt to harness the hunger to learn. Add to this new technologies and tools, greater access to learning with the likes of MOOCs, Video on demand, social networks etc it is more understandable when we see major trend shifts like this. What sets the best apart from the rest is the Learner and the Learning Organization working collaborative in an integrated, joined-up learning approach, providing the best of formalized and informal learning. We are getting much closer to true personalisation of learning for all.

The paper will look at the drivers for this and how the attributes of informal learning are mirroring the modern-day corporation and employee; successes to date; the main technology-enabled vehicles that are providing the catalyst to implementation; challenges; and the essential building blocks for the successful integration of informal learning within organizations. In this way, informal learning can function seamlessly alongside other activities and deliver significant benefits to the organization from increased productivity through to an addressing of skills shortages.

The paper will also look at some of the changes in institutional mindset that need to be made internally from senior managers, HR/L&D departments and line managers to ensure that an informal learning culture is fully embedded.

Today, informal learning is ushering in a revolution both inside and outside the workplace. Get implementation right while continuing to foster and support informal learning's unique attributes and organizations can look forward to significant benefits for years to come.

1. Informal Learning – An Introduction

While a more detailed look at the history of informal learning and informal networks can be found in my previous white paper on informal networks [1], for the benefit of this paper it's important to establish a clear definition of what informal learning means today.

While definitions vary, a generally agreed description of informal learning is that: i) it takes place outside a dedicated learning environment; and ii) it is driven by the activities and interests of individuals and groups. Informal learning also tends to be delivered in flexible and informal ways and often in informal community settings – whether physically or, as has become increasingly the case, virtually with technology a key enabler.

One equally important criterion for informal learning today is its objectives and how they are set. Informal learning is learning in which learners determine the objectives and meaning of learning and then determine when they have successfully achieved them. In this way, it represents a significant step-change from traditional approaches to learning and the roles of HR and L&D departments.

A central element of informal learning today and key to its successful adoption is informal networks – forums (often virtual) that play a vital role in the bringing together of people with distinct interests to share information and expertise and learn from each other. Many informal networks today have a heritage in software development in the 1980's and 1990's.

Today, informal learning has the potential to reshape the learning environment, as we know it. Informal learning can redefine communities, geographies and identities. It can encourage high performance collaboration. It can foster learning, communication and knowledge sharing through a culture of empowerment. And it can provide an important complement to traditional learning to give companies that extra competitive edge.

So, given its' importance, what has been the take-up of informal learning in Asia to date?

2. Informal Learning Take-Up in Asia

It's perhaps ironic that it is in Asia - a region where there has traditionally been a linear and hierarchical approach to learning - that some of the most well rounded forms of informal learning have taken place to date.

While different elements of informal learning have been around for centuries, one of its recent manifestations was through the Shibuya University Network in Tokyo, Japan – a lifelong learning project founded in 2006 [2].

The philosophy of the Shibuya University Network is grounded on the pretext that everybody should have the chance to join in and share knowledge – anybody can be a teacher and anybody can be a student. Unlike traditional universities, there are no entrance examinations and no graduation degrees. Classes are led by teachers from all walks of life; cover a huge variety of topics; and take place in venues, such as shopping complexes, restaurants, record shops, museums and temples. It is this the free-flowing approach to the learning of Shibuya which is in stark contrast to traditional, formal Asian teaching methods.

Yet, have some of the concepts behind Shibuya been replicated throughout Asia?

With the growth in technology and social networking tools (more details on informal learning platforms will be found later in this paper) and the focus on agility, responsiveness and community building, there's little doubt that informal learning and informal networks are seeing more and more take-up in Asia.

This is particularly being seen in the decentralization of training and the number of Asian employees who initiate their own training. A 2012 Asian survey conducted by Cegos [3] for example found that almost one in three Asian employees initiate their own training. This was backed up by Cegos' most recent 2014 Asia Pacific survey [4] where in countries, such as India, 39% of learners self-initiate their own training. The same survey found that 79% of Indian learners are now training in their own time rather than the office, indicating a move towards more informal forms of learning.

There is a growing global learner demand as well. The Skillsoft Social Networking at Work Survey [5] that surveyed 3,000 learning professionals, found 91% believing that social networking principles can be even more useful in a professional environment than a personal one.

Yet, despite the emergence and growth of informal learning, it's clear that full take-up of informal learning still has a long way to go. For many organizations in countries such as Hong Kong, China, Malaysia and Indonesia, the majority of learning is still based around structure, a set-learning path and benchmarks and milestones that allow for easy replication in multiple contexts. The same 2012 Cegos survey [3] found that 79% of learners receive classroom training although the 2014 survey [4] saw this number drop to 60%.

Probably the single biggest driver for the more widespread adoption of informal learning, however, is the changing face of the modern-day corporation and the modern-day employee. It's these changes - aligned with employee demand - that, I believe, will change the learning landscape forever and in the future place informal learning on an equal footing with formal learning.

3. The Changing Face of the Corporation and the Employee

It's my view that many of the changes in the modern-day organization, the typical employee profile, their relationship with the organization, and the exchange and dissemination of information mirrors the growth in informal learning and explains growing learner demand. Some of the key drivers include:

3.1 The Personalization of Learning

One of the biggest drivers for informal learning within organizations today is the personalization of learning. Learners are no longer willing to accept traditional manager-led, hierarchical structures when it comes to their development but want to set their own learning paths and destinies.

People learn best within the context of their own needs with an environment where other people decide what you need to learn a natural 'turn-off'. A recent 2013 survey, for example, conducted by Cegos and local Singapore partners [6] where over 580 managers and employers were interviewed, found self-development as the most important learning challenge rated by 69% of respondents.

It is this personalization of learning (also seen in one-to-one mentoring with the Cegos 2014 Asia Pacific survey [4] finding 44% of learners engaged in this activity) that is providing a major driver for informal learning today. Informal learning can ensure that learning is customized for each individual as well as providing a highly interactive and continuous feedback loop.

There's also no reason why informal learning can't in the future mirror the customization that sites such as Amazon provide on people's personal buying habits, such as 'Recommendations for You' and 'Recent Searches' tags.

Personalization and a greater ownership of learning have started to come to the fore (as Dr. Tan from the National Institute of Education in Singapore indicates). It's up to informal learning to deliver on this.



"People who jailbreak their smartphones do so to take greater control of their devices and to customize their user experiences. In a similar fashion, learners and educators have started 'jail breaking' education so that they take ownership of learning and to individualize education" – **Dr. Ashley Tan, National Institute of Education, Singapore**

3.2 The Growth in Experiential Learning & Collaboration

Linked to personalization, the last few years have also seen an increased focus on experiential learning – learning by experience. The 2013 Cegos survey, for example, found that Generation X employers have a preference for learning on the job. The 2014 Asia Pacific survey [4] found that 50% of Asian employees have 'on the job' training.

Experiential learning fits in closely with some of the main characteristics of informal learning based around personal involvement, experience and reflection rather than simply the knowledge/skills transfer of more formal learning.

Furthermore, experiential learning is also closely linked with collaboration with colleagues – a trend which is being seen as increasingly important throughout Asia. The Cegos 2013 survey [3] found collaboration and social media skills viewed as the second most important skills for Asian leaders. Both these skills are vital for a successful informal learning program.



"If you tell me, I will listen. If you show me, I will see. But if you let me experience, I will learn" – **Lao-Tse, Chinese Philosopher**

3.3 Accessing & Managing Information

Another key organizational driver that is facilitating the growth of informal learning is the changing ways in which employees access information. With the intense pace of change in today's business world, employees, leaders and partners face a continually updated stream of information. Employees of all generations demand real-time access to answers that can improve their decision-making and their organization's competitive edge.

While a lot of this information is readily available via the Internet, not all information is so easy to access and much of this information needs to be interpreted and made sense of with only certain areas relevant to an employee's role and their position within the organization.

In these circumstances, informal learning and the ability to make sense of such information through conversations and a sharing of expertise is integral to managing information today as are technology-enabled tools.

3.4 Reaching Across Companies & Countries

Engaging in informal networks also provides the opportunity for sharing best practices across companies and countries. This is particularly relevant for today's dispersed workforces and the growth in employee mobility.

Today, according to IDC [7], the Asia Pacific's mobile workforce is predicted to reach 838.7 million by 2015 – the world's highest number. By 2015, IDC predicts the global mobile workforce will reach 1.3 billion people or more than one-third of the overall enterprise population worldwide. Such business developments are likely to exacerbate the continued growth of informal learning and its ability to cross boundaries.

Furthermore, informal learning and its flexibility is also an important enabler for organizations who look to reach out to include partners, customers and suppliers in their learning programs.

There is a strong business case towards expanding learning outside traditional borders as well. Research from the Aberdeen Group [8] found that organizations that focus their learning efforts exclusively inside the company saw a 5% year on year increase in revenue per Full Time Equivalent (FTE) in the last 12 months. This compared to companies that had learning programs for customers and/or partners who saw a 7% increase in revenue per FTE year on year. Extending learning beyond internal stakeholders to customers and partners is often the hallmark of successful companies.

3.5 The Multi-Generational Workforce

The multi-generational workforce, prevalent in so many Asian organizations and where four generations from baby boomers to Generation Z often work side by side has also encouraged informal learning.

With the baby boomers retiring and Generation Z entering the workplace, knowledge transfer has risen up the priority list with informal learning often more effective than traditional learning environment as a means of fostering the exchange of information.

It is the flexible, loose nature of informal learning that can play an important role across generations and meeting their inevitably different needs.

It's also perhaps inevitable that younger generations with their better understanding of social networking technologies are more likely to embrace informal learning. However, don't rule out older generations who are showing increasing adaptability in embracing new learner techniques.

3.6 The Rise in Technology-Enabled Learning

With some of the world's fastest broadband speeds and huge growth in mobile broadband, technology developments in Asia have been a key driver in the changing face of corporations and in changing employee needs.

While this paper will go into more detail on the technology-enabled vehicles behind informal learning in section 5, it's important to acknowledge that technology is irreversibly changing the learner landscape. The move towards 'learner on demand', 'anytime, anywhere' training driven by technology also fits very comfortably with informal learning.

3.7 The Need for Flexible, Low Cost Learning

Finally, there are the cost and flexibility benefits that informal learning brings. At a time of declining training budgets and an end to week-long training courses, the emergence of highly cost effective informal learning and networks enables organizations to get maximum 'bank for their buck' from learning programs.

Furthermore, the focus on workforce productivity and the avoidance of learning programs that require too much time away from the workforce fits ideally with informal learning. In this way, informal learning directly addresses the needs of the modern-day organization.

As one can see, organizations, employees and learners are all going through significant change – change that is helping drive the popularity and integration of informal learning within organizations. There is also a strong business case for informal learning as well which will be addressed in section 4.

4. Influencing the Bottom Line

Probably the biggest driver for informal learning today is the business impact informal learning brings and its affect on the bottom-line. Such benefits include:

4.1 Employee Engagement

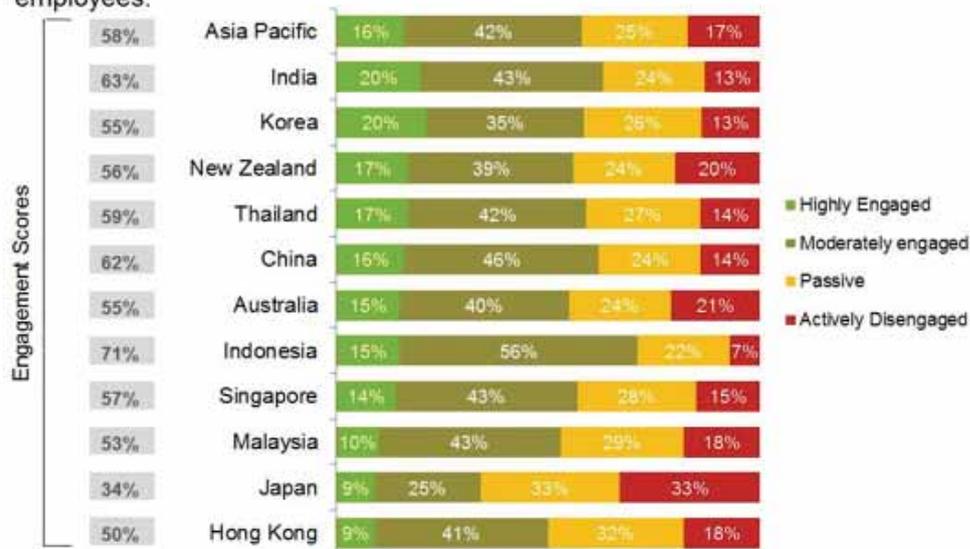
Informal learning plays an important role in employee engagement in Asia – a region that has seen a flattening of such engagement over the last few years. The Hay Group 2013 Global Employee Engagement and Enablement Trends Survey [9], for example that tracks employee engagement, found Singapore unchanged at 62% and Hong Kong at 61% over the last three years. Within China, engagement levels fell by 1% (61%) with as many as 57% of employees in China planning to leave their current organizations in the next five years.

An analysis by Aon Hewitt, Asia Pacific and their 2013 Asia Pacific Engagement Trends Report [10] came out with similar findings concluding that although employee engagement levels have risen two percentage points globally (from 58% to 60% in the past two years), they have stayed constant in Asia Pacific at 58%. The accompanying illustration shows engagement scores by country.

The report went on to say that “organizations with flexible, but clearly defined, career paths along with options for short-term assignments and geographic transfers, will differentiate themselves from other organizations and achieve higher levels of employee engagement.” Informal learning will have a key role to play here in bolstering engagement levels.

Employee Engagement Distribution

Are all these employees engaged equally? Our research indicates a significant performance difference between the moderately engaged and the highly engaged employees.



Source: Aon Hewitt [10]

Informal Learning = Employee Engagement at Illumina



Illumina is a Singapore-based life sciences research company. According to Foo Wah Teng, Associate Director, HR, Asia-Pacific: *“One of the greatest employee motivators is cultivating a sense of purpose. If employees feel like they are contributing to the greater good, they will be driven and energized in their work.”*

To this end, Illumina has put in place a performance management system that promotes autonomy and a ‘self-directed’ culture, whereby employees at different levels are responsible for setting their own goals, communicating with their managers about their performance, taking an active role in planning their development, and being accountable for their actions. [11]

4.2 Employee Productivity & Organizational Competitiveness

Informal learning is also playing an important role in improving both employee productivity and the competitiveness of organizations as a whole.

Informal learning increases workforce efficiency and productivity as users are in greater control of information. With the ability to quickly post questions, share documents, discuss best practices and connect with experts, users find themselves getting what they need when they need it at a faster pace. This also enables them to do their jobs more efficiently and more effectively.

Furthermore, the fact that end users manage information makes it more relevant and applicable to their jobs. The days of week-long training courses at country hotels are coming to an end.

Furthermore at an organizational level, better-informed and better skilled employees as a result of informal learning will create more competitive advantage for the business.

4.3 Addressing Current Skills Shortages & Supporting Recruitment

Asia today is facing a profound skills shortage that could affect the region’s competitiveness and national economies for many years to come. The Manpower 2013 Annual Skills Shortage survey [12] found that talent shortages in Asia are more widespread than any other region of the world. The Asia Pacific Region is also set to grow by 6.5% in 2014 and yet the lack of skilled talent has become a key concern for 39% of leaders in BRIC economies according to Grant Thornton [13].

There are a number of reasons for these skills shortages from a failure at the tertiary educational level to demographic factors and a skills migration from both West to East and East to West. A 2012 Report on Asia by the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) [14] found that in Malaysia 75% of employees feel that their country will be a net exporter of talent in five years time. Furthermore, the consequences of skills shortages for businesses can be devastating from loss of revenue to loss of business to competitors to eroding customer satisfaction.

How can informal learning help address these skills shortages? Informal learning is just one element of how many organizations have to rethink how they define jobs, mine their organizations for talent and how they recruit and evaluate candidates.

For example, the ability of informal learning to embed learning in everyday work –mentorships or learning from peers through to online forums – can help formal online or classroom training become more relevant and more effective as well as fill skills gaps.

Furthermore, as opposed to some preconceptions, more and more informal learning today focuses on the hard skills of business grounded in modern-day business reality. Informal learning can be highly effective at taking a set of abstract skills, embedding them and enabling these new skills to be applied for the benefit of the organization.

In addition, companies that implement strategies to cultivate informal learning and employee engagement will be more likely to have a workforce committed to see the company thrive in the midst of a skills shortage. As mentioned earlier, there is a direct correlation between informal learning and employee engagement leading to improved employee retention.

Recruitment strategies can also be improved through external informal learning forums that can reach outside the company. To this end, social media – so prevalent in informal learning – is today viewed as a key driver in talent acquisition. A 2014 survey from InterviewStream [15] that surveyed 250 global HR professionals found 70% of poll respondents identifying social media as the chief game-changer in talent acquisition today.

4.4 Breaking Down Silos!

Finally, informal learning can play a crucial role in broadening the knowledge pool across an organization and breaking down silos of information. This can lead to a more collaborative culture and greater organizational effectiveness as the case study involving the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore demonstrates.

In summary, we believe that the changing face of organizations and employees along with the strong business case represent a compelling argument for informal learning within organizations today. Section 5 will look at some of the informal learning vehicles that make this a reality.

Encouraging a Broader Knowledge Pool Through Informal Learning - The Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore



The Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS), responsible for Singapore's civil aviation system, are introducing new informal learning platforms within the organization to complement more traditional learning. These include 'brown bag lunches' to give staff the chance to sign up for sessions to understand more about different aviation topics and skill areas, often outside the participant's direct field of knowledge.

"The aim is to create a broader knowledge pool and encourage collaboration between divisions," says Peter Wee, Director of HR at the CAAS. "This would serve to strengthen staff's corporate knowledge and enhance collaborative efforts with a better understanding of other divisions' work." [16]

5. The Main Informal Learning Vehicles

Informal learning can only be as successful as the effectiveness of its infrastructure and the vehicles that enable it. This next section will briefly look at some of the key tools that are facilitating informal learning in the workplace and that are crucial to its success. Many of these vehicles have been described in detail in previous white papers.

5.1 Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoPs) is such a broad and rich area of learning today that it could fill a white paper in its own right – something that I did back in March 2012 [17] when I looked at what benefits Asian companies can derive from such communities. While I won't go into detail here, it's important to acknowledge the role these groups of like-minded, interacting communities play in informal learning, allowing the individual learner to share their experiences and learn from others as and when they need to. Today, CoPs are emerging within organizations across Asia with Microsoft and the Asian Development Bank among the region's leaders [17].

5.2 Social Networking

Social media and networking technologies have emerged as key enablers of informal learning. Whether it's Facebook, micro-blogging sites, portals or other Web 2.0 applications, informal learning enables collaboration among peers within knowledge networks that are often independent of any formal organizational hierarchy. Social networking enables people to connect with one another in an ad hoc way – versus the structured manner of formal learning. Employees aren't interacting with training materials, but with a subject matter expert. They aren't simply receiving information but are actively participating in learning.

Aberdeen Group's 2011 Learning & Development Report [8] found 44% saying that participation in cross-functional teams was the most effective means of knowledge transfer and today through technology this has become a reality. The same report also found that organizations that leverage internal social networking tools for learning and knowledge transfer are more likely to achieve best in class results than those who do not.

5.3 Enterprise Social Networks

Another new development over the last few years based on social networking are Enterprise Social Networks - a means of organizations promoting collaboration among employees through the use of external tools that are used internally.

A Vibrant Enterprise Social Network in Australia



Boral is Australia's largest building and construction material supplier. In 2010, Boral set up its own private Enterprise Social Network based on Yammer (www.yammer.com). Today, the network has grown to over 1,700 users out of Boral's 6,000 employees.

Driven on by a champions group, the open collaboration platform has been embraced by senior management. A Social Guidelines Document for use has addressed governance issues.

The network currently achieves a 23% contribution rate with out of the 1700 users, nearly a quarter of them regularly contributing. Activities that have helped drive engagement have included specific groups that keep relevant conversations in the same place and content that isn't published elsewhere. The result is a vibrant social network. [18]

Deloitte predicts that by the end of 2013 more than 90% of Fortune 500 companies will have partially or fully implemented an Enterprise Social Network [19] with such social media-related vehicles playing an important role in improving employee engagement, internal communications, learning and productivity.

5.4 Finding Those Answers

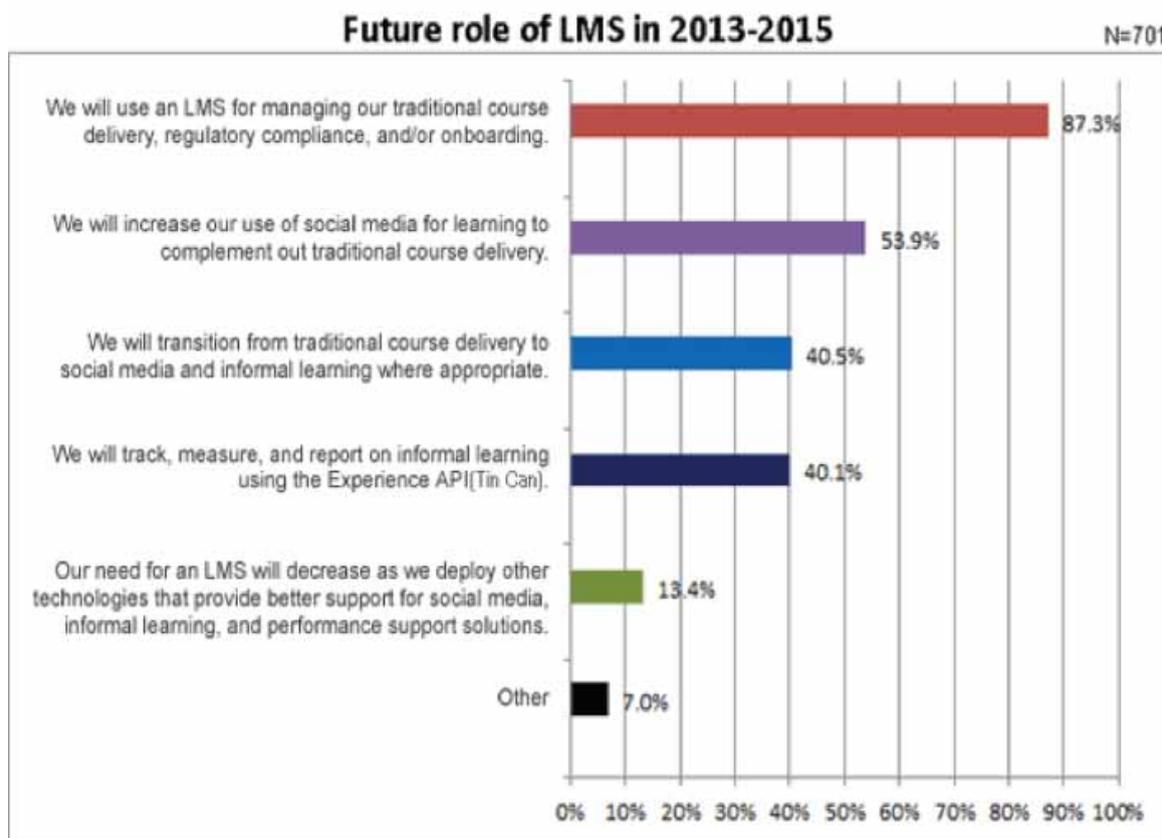
Informal learning is also embracing managed searches as part of the learning design as learners look to the Internet for instant answers.

Sites like quora.com, which is a question-and-answer service built on a social-media platform have soared in popularity since launching in 2009 and have created a platform where the community creates and builds content around questions.

5.5 The Importance of an Integrated LMS

All these platforms must be integrated together, however, as well as aligned with more formal learning. This makes an integrated but flexible learning management system (LMS) more important than ever. As can be seen in the People Cloud case study there is a need for systems such as this that are flexible and can comfortably integrate both formal and informal learning.

A recent survey from the E-Learning Guild [20] looked at the future of Learning Management Systems. As one can see from the table below, while most respondents agreed on the need to continue using the LMS to manage traditional course delivery, there was also a lot of interest in using such a system to manage social and informal learning. This trend is likely to continue.



Source: The eLearning Guild Research

Source: The E-Learning Guild [20]

The Growth of People Cloud



US company SABA provides a unified set of people cloud applications including enterprise learning, people management, and collaboration technologies delivered through the Saba People Cloud. The company is seeing significant growth in China where local companies include China Telecom, China Education TV, Haier, Sinograin, Shunde Bank and China Aerospace are all customers. People Cloud provides an integrated learning management environment that integrates formal and informal learning:

- PeopleCloud allows users to set their own learning goals although the manager can also set these as well. Learners can then be supported through YouTube-style video channels, communities of practice, shared content and webinars.
- PeopleCloud provides an alternative to other social networking tools where knowledge can be shared in the form of content, news feeds or through social interaction.
- The functionality of PeopleCloud will also support action learning and blogging that helps to maximize what is learned on the job.
- Finally People Cloud includes a People Quotient (PQ), which measures the contribution that an employee makes to the community. [21]

Agilent Technologies



Agilent Technology Malaysia is a subsidiary of US-based Agilent Technologies and designs and manufactures electronic and bio-analytical measurement instruments. The company employs 3,000 people at a Campus in Penang, Malaysia. AS well as business management, sales, marketing, and research activities, the site is also responsible for the worldwide manufacturing and supply chain activities of the Agilent Group.

Leadership development is a collaborative process at the company with each individual employee working closely with their manager or supervisor to come up with the best training strategy. The company is also focusing on informal training procedures with a focus on coaching, mentoring and self-paced learning programs that extend beyond traditional classroom training.

5.6 Blended Learning Comes Good Again!

There are other vehicles for informal learning today from serious games to different elements of e-learning (although a lot of e-learning is considered a more formal element of training).

What is clear, though, is that informal learning fits in perfectly with a blended approach to learning where different learning environments are mixed with different forms of delivery to provide a complete learning solution. Blended learning moves seamlessly between informal and formal activities with no right blend – every single part of the blended learning experience should stand up in its own right. As the Coca Cola Singapore example below illustrates, the physical side of informal learning is also important as well.

Blended learning also fits in perfectly with the changing profile of employer and employee and is seeing increased take-up in Asia. Cegos's 2014 Asia Pacific survey [4] found that blended learning is used by 43% of Asian learners (up from 39% in 2012). To find out more about the unique benefits of blended learning in Asia, I would recommend you read my previous white paper on the subject [23].

Maximizing The Physical Aspects of Informal Learning – Coca Cola Singapore



The individual employee development 'formula' at Coca-Cola Singapore Beverages is 70% On-the-Job training, 20% through Coaching & Feedback by the immediate supervisor, and 10% through traditional channels, such as classroom and e-Learning.

Coca-Cola has also started a series of new initiatives that focus on building business and subject matter knowledge through informal 'Lunch and Learn' sessions. The session is a 60-minute best practice-sharing format with content based on a self-nomination process and participants coming from various functions. The participants leave with a new idea or practice that may help them to become more effective in their roles.

"Coca-Cola is also looking at introducing experiential learning through simulation and business case studies for identified managers, as part of a global initiative", says Gaurav Sharma, Coca-Cola Singapore. [24]

6. The Challenges to Creating an Informal Learning Environment

Of course, many challenges remain to embedding informal learning with organizations. These include:

6.1 Making it Too Formal

Probably the single biggest challenge today is integrating and formalizing informal learning without too much control and without sacrificing its unique learner-driven characteristics.

This is a recurring theme throughout this paper and one where it is crucial to obtain a balance where informal learning operates in an environment that is relevant to the organization and supports formal learning without being too formulaic and taking away control from the learner.

6.2 Information Overload

The huge amount of information a typical employee must digest today is another challenge, making it all the more important that the information they access is personalized and relevant to their roles. The unstructured and less controlled aspects of informal learning mean that there is a danger that, at times, learners are accessing information they don't really need, thereby exacerbating information overload.

It's with these issues in mind that there is an onus on HR and L&D departments to develop internal collaborative technology tools that can personalize learning for each individual in addition to providing other capabilities, such as filtering.

6.3 Maintaining Relevance

The relevance and appropriateness of content that learners are accessing as part of informal networks and informal learning is also a challenge and again links to the control issue. How can you be sure that the information and expertise captured in informal learning will contribute to your company's ethos? Is there a danger of decentralizing such knowledge and learning to such an extent that it has no relevance to the organization?

Welcome to the Information Age!



According to Dr. Martin Hilbert and the University of Southern California, every day the average person produces six newspapers worth of information compared with just two and a half pages 24 years ago – nearly a 200-fold increase.

Source: UK Daily Telegraph, February 2011 [25]

Informal learning today must be linked to specific skills development and talent management strategies and structured in such a way that it has a measurable impact on individual and organizational performance.

6.4 Measurement

Another challenge is measurement. No matter how informal and independent the learning may be, informal learning still needs to be measurable with a clear focus on ROI. In this way, learner progress can be charted and the significant investments in technology evaluated. In today's results-driven environment, metrics rule the day and it's naive to think informal learning is different. Such metrics will also be essential for future investments and more widespread organizational adoption.

Yet, at the same time, there is danger that trying to track and control informal learning the same way organizations manage formal learning puts its unique characteristics at risk.

There are a number of ways in which informal learning can be measured. As has already been demonstrated in the People Cloud case study, learning management systems have progressed substantially and are able to capture much more of what's going on in the informal learning environment without levying too much control.

Learning and talent management suites can also now provide the ability to link social networking and collaboration contributions directly into performance appraisal documents and training histories.

A useful already mentioned metric that correlates to the successful spread of informal learning is employee engagement, measured directly in surveys or when looking at social feedback mechanisms used most frequently by employees. Other metrics might even include productivity, training costs and even turnover.

The fact remains, however, that some learning across the enterprise will never be captured but still has a positive impact on employee engagement and productivity. Measurement, however, will remain an important driver.

7. Institutional Challenges

So given these challenges, how can they be addressed?

One of the key areas that will determine the success or failure of informal learning within organizations will be the approach and support of key departments internally. This next section will look at some of the key players in adopting a successful informal learning strategy.

7.1 The HR/L&D Department

The approach of the HR and L&D teams will be crucial to the success of informal learning. With this in mind, HR departments need to reign in their natural tendencies to drive initiatives and leave that in the hands of the learner while giving them a positive and supportive framework in which to operate. It's vital that they avoid any overbearing guidelines that will take out the sense of empowerment and freedom so valued by the learner.

There's also no substitute for experiencing informal learning. To this end, HR & L&D professionals need to not only be aware of such networks but also experience them and embed them into their activities as well.

HR and L&D departments will also play a key role in providing that important link between formal and informal learning. For example, informal learning can play an important role after more traditional learning interventions and HR/L&D departments should be able to foster what has been taken away from the formal learning through more informal learning. This might consist of everything from peer-based workshops, after learning events, or digital or social networking platforms to discuss issues that came out of training.

HR/L&D Departments: The Path to Redemption

- Trust the learner.
- Avoid overbearing guidelines.
- Experience informal learning.
- Provide the context.
- Promote informal learning.
- Consider recognition mechanisms.

In such context, it's vital for HR departments and formal learning to provide the all-important context and foundation against which informal learning takes place. Without such a context, informal learners might reach incomplete or incorrect conclusions to the detriment of the organizations. With this context understood, they can then amplify the information people need to learn.

In addition, while the learner drives a lot of informal learning, this doesn't let the HR and L&D departments off the hook and they must do their share of promotion as well – especially to those less familiar with informal learning. To this end, people must be given reasons to engage with these networks and understand what's in it for them in terms of their respective role in the workplace.

Careful thought also needs to be given by HR/L&D departments as to how informal learning can be given the same status in terms of recognition, accreditation and certification as formal learning. As the example from higher education in Asia shows, this is already taking place at the tertiary education level and there's no reason why this can't be transferred into the corporate world as well.

Of course there will inevitably be those who want to stick to the status quo and feel threatened by change as Clive Shepherd's quote below indicates. With a coordinated approach and an understanding of informal learning's benefits, however, there's no reason why HR and L&D can't be informal learning's greatest champions.

Numerous surveys from Cegos over the last few years have seen a lack of confidence in HR departments. Our most recent 2013 survey found that only 24% of Asian employees go to their L&D/HR department for information on training (down from 28% in 2012) [4]. If HR and L&D departments can handle informal learning well, it offers a path to redemption.



“Both the emergence of new and powerful learning technologies and the increased recognition of the importance of on-demand, informal and experiential learning, are unsettling in the extreme to a profession that likes to act as an agent of change but doesn’t like doing the changing.” – **Clive Shepherd, Training Expert**

7.2 The Line Manager

With a main focus of informal learning being experiential learning, it’s perhaps inevitable that the line managers within organizations will be critical to its success as well. Line managers will play a vital role in focusing and reinforcing what is learned as a result of informal networks and ensuring that new skills and learnings can be utilized in day-to-day work activities.

Line managers, for example, can help employees have more varied and challenging job experiences and encourage learning through reflection, mentoring and on-the job activities. Line managers can also help employees assess, evaluate and reflect on the outcomes of their informal learning. To this end, it’s important that line managers are an integral part of the context in which informal learning takes place without directing or influencing it.

7.3 The Role of Senior Managers

Senior management also have an important role to play in the successful adoption of informal learning. They need to both visibly support it and experience it in their day-to-day activities. When the CEO of Boral Limited (see separate case study) posted on the company’s Enterprise Social Network for the first time, for example, user registration for the new system spiked.

The democratic nature of informal learning also offers the opportunity for managers to decentralize information dissemination and include more people in the decision-making process. In this way, informal learning provides a unique tool for future management strategies.

What Can the Asian Organizational World Learn from Higher Education?



A number of Asian governments are looking to provide accreditation and qualifications for more informal education outside the classroom. For example:

- The Cambodian Ministry of Education has recently established an accreditation committee and a quality assurance department for non-formal education.
- In Mongolia, the National Centre for Lifelong Education is currently developing a National Strategic Paper on Lifelong Education.
- In the Philippines, the Department of Education is developing strategies to correct the negative bias towards non-formal education.
- In Thailand, the Office of Non-Formal and Informal Education is assessing the knowledge learners acquire from a range of contexts and awards an appropriate qualification that is equivalent to the traditional to standards set by the Thailand Ministry of Education. [26]

Source: UNESCO Bangkok

8. Creating A Successful Informal Learning Environment Internally

So what are the key criteria for successfully adopting informal learning within organizations? This last section will look at a number of important areas that are crucial to successful adoption.

Communications - Communications is vital for the embedding of informal learning within organizations. From senior managers providing its support to HR/L&D departments explaining how it complements more formal learning to employees looking to set up new forums or communities of practice, an open line of communications throughout the organization is vital. It is only then that everyone can have a full understanding of informal learning and its place within the organization.

Commitment - It's essential that an informal learning culture be created to encourage the sharing of information. What this needs is an absolute commitment from all members of the organization to the informal learning process. If people feel that they have a tacit endorsement to teach and share information, they will do so.

Personalize - As indicated earlier in this paper, personalization is so integral to learner demands today that every attempt should be made to make informal learning more personalized. LMS systems could play a crucial role here with users receiving personalized information just as we do when we visit Amazon, watch our favorite videos on YouTube etc.

Collaborate - Collaboration is so essential to informal learning and the embedding of an informal learning culture that it needs to be top of mind throughout. While personalized learning is crucial, don't do this at the expense of the collective and the need for sharing ideas and knowledge.

Ensure All Generations Are Involved - There's sometimes a patronizing attitude towards older learners as unable or unprepared to take on newer technologies. Don't fall into this trap and make informal learning the sole domain of newer generations. Informal learning can only be fully effective as a means of sharing expertise and knowledge transfer if it is full embedded throughout the whole organization.

Remove The Barriers - The desire to share and be considered an expert is a feeling that the majority of employees share. Yet, too often, there are organizational obstacles in the way – whether it is hierarchy, geography or a lack of integration between different departments. Informal learning can only fulfill its true potential if such barriers are moved. How can this be achieved? Consider fostering information and education exchanges, create internal campaigns so that employees understand that they can reach out to their peers in other departments, make maximum use of the Intranet etc.

Take An Incremental Approach & Promote - It's also important that the introduction of informal learning activities is carefully managed and promoted at the outset. Perhaps two or three initiatives to start with so that employees can feel more comfortable with the self-directed approach. Again, it's important not to believe that all employees have fully brought into the latest informal learning techniques and there's a need to demonstrate what's in it for the learner.

Think Social But Don't Forget the Physical Aspects - With social media so prevalent within organizations today and a key catalyst and vehicle for informal learning, it's important that social media is incorporated into informal learning provision right at the design stage. Managers, L&D and HR professionals and line managers must all be technically fluent. This being said, however, it's important that the physical, non-technology elements of information are not discarded completely. This might include physical venues for information sharing through to brown-bag lunches and other activities

Open Up Learning - It's also important that the culture around learning changes as well. It's important to overcome the mindset that learning is something that employees must register for, for example. Creating a culture where learning is prevalent in all activities is crucial.

Don't Allow an Information Free for All - As already mentioned in this paper, it's essential that information is managed and structured to some extent and learners only access information that is relevant to them. It is important to ensure that employees are not aimlessly wondering around cyberspace looking for answers. Research by IDC, for example, found that knowledge workers spend 15 to 30% of their time gathering information where less than 50% of that information was relevant.

Focus on Goals & Outcomes - Against this context, learners still require some kind of direction and learning activities must still combine to focus on goals and outcomes. There are a host of technology tools that are enabling learners to better manage information from enhanced filtering through to personalized LMSs, easily searchable key words and alignments with formal learning.

The Importance of a Flexible LMS - As one can see from the PeopleCloud example earlier in this paper, an effective and flexible learning management system can play a crucial role in fostering an integrated and unified learning management environment that integrates formal and informal learning while still encouraging the unique characteristics of each.

Align Informal Learning with Talent Management Strategies - Informal learning today must also be linked to specific skills development and talent management strategies and structured in such a way that it has a measurable impact on individual and organizational performance.

Measure - Like any internal business process, it's important that measurement metrics are in place. It's only through this that informal learning can secure senior management buy-in and further investment. The board is not going to want to invest in new social networking tools or enterprise social networks just for employee enjoyment.

Highlight the Bottom Line - It's also essential that the effects of informal learning on the bottom line be highlighted wherever possible. It is this more than anything that will attract the attention and support of the CFO and CIO. Examples might include reduced employee turnover and savings in recruitment and training costs through to increased productivity and better use of talent throughout the organization.

Everyone Must Play Their Part - Ultimately, everyone must play their part in a successful informal learning strategy. From HR departments reigning in their natural tendencies to drive initiatives but still providing a general context through to line managers encouraging reflection, mentoring and on-the-job activities and senior managers adopting it themselves, informal learning is essentially a team effort with the learner at the center.



9. Final Thoughts

Learning today is about conversation, reflection, knowledge transfer and experience, supported by trusted networks of peers and managers and facilitated by innovative, collaboration technologies that can transcend location, department and job title.

Informal learning fits perfectly into this definition helping create an even more innovative and personalized environment for learners as well as having a direct impact on the bottom line. The results will be a win-win for all involved.

Top Suggestions for a Successful Informal Learning Environment

- Communications.
- Commitment.
- Personalize.
- Collaborate.
- Ensure All Generations Are Involved.
- Remove the Barriers.
- Take An Incremental Approach & Promote.
- Think Social But Don't Forget the Physical Aspects.
- Open Up Learning.
- Don't Allow An Information Free for All.
- Focus on Goals & Outcomes.
- The Importance of a Flexible LMS.
- Align Informal Learning with Talent Management Strategies.
- Measure.
- Highlight the Bottom Line.
- Everyone Must Play Their Part.

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11. About Cegos Group

Cegos, Europe's largest training organization, is one of the major International players across the Asia Pacific region, based at its Regional HQ in Singapore, and with operations in China and Hong Kong. A network of region-wide Most Valued Partners, and Collaborators, ensures Cegos can support Client training and development anywhere, in any language, consistently and with a truly "Think Global, Learn Local" approach – meaning Cegos is experienced at driving training in the Asian context, not just in the context of the origin country / company.

Cegos provide a multi-mode approach to training and development through delivery mechanisms ranging from all forms of Face to Face development, eLearning and with Blended Learning as tis core focus. The content for all delivery methods comes off the shelf (ready-made) across a range of professional and personal development topics for Managers and their teams, can be customised to suit a Client's environment or can be 100% tailor-made – built to exact client specifications.

The Cegos Group was founded in 1926 in France, and is one of the world leaders in professional training for **managers and their teams**. In 2013, the Cegos Group achieved a turnover of over \$200 Million USD.

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Prior to this, Jeremy was responsible for Cegos' strategy for international expansion through a value adding Global Distribution Partners Network and before that as Managing Director of Cegos U.K.

A commercially minded L&D entrepreneur responsible for growing Cegos' business worldwide through his various roles within the company, Jeremy has 13 years' experience in the industry as a managing director, partner, trainer, coach and program author. In previous roles at Procter and Gamble, PepsiCo and as Managing Partner of his own point-of-sale software business. Jeremy's background includes marketing, sales, operations and general management.

As one of Cegos' senior executives, Jeremy is a frequent international conference speaker and media commentator on topics related to the global L&D market. Themes include: the integration of emerging and informal learning technologies; the importance of performance measurement and proving ROI; developing 'core' leadership, management and commercial skills to achieve competitive business advantage; and change management and how to implement successful international training strategies.

For more details, debate or discussion, you can find Jeremy on LinkedIn <http://sg.linkedin.com/in/jeremyblain> and also on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/learntheplanet>

Jeremy has also **published a series of white papers on issues relevant to L&D**. These are still current and available and can be viewed on Jeremy's SlideShare portal <http://www.slideshare.net/JeremyBlain> and include:

- *APAC Workplace Learning Trends Survey, March 2014*
- *Skills Shortages in the Asian Workplace, December 2013,*
- *Technology Enhanced Learning in Asia Today – Benefits & Challenges, September 2013,*
- *Leading & Managing in the 2020 Multi-Dimensional Workplace, August 2013 (a joint report with Temasek Polytechnic TP-THT Centre for TransCultural Studies & STADA Singapore)*
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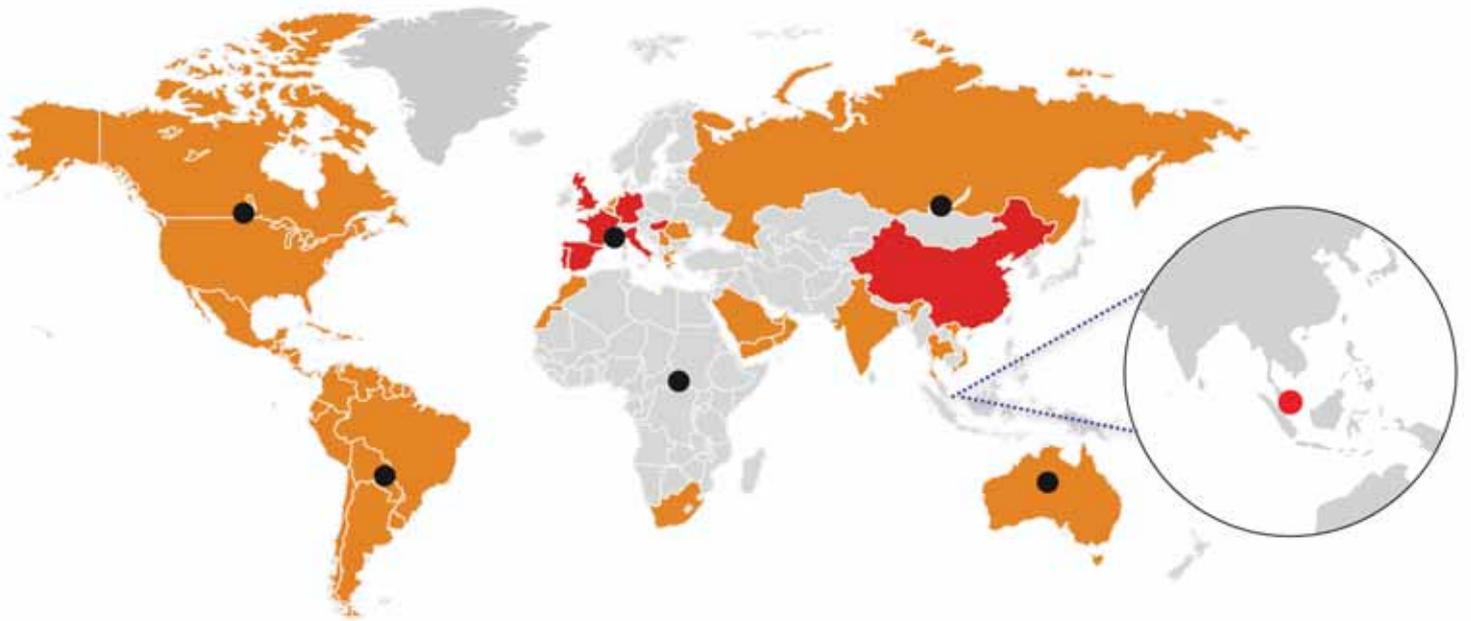
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