

Informal Learning at Workplace and Work Environment: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Background: Several studies have pointed out that informal learning contributes to work place learning more than the structured formal learning. It can also be seen from the literature that more information needs to be unearthed to understand the various factors at workplace that contributes to gaining of knowledge through informal learning. This research paper is in alignment to this view and is intended to throw lights on the factors that have been explored by several researchers.

Aim: The importance of work environment for informal workplace learning has been investigated in various research studies. However information on various conditions existing at workplace that affect informal learning is highly fragmented. Only parts of several conditions have been explored in different sectors. Researchers continually point out the need for exploring more aspects at work place that may positively or negatively influence informal learning. This paper looks to collate the factors in the internal work environment that has been found to affect informal learning at workplace from within the academic literature

Conclusion: A tabular representation of few papers that has studied the relationship between informal learning and work environment has been presented for a holistic purview.

Key words

Learning at Workplace, Informal Learning, Organisational Learning, Learning Organisation

1. Introduction

Continuous learning at workplace is more significant in the 21st century considering the rapidly changing environment and the transformation in the social, economic and political spheres. Workplace learning and its necessity for improving knowledge and skillsets is not new. However, the interest level in research circles on the how workplace learning can be improved has increased and there are different avenues of research in which learning at workplace is the pivotal theme

Many commentators, such as Stern and Sommerlad (1999), argue that, “it has acquired visibility and saliency” because “it sits at the juncture of new thinking concerning the nature of learning about new forms of knowledge, about the transformation of the nature of work and about the modern enterprise in a globalized economy” (cited in Fuller & Unwin, 2002, p. 95).

Learning is no longer attributed only to the formal HR driven classroom sessions. Knowledge is not necessarily individualised (Gilbert, 2005) and the way an entire organisation learns plays a significant role in its profitability and performance.

David Boud (1999:5) explains it as follows:

“Workplace learning is concerned not only with immediate work competencies, but about future competencies. It is about investment in the general capabilities of

employees as well as the specific and technical. And it is about the utilisation of their knowledge and capabilities wherever they might be needed in place and time.”

2. Importance Of Informal Learning At Workplace

Learning is commonly perceived as a formal process or activities that is planned to bring about a change or transformation (Hager, 2004). However, for the past few years researchers have been increasingly focussing on the informal processes or activities at workplace that induce learning. Broadly defined, informal and incidental learning refers to learning outside formally structured, institutionally sponsored, classroom-based activities (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Garrick, 1998). These activities are not planned by the learner; it may be intentional but mostly non-intentional. In general terms informal learning activities are predominantly experiential, non-instructional and characterized by participation in everyday social and working practice (Garrick, 1998). This “every day” learning has a self-evident character and takes place in the daily working situation (Tjepkema, 2002; Van Biesen, 1989). It is seen as the development of the individual through interaction with others (Marsick and Watkins, 1990). Baert et al. (2000) informal learning is an important determinant for the professionalization of employees and organisations

Since many empirical investigations support the fact that about two thirds of learning at workplace happens informally, it is important to identify the contextual conditions that promote informal learning. ‘Informal learning’ tends, therefore, to be considered as not only crucial to understand and facilitate, but as a more significant, effective and thus ‘superior’ form of learning to formal classroom-based learning (Colley et al, 2002; Hager, 2004a). Research by Enos, Thamm Kehrhahn and Bell (2003) and earlier by Bell and Dale (1999) suggested that most of the learning that takes place in organisations is informal and forms part of everyday work activities. Research by Enos, Thamm Kehrhahn and Bell (2003) on the extent to which managers engaged in informal learning found that employees successfully learned core managerial skills from informal learning activities. They found that significant informal learning activities included interaction and watching others to make sense of their experiences and learn new skills. In 1988, research by McCall, Lombardo and Morrison about managerial learning revealed that the acquisition of managerial skills such as negotiation and proficiency were predominantly developed through informal learning. They found that out of 35 managerial job skills, managers self-reported having developed 30 of them through informal learning. In the late 1990s, Garrick’s (1998) research in the building industry and Boud’s (1999) study of academia highlighted that a major part of informal learning involves learning from others at work. Bell and Dale (1999) also considered the importance of informal learning in the workplace. In their study on informal learning in the workplace, Bell and Dale (1999) described informal learning as learning which takes place in the work context and relates to the individual, their job and their performance. They argued that such learning is not formally integrated into a learning program or activity by the employer and that informal learning may be motivated by everyday activities or need and could take place in conversations and social interactions. Furthermore, Conner (2003) has stated that informal learning is a learning process whereby the learner can acquire a

3. Work Environment

Taiwo (2010) demonstrated that work environment is one of the main factors that could affect employees’ performance. Moreover, a conducive working environment

reinforces employees' well-being, and this would enable them to exert high efforts in doing their tasks with higher motivation that is necessary to higher productivity levels (Akinyele, 2007). Environment is the surroundings that affect a human being throughout his life span. In business context, a working environment refers to the environment where employees work collectively to achieve organizational objectives (Awan & Tahir, 2015). According to Nakpodia (2011), a good working environment exists when all the essential needs and facilities that could help employees do their works are provided. Sikalieh and Mutia, (2014) referred work environment to the physical geographical location of a job and its close surroundings (generally the instruments and equipments that are vital to the performance of diverse tasks for doing the job). Vischer (2007) also expressed work environment according to the integration of psychosocial dimensions that include employer relationship, motivation and progression, career demands, and social support. Thus we see that work environment is a combination of physical tangible factors and a set of intangible measures that involves the characteristics of a particular job, the amount of collaboration in an organisation, the support received from the superiors and the likes.

Literature reveals several sub aspects of Work environment that has been studied previously. **Learning Conditions** (Billett (2001, 2002), Fuller and Unwin (2003, 2004a), and Ashton (2004)), **Job Characteristics** (Robbins, (1990), Mehrabi (2011)), **Organisational Support** (Woojae Choi, Ronald L. Jacobs (1997), Alexandra Luciana Guță (2014)), **Supervisor Support**(Andrea D. Ellinger, Alexander E. Ellinger (2002), Tone Češnovar (2005))

Learning conditions are defined as conditions created in the social, material or informational environment and in the work environment itself by key figures and agents of the labour organisation, and by the employees themselves so that other employees can learn (Clauwaert and Van Bree, 2008). There have been studies to understand how informal learning can be facilitated by tapping into specific aspects of organisational culture and the systems and procedures of the organisation. Billett (2001, 2002), Fuller and Unwin (2003, 2004a), and Ashton (2004), have pointed out that organisational structure and context are Significant factors within the processes of learning at work. Comprehensive conceptual bases for understanding workplaces as learning environments will not be realised without consideration of both the personal and situational, and the relationships between them (Billett, 2006b). The most important (general) stimulating learning conditions that were found in literature are communication and interaction (Collin, 2002; Education Development Center, 1998; Ellström, 2001; Eraut, 1994; Sterck, 2004), cooperation (Collin, 2002; Education Development Center, 1998), feedback (Ellström, 2001; Eraut, 1994; Skule, 2004; Sterck, 2004), evaluation (Collin, 2002; Ellström, 2001), participation (Collin, 2002; Ellström, 2001), reflection (Ellström, 2001), coaching (Ellström, 2001; Sterck, 2004) and information (Sterck, 2004).

Job Characteristics refers are structural aspects of the learning environment which involves challenging work and variety that promotes use of different skills and knowledge, giving opportunity to make important contributions which result in greater psychological meaningfulness. It is assumed that job characteristics are important in facilitating or constraining learning (Ellstrom, 2001). Learning in the workplace is influenced by the job that individuals perform because the workplace itself is highly structured for work process, determined business objectives, and job assignment to employees (Billett, 2002). Factors like 1. degree of job

challenge(Kozlowski and Farr (1988)), 2. job transitions, job content, and status which involve changes in role task-related Characteristics 3. high level of responsibility, and non-authority relationship, which create change; and obstacles, including coping with challenging situations and a difficult boss (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, and Morrow (1994)), 4. Task identity (Robbins, 1990). which refers to helping the employees understand the relationship between their job and other activities in the organisation and Task significance (Moorhead & Griffin, 2002) that points out to the impact of an individual's job on the lives and jobs of other people were found to promote or inhibit informal learning at workplace. Berg and Chyung (2008) found that the job itself and job satisfaction are perceived as an influencing factor for engagement in informal learning Activities.

Organisational Support is defined as the perceived support from the organization for workplace learning activities concerning practices, procedures, and policies. Contextual factors, such as organizational culture and incentive systems, play an enormous role in informal leaning (Lee et al., 2004; Leslie et al., 1998). Billett (2002) argues that the impact of organizational factors upon processes of learning at work affects how individuals engage with both the opportunities and the obstacles for learning. Positive policies or organization climate factors that affect employee development activities are as follows: encouraging innovation, accepting occasional failure, disseminating career information, rewarding the advancement of competence, and creating a climate in which peers communicate and foster creativity (Maurer, 2002).Moreover, if individuals believe that their organization encourages employee learning and development, and workplace learning is linked to reward, they will be more enthusiastic about workplace learning activities (Lee et al., 2004; Tracey et al., 2001). In a qualitative case study, Ellinger (2005) explored the contextual factors that influence informal learning. According to the results of the study, supportive culture and work tools and resources encourage employees to learn informally, while weak non supportive internal culture and lack of work tools and resources are major inhibitors to informal learning. Lohman (2005) also found that an unsupportive organizational culture, a lack of time, and a lack of proximity to colleague's work area inhibit the engagement in HRD professionals' informal learning activities. Thus, HR policy infrastructure has an indirect effect on workplace learning (Clarke, 2005).

Supervisory Support has clearly been established as a major work environment characteristic influencing workplace learning processes and outcomes (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Clarke, 2004; Russ-Eft, 2002). Russ-Eft (2002) defines supervisory support as reinforcement provided by a supervisor to encourage learning on the job. Supervisor support consists of such things as encouraging participation in learning activities, assigning tasks to use knowledge or skills learned from previous learning activities, providing information regarding learning activities, and arranging work schedule for learning. Several researchers discussed the importance of a social context that is favourable and supportive toward training and learning (Noe, 1986; Noe & Wilk, 1993; Maurer & Tarulli, 1994). Cohen (1990) found that individuals with supportive supervisors perceived that workplace learning activities are more useful than did individuals with less supportive supervisors. Xiao (1996) also found that supervisor support affects learning transfer more than any other work environment variable.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this review of literature would like to summarise that a number of papers have established the relationship between informal learning and conditions that exist at the work place. For better understanding, Table 1 is appended that lists some of the studies listing out the relationship between informal learning at workplace and various aspect of work environment found in literature. This is with a view to project the way in which this research paper was studied. Although several aspects have been unearthed from the work environment, researchers agree that fresh studies need to be conducted to throw more light on hitherto unexplored factors.

Table 1 : Some Research Papers that studied the relationship between Work Environment and Informal Learning

SNo	Year	Paper, Author	Work Environment				Informal Lrng
			Orgl Spprt	Suprvsr Spprt	Job Charect	Lrng Condn	
1	1997	Influences of Formal Learning, Personal Learning Orientation, and Supportive Learning Environment on Informal Learning, Woojae Choi, Ronald L. Jacobs	-	-	-		-
2	2005	Influences of Implementing the Learning Organisation on Companies' Financial and Non-Financial Performances, Tone C` Ešnovar		-		-	
3	2007	Factors that Influence Informal Learning in the Workplace, Shelley A. Berg, Seung Youn Chyung			-		
4	2008	Learning conditions for non-formal and informal workplace learning, Eva Kyndt, Filip Dochy and Hanne Nijs			-		-
5	2009	On the relationships among work characteristics and learning-related behavior: Does age matter?				-	-
6	2009	Employability enhancement through Formal and Informal Learning, An empirical study among Dutch Non-Academic Staff members		-	-		
7	2009	Influences of Formal Learning, Personal Characteristics, and Work Environment Characteristics on Informal Learning among Middle Managers in the Korean Banking Sector, Woojae Choi		-	-	-	-

8	2009	Relation Between Job Characteristics Model (JCM) and Learning Organization (LO)	-	-	-	-
9	2010	Organizational Learning and Employee Retention: A Focused Study Examining the Role of Relationships between Supervisors and Subordinates, Veeranuch Vatcharasirisook and John A. Henschke		-		-
10	2013	Measuring organizational learning. Model testing in two Romanian universities, Alexandra Luciana Guță		-	-	
11	2014	EMPLOYEES' CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND JOB SATISFACTION - EFFECTS ON PRODUCTIVITY, Eetu Laatikainen	-	-	-	-
12	2015	The Mediating Role of Job Characteristics in the Relationship between Organizational Commitment and Job Satisfaction		-		-

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