

How do employees learn at work ?

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Many companies have become aware of the limited power of formal training programs and are looking at how workplace learning can be encouraged and supported. Still, for many organizations, it is not clear how they can facilitate, support and encourage informal learning from others among employees. The research findings of this dissertation have been transferred into several practical interventions that are implemented in the workplace. The goal of all these interventions is to stimulate informal learning from others among employees.

APPLICATION “FROM LEARNING 2 INNOVATION” (WWW.FL2I.COM)

Attracted funding from: Network Social Innovation (NSI)

The goal of this application (free access) is to provide organizations a basis for structurally supporting informal learning from others thereby increasing employability. We developed and implemented an application that not only measures informal learning from others, but also provides suggestions on how to optimize employees' informal learning in the workplace. Employees develop "naturally" in the company which often remains unnoticed. For instance, they ask their colleagues for advice, share information or make mistakes and correct them. In this context, this diagnostic tool measures the strengths and weaknesses of a company (or unit) in terms of informal learning from others and employability. When employees fill in the survey, they will receive immediate feedback on their level of informal learning from others and how this is related to their employability. The application can be filled in multiple times over a longer period to show employees how their informal learning from others developed over time.

THE LEARNING ECO-SYSTEM

**Attracted funding together with the Staff Development Center of Maastricht University from:
Sociaal Fonds voor de Kennissector (SoFoKles)**

In this project we developed and implemented an online learning platform (Learning Management System) for university staff. This learning eco-system offers a variety of learning paths tailored to today's employees. Different opportunities for informal learning from others, such as discussion fora and the Ask-Your-Colleagues App (see below), are at the heart of the learning platform. The learning platform is based on the principle that employees are responsible for their own learning and development. Employees can develop their skills based on their own needs, interests and responsibilities with the goal to increase career opportunities and their mobility inside and outside the organization. Employees learn at their own pace and in their learning

style, both individually and in teams stimulated by relevant content. The content is both general and specific and is presented in various ways: short interactive sessions such as podcasts given by experts, short interactive courses on managing professionals, assessments, discussion fora and workshops. By implementing the platform, the organization facilitates 'learning' to be a permanent topic of the conversations between all employees. This can in turn have a positive impact on the learning culture within the organization. Furthermore, administrative documents such as performance evaluation forms could have a place in the learning system. The forms evaluate employees on their proficiency in certain competencies. If made available online, employees are able to connect their learning progress to their competencies and use this as a basis for the evaluation meetings with the supervisor.

APPLICATION “ASK YOUR COLLEAGUES”

As part of the learning eco-system we also developed and implemented an application that allows employees to find experts on a certain subject within the organization. The application is made to stimulate employees to contact one another with questions or ask for advice and feedback. The interactive map presents an overview of experts otherwise left unknown in organizations. Employees can use the search function to find experts on a certain topic (e.g. EU project management) and get in contact with a colleague. Knowing the expertise and knowledge of colleagues can encourage employees to share information, discuss opportunities for innovative projects and explore ideas together. Moreover, finding other employees that help carry out innovative tasks can stimulate employees to connect. As a result, the interaction and collaboration lay the foundation for enhancing employability and encourage innovations.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANS TO STIMULATE INFORMAL LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Attracted funding together with Ambulancezorg Limburg Noord from: Nederlandse Stichting voor Psychotechniek (NSvP)

In a first project in 2013, we created a learning map on how employees learn formally and informally in the Ambulancezorg Limburg (emergency medical services) and how this, in turn, influences their employability. Formal training programs are a mandatory part for employees working in the emergency medical services to keep up-to-date with the latest technology and emergency procedures (e.g. cardiopulmonary resuscitation). The results showed that formal and informal learning enhanced different dimensions of employability. Yet, informal learning had a stronger influence on employability than formal learning. A more detailed description of the study and the results can be found in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

A follow-up project is presently taking place at the Ambulancezorg Limburg Noord, the Netherlands. Based on the results of the first project, we are setting up an intervention study to stimulate informal learning from others among employees by means of personal development plans (PDP). Professional development plans are used to "gather and document information

about the competencies the employee worked on and is planning to further develop" (Beausaert, Segers, & Gijselaers, 2011b, p.232). Literature suggests that PDPs can stimulate employees' formal and informal learning to develop professionally (Beausaert, Segers, & Gijselaers, 2011a). Currently, in most PDPs, future learning activities are formulated within the context of formal training programs. So far, few scholars and practitioners have taken into account how informal learning from others can be a resource for professional development. The goal of this intervention is to give informal learning from others a central role in personal development plans. The PDP can be connected to the learning that takes place daily in the workplace by adding core reflection questions to the PDP asking about employees' informal learning from others. Questions like "who do you turn to when facing a problem?", "what are the core characteristics of your memorable learning events and why are they memorable for you?" and "what is your next step given your experience?" can be part of the PDP. The aim is to make employees aware that professional development is a daily activity and that powerful learning experiences are not restricted to participation in formal training programs but take place minute-by-minute during daily work. An introductory session given by HRD for supervisors can help to integrate the PDP into the workplace. Another way of stimulating informal learning from others is to schedule a follow-up meeting in response to a training or experience in the workplace whereby participants exchange information and feedback on the acquired knowledge and skills. The richness of the learning experiences is then mapped in the PDP.

MENTORING AS A TOOL TO STIMULATE INFORMAL LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Attracted funding together with Université Catholique de Louvain (Belgium) from: Municipality Kerkrade (the Netherlands)

In a different project, inspired by our research findings and supported by the author of this dissertation and her colleagues, the staff at the municipality Kerkrade is currently exploring mentoring as a tool to stimulate informal learning from others. It's a master-apprentice learning method to retain the knowledge of senior staff in the organization and allow the transfer to younger staff. More specifically, a mentor is a more experienced colleague who will move to another job or soon retire and assists and gives advice to younger colleagues. At the same time, the young colleagues can bring new innovative ideas to ensure that the necessary changes are made in the organization. Employees can be prepared for their master/apprentice function by attending workshops given by HRD. The workshop can be based on previous experiences of employees and examine the way they give (constructive) feedback and to stimulate their reflection in order to maximize learning opportunities. The master-apprentice method helps employees to share information, feedback and give assistance; which in turn will have a positive impact on the development of occupational expertise and active and passive flexibility (three dimensions of employability).

STIMULATING INFORMAL LEARNING FROM OTHERS OF UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE

Pilot project in cooperation with VDAB (Belgian public employment service of Flanders)

The goal of this pilot project was to stimulate informal learning from relevant others in your network to be more aware of your talents (beyond the specific jobs a participant has had in the past). Together with a regional centre of the VDAB, the Belgian public employment service of Flanders that offers employment services, training and career guidance, we set up an intervention in order to stimulate informal learning from others of unemployed people. The project lasted for six months in 2015. Participants were asked by VDAB if they want to take part in the project. They were divided in an experimental and a control group. Participants in the experimental group ($N = 16$) received the informal learning intervention given by the VDAB in cooperation with us. Participants in the comparison group ($N = 14$) took part in the 'traditional' career guidance offered by the VDAB.

The informal learning intervention consisted of five group meetings supported by 2 VDAB coaches. The first meeting was a defreezing workshop where participants got to know each other. The goal was to "unfreeze" their potential through activities and make them aware of informal learning. After that, three coaching sessions took place in month 2, 3, and 4 and a final meeting in month 6. The goal of the coaching sessions was to guide participants in their development using different methods to explore their profile in terms of unique talents as well as sources for feedback, help and information to fine-tune their profile.

The intervention activities as well as the measurement of informal learning in this project draw on a social network perspective to capture the participants' social relationships and the acquiring of information, feedback and help. In particular, an egocentric network technique was used to investigate the participant's relationship within their network (Cross & Sproull, 2004; Van den Bossche et al., 2014). The method obtains information about the contacts in the network thereby providing a closer look at informal learning from others. Participants set their own boundaries that make it possible to ask about contacts in the private as well as (past) professional environment. In addition, data have been collected on self-efficacy, three dimensions of employability (occupational expertise, anticipation and optimization, personal flexibility) and a self-chosen competence, at the start and at the end of the intervention, for the experimental as well as control group. Given the limited numbers of participants, the findings need to be interpreted carefully. The main finding indicates that participants in the intervention group stated to have a broader network compared to the control group at the end. Participants in both groups also experienced a growth in their competences. Currently, the ideas developed in this pilot project are disseminated in other regional centers of VDAB.

6.7 REFERENCES

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