Viewpoint

What is informal workplace learning: Qualitative meta-synthesis analysis shows eight components are significant to drive informal workplace learning

Researchers set out to provide a model for informal workplace learning. They used a meta-synthesis method, selecting 17 sources from different databases. After analyzing these texts the authors found that eight components were significant to drive informal workplace learning, including learning stimulus, awareness and intent to learn, action or experience, critical reflection on action, facilitators, collective learning, self-directed and context. The study also emphasized that informal learning accounts for 70–90% of workplace learning, underscoring its importance beyond traditional formal training methods.

The authors said the study provided clarity in identifying the most significant structural components of informal workplace learning. They said the results confirmed four of the eight components have the biggest influence on the informal learning process. These components are those that form the initial, middle and final components of informal learning. They are learning stimulus, awareness/intent, action or experience and critical reflection on action.

Learning stimulus is one of the most important components because the existence of an internal or external stimulus, such as a new challenge, is a starting point for the informal learning process. Then, to make the best use of this new learning experience, the learner must be aware of the need to learn to overcome this situation and act intentionally.

In the next stage, the authors said, action or experience takes place. This component is critical as without it, the opportunity to learn by doing is lost. After an action or experience takes place, critical reflection brings new insights to learners. This cycle continues until effective learning is achieved. During the learning experience, the learner will benefit from guidance and feedback, which helps to promote appropriate informal learning. There is, they said, a collective aspect to informal learning when workers model their behavior on others. During the learning process, the learner has autonomy and responsibility and directs his or her learning. Also, informal learning is influenced by the specific context in which the learning experience takes place.

The authors argued that the study helps those involved in HR development to support informal learning through better recognition and orientation of its components. The authors say for informal learning to be successful, appropriate structures must be provided to create learning opportunities.

For example, among these cases is the use of a collaborative environment. It is necessary to create a cooperative atmosphere as it can help people to accept new roles, in addition to maintaining their previous ones. The designer who provides appropriate learning experiences can cooperate with a colleague or manager as a coach, supporter of learning and source of information.

The learner also plays an active role in shaping his or her appropriate learning experiences as a self-directed learner. Also, teaching self-directed learning skills to learners can be

|

considered first of all. In the case of informal learning support, specific support structures can be foreseen for this purpose. Informal learning should be recognized and rewarded to motivate employees.

But support from learning is a set of activities that help the learning process. Organizations need to make relevant information sources available, including printed or electronic books and videos. Also, creating a suitable platform for peer-to-peer coaching and learning activities can be useful. Employees with expertise in a particular area can be encouraged to act as learning experts and support their colleagues.

As learning in the workplace comes from action and not the other way around, tasks can be assigned according to learning goals and used as a tool to create related actions. Reflection on action is necessary to integrate knowledge and skills and transfer learning, providing the opportunity to reflect on the real conditions of the work environment can also be practical.

The authors embarked on this research project due to the growing recognition of informal learning's role in workplace development. With rapid technological advancements and evolving job requirements, employees need to learn informally to keep up with changes in their work environments. The research aimed to fill the gap in understanding the processes involved in informal workplace learning.

As the purpose of the paper was to review various sources, studies and models the research was guided by the following question: "Q1. What are the most significant components of informal workplace learning?"

To gather data, the authors conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of 17 scholarly sources, which included journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers. These sources were selected based on their relevance to informal workplace learning. They had to be published between 2000 and 2021 and written in English. The research involved an extensive literature search using keywords like "informal learning," "workplace learning," and "learning at work" across the Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Eric, Emerald and Taylor and Francis databases.

The thematic analysis method was employed to analyze the data, resulting in the identification of 13 main themes and 11 subthemes, which were synthesized into the eight core components of informal learning.

This review was based on the study "What is informal workplace learning: a qualitative meta-synthesis," written by Hamide Lotfi, Department of Educational Management and Human Resource Development, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran; Morteza Karami, Department of Curriculum Studies and Instruction, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran; Saied Safaei Movahed, Human Resources Development Consultant of National Iranian Oil Company, Tehran, Iran, and Gregory M. Francom, Department of Instructional Systems and Workforce Development, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS, USA.

Reference

Lotfi, H., Karami, M., Safaei Movahed, S. and Francom, G.M. (2025), "What is informal workplace learning: a qualitative meta-synthesis", *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 171-193, doi: 10.1108/JWL-05-2024-0108.