

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

BTN interviewed Paul Matthews in 2018

The Business Transformation Network interviewed Paul Matthews in 2018 and created four videos. This is video #4 which focusses on informal learning.

TRANSCRIPT

Question: What is informal learning?

Okay. Informal learning, well, there's a really glib answer is that it's anything that's not formal, and by formal learning we tend to mean learning that's scheduled, planned. The obvious case is a training course, something like an elearning that you are mandating that people go and do and then in less obvious cases, it's things like action learning sets, or anything that's really scheduled, planned and in some way mandated. Now it could be stuff that someone just wants to do on their own that they go to a conference, and that could be considered formal, because they've made the decision to go to that conference.

But when you think about informal learning, actually one of the phrases I use for it is, "A side effect of life." We are as a species, a learning species. We would have been consigned to the evolutionary dustbin some long time ago if we didn't just learn by doing things, if we didn't learn on the fly, if we didn't learn from watching others around us. And, that style of learning, social learning, for example, watching how a family member used to tie the piece of axe head to a shaft around the campfire 10,000 years ago, that was informal learning. The stories that were told around the campfire. So, and we know it from our own experience. I mean, whoever taught you how to run a household and yet you probably do? Or you know someone who does, how did they learn how to do it?

So we absorb and we learn as we go through life all the time, and learning for us is such a second nature thing that we actually lose awareness almost of the fact that we are learning. It's a bit like a fish, we think is unaware of the water they swim in. We are unaware of most of the learning that we do unless we see it as some formal thing. And in fact if you ask people, "When was the last time you learned something?" They will probably hark back to a textbook they read or a course they went on, or even their school days and, "Well I never learned much since then."

Well that's obviously rubbish. We know that because most learning is happening outside of the formal stuff. And if you look at the 70:20:10 learning model or philosophy of learning, that posits that around 70% of what we learn, we learned through experience, around 20% we learned through collaborating and working

with others, and around 10% we learn formally, those are in no way fixed things and they vary dramatically depending on all sorts of other factors. But whatever research you look at, it's very, very obvious that the majority of learning happens outside of the formal interventions.

Question: Why is informal learning important?

Okay. It's really important that learning and development gets their head around informal learning. A, because it's where most of the learning happens. B, because people can end up learning the wrong things if they're not supported well. So, for example, if you are not giving them the information they need in the moment to do the job they're doing, they will end up learning how to do that job without the right information. And the way they end up doing it may will have serious consequences if it's a regulatory issue or a safety issue. For example, would you want your airline pilot to be taking shortcuts on their preflight checklist because you've not provided the checklist?

So informal learning is really, really important. And the other reason that it is, is very simple. Is if we could stop informal learning happening, and thankfully we can't, but if we could, any organization would be on its knees in a month or two, maybe even weeks. The success of our organization is founded upon our ability to learn, and most of that learning is informal. So not paying attention to it is like not paying attention to the lifeblood of our organizations.

Question: How can L&D leverage informal learning?

When you're thinking about informal learning, you can think about it in two different ways. One is that it is the general learning going on. It's the happenstance learning, the coincidental learning. Here's a metaphor. Just think of it like there's a huge informal learning engine in the basement. It's been there since the company or the organization was formed. It's just running. You can't stop it. But actually, in most organizations, no one has been to that basement for years, forever almost. In fact, if you ever do manage to find the basement and get down there, you'll find this engine chugging away. A true servant of the organization, but it's covered in cobwebs. It's got old grease and oil, it's a horrible place. The lights are out. So, one of the ways that you can leverage informal learning is to clean the engine up and get it running better.

And that means doing things like providing better support services, so information is available on demand, like electronic performance support. Signposting people who are experts, that people can then go to when they've got a problem. So it's about saying, "Well, what do people need in terms of learning informally in the moment, at the point of work, and how can we support all of that? How can we help them when something around them changes? They're not quite sure what to do next. How can we help them when something

around them breaks, like a process, and they're not quite sure what to do next?" So that's about making sure the informal learning engine is running with the right sort of fuel, and it's all painted and shiny and sparkly and doing a great job.

Now the second form of informal learning that you can then harness from L&D is you can take the power of that informal learning engine because trust me, it's really powerful. That's the most important way that people learn, is learning by doing. Is what we can do is saying, "We've got a very specific learning outcome. How can we harness the power of the engine for that specific learning outcome?" And this is where you've got to get careful because if you try and harness it too tightly, you'll end up destroying the informality that actually makes it powerful.

So it's that old conundrum of how do you manage formerly, something that is powerful because it's informal? One metaphor I use often is, if you cup a butterfly in your hands, if you hold it too tight, it's not great news for the butterfly. If you hold it too loose, the butterfly escapes. How tightly do you hold your butterfly? So how tightly do you hold your informal learning? How can you leverage that huge engine? And there are ways to do that and some of the processes that we've worked with companies can help you do that.

Question: How do people get informal learning wrong?

So when I talk to people about informal learning, one of the questions I get asked, "Well how do we do it?" But also I come across people who are, "Doing it," but kind of getting it wrong. They've missed the point. One of the things they do is they head off into 70:20:10 philosophy land. And what they do is start delivering their formal training across different channels, thinking that a blend of learning that caters for experience and social and so on is going to then start, "Doing informal learning." And one of the things they sometimes say to me is, "We have to start doing informal learning." I think, "Well no," but it's already going on already. The 70:20:10 model and other research around that shows that's what's happening. The question is, how can we leverage that in terms of what's already happening rather than how can we start it?

So that's a way of mismanaging it, is thinking that you have to do it. Another thing that happens is they then take their formal curriculum, deliver it through these different channels and really all they've got is a rather upmarket thing called blended learning, which we used to do years ago. So nothing in effect is really changed. What some commentators in the field, Charles Jennings calls it for example is, "10 plus." So it's still formal. What you'll find is most things that people learn informally are the things that you cannot learn in a formal curriculum. Think about, I don't know, a negotiation model, for example. Until you go and use that in practice and look at the whites of somebody's eyes over a table, you then learn about how that model works for you, how you and your personality can make best use of it, and so on. But until you have that experience, you really can't

do much with it. So to a certain extent, you can do that with simulations and role-plays, but ultimately you will only ever learn it in the saddle as it were. So that's the mistake that people often make about informal learning, is misunderstanding where it's happening and the fact that they have to kind of do it. What you really got to think about is how can we steer it? How can we harness it?

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Paul Matthews is a renowned authority in the Learning and Development space. Whether you want to call on his knowledge and expertise as a skilled keynote speaker, as a consultant or to run a workshop, he'd love to hear from you.

To book Paul for your forthcoming event, enquire about his availability or arrange an informal chat about any of his services, get in touch today.

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