

How Informal Learning Is Transforming the Workplace

A Pulse Survey - Social Media's Impact on Informal Workplace Learning



CARA

People • Content • Technology • Performance



Q4 2010

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Over 70% of what we learn in life and at work is learned informally and socially say proponents of informal learning. Language is first learned not in a classroom but in the informal setting of home. For most of us social skills are gradually acquired and refined through life experience, rather than etiquette classes. And some of the most critical skills to workplace success—communication, collaboration, teamwork and even technical skills—are cultivated through invaluable and ongoing informal workplace learning: mentoring, coaching, peer reviews and job shadowing.

Though informal learning has always been around, the rapid proliferation of social media has added a new layer of complexity and controversy. Businesses worry about security risks and productivity loss that could occur with widespread access to social media. Learning experts worry about quality of sources—how “expert” are “the experts” in personal and professional networks? Meanwhile, people around the world are embracing social media technologies and rapidly integrating them into their personal and professional lives. Hardware—think smartphones, TVs, notepads and laptops—and related applications are now designed with social media in mind.

With the social media concerns of employers bumping up against an emerging culture of social networking and broadcasting, The CARA Group, Inc. conducted a pulse survey of corporate training and learning leaders. For the purposes of the survey, CARA defined informal learning as “learning that takes place independently from instructor-led classes or course-specific work such as self-study programs, performance support materials and systems, coaching, mentoring, and/or online community-based learning through social and business networks, etc.” The goal was to examine the current role, challenges and opportunities of social media in workplace-based informal learning. Are businesses embracing social media as an informal learning tool? Are they resisting it? Are they intrigued but not quite sure how to embrace it?

As the survey results that follow illustrate, learners are taking the driver’s seat in social media-based informal learning, which is an emerging path being adopted in the workplace. However, a hands-off approach to informal learning in the social media sphere might be a lost opportunity for many employers as well as a substantial risk in terms of the quality of resources and their influence on employees. Unquestionably though, social media has become an important and influential new conduit for informal workplace learning that businesses must address one way or another.

Key Findings

- Informal learning is a vital tool in employee training; 90% of respondents encourage or support it in some way
- According to participants, informal learning is most useful when the format is social and in person rather than individual and isolated
- 81% of respondents feel social media offer valuable learning opportunities for employees
- 98% of respondents agree that social media are changing how employees are learning and accessing information

Survey Results

The Participants

The survey polled 125 learning and training leaders at businesses across the U.S. While participants came from a broad range of industries, the top five sectors represented in the survey include:

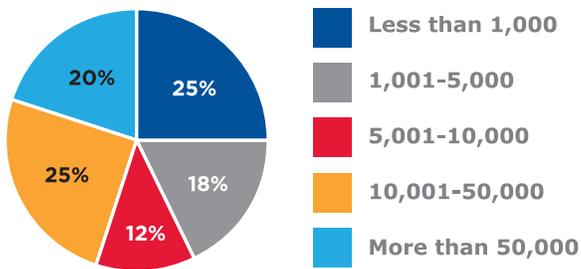
- Healthcare
- Pharmaceuticals/biotech
- Telecommunications
- Financial services
- Insurance

Participants also came from organizations of all sizes, including small and mid-size firms, as well as global enterprises that exceed more than \$40 billion in annual revenue.

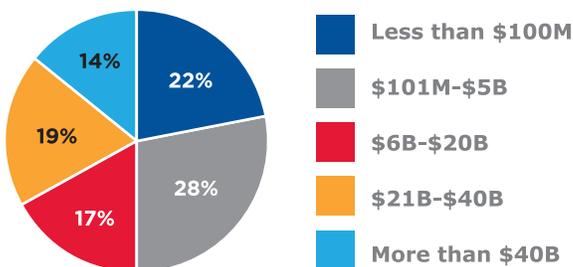
Survey of Corporate Training and Learning Leaders

This report is based on the findings of a recent pulse survey to explore how informal learning is transforming the workplace.

Respondent Company Size (number of employees)



Respondent Company Annual Revenue



Informal Learning Is a Valued Training Medium

The survey initially looked at informal learning and how important participants see its role in enhancing workforce skills and knowledge. Informal learning is clearly a well-supported learning medium among survey participants: 46% responding that they encourage it. Another 44% of respondents say they see it as valuable. Only 10% say they do not support informal learning in any way. Additionally, almost all participants (99%) say that formal learning is enhanced either very much (64%) or somewhat (35%) by informal learning.

This broad-spectrum of appreciation for informal learning could also be seen in the fact that survey participants do not see it as something that should be occurring

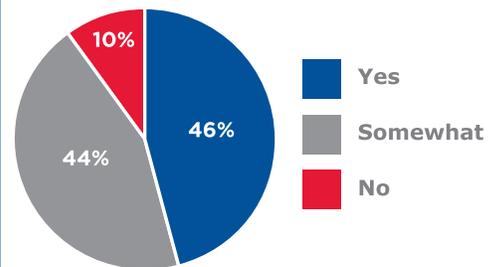
outside of the workplace or work hours. According to 96% of survey participants, informal learning should happen on company time or on demand. Only 4% said it should occur off hours (on the employee's own time).

Informal learning targets a very wide range of skills at businesses today according to the survey. Participants were asked to list what they felt were the top content areas for informal learning and the variety given was impressive. From computer applications, regulatory topics and leadership development to change management, best practice sharing and soft skills, the topics addressed in informal learning extend across disciplines and rank. These broad strokes in terms of topic indicate informal learning's pervasiveness across skill and professional levels.

Most Useful Informal Learning Is Collaborative and Social

According to survey participants, the informal learning approaches that are most useful in the workplace are those that are social and interactive, such as "employee/team-initiated sharing sessions/collaboration," mentoring and coaching. Only 47% agreed that social/networking communities were one of the most useful tools for supporting informal learning in the workplace.

Does Your Organization Encourage and Support Informal Learning?



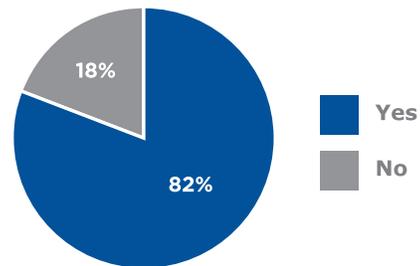
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That 47% was the lowest ranking of all the workplace tools/ approaches, which also included employee/team-initiated sharing sessions/collaboration (75%), mentoring (61%), coaching (61%) and performance support materials and systems (53%).

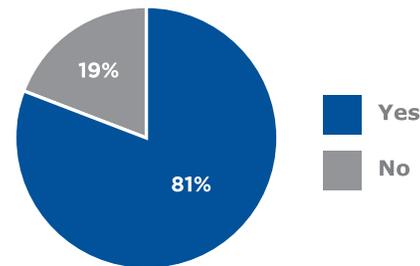
Many participants added their own written comments on informal learning techniques they found most useful. The most frequently cited informal learning approach was also social and interactive in nature: lunch and learn sessions.

When asked to describe how they are changing information access, many participants cited speed and the fact that people can access information more quickly. In addition, several participants described the learning more in terms of expanding the individual's ability to network easily and access subject-matter experts.

Do You Personally Use Social Media and Networking Tools to Advance Your Professional Skills and Resources?

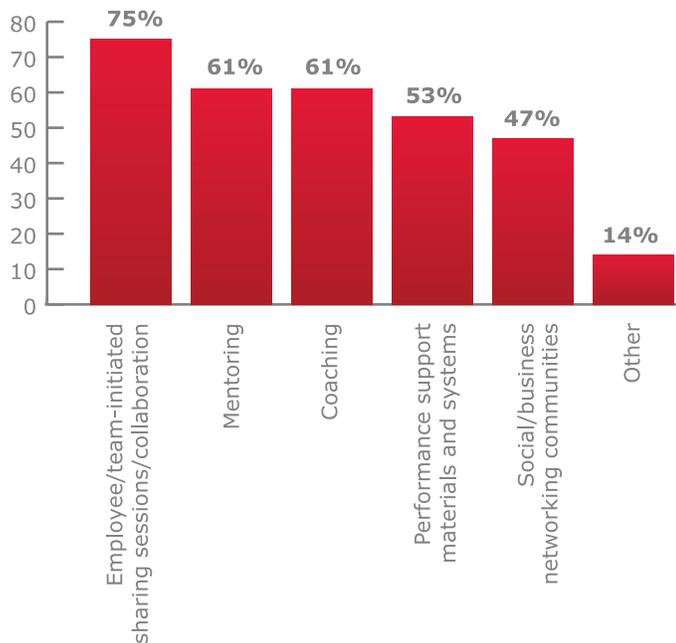


Do You Believe That Social Media Offer Valuable Learning Opportunities for Your Workforce?



One interesting point made by a few participants was that "people tend to trust their networks." This creates an interesting dilemma in learning because typically the experts and thought leaders in a field are defined by the industry as a whole. Through social media resources, individuals can choose their own experts, decide who they trust and seek out information and ideas directly. The fact is, not every contributor is an expert and not every source or idea is valid. Without the filter of the employer or the industry determining who is a true expert and which information is accurate, informal learning via social media gives credence to a much broader scope of resources and information.

Which Informal Learning Approaches Have You Found to Be Most Useful?



Social Media Are Making an Organizational Impact

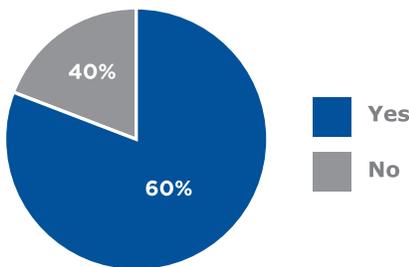
A clear majority of participants (82%) use social media to advance their own professional skills and resources. Another 81% believe that social media offer valuable learning opportunities to their workforce. The fact that so many survey participants leverage social media personally and see it as a learning tool for the workforce shows that social media have pervaded the workplace and are widely accepted as a professional networking and development tool.

The vast majority of respondents agreed that social media tools like LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, Wikis and blogs are changing the way people access information.

Social Media Skepticism Is Healthy As Well

Survey participants were clear in expressing skepticism about social media's ability to be a truly effective and efficient learning tool. For example, many respondents wrote in their concerns that employees might waste significant time using social media sites and tools. A handful of participants' companies actually block access to social media sites due to corporate confidentiality and privacy issues or the regulatory environment of its business sector. The broad openness and empowerment of the individual are too high a risk for some businesses. More and more businesses might be addressing this through internal collaboration and networking sites. For example, 60% of respondents said their businesses create internal online communities. These systems or sites might be traditional intranets and user groups that have been around a while or they could be part of new functionality in enterprise applications that allow for more chat, file sharing and group creation features.

Does Your Business Create Internal Online Communities (User Groups, etc.) Where Employees Can Share Work-Related Information and Ideas Online?



Social Media Concerns: Security and Source

Not surprisingly, security (complying with corporate confidentiality and security policies) is the number one concern related to informal learning via social media. Security is always a high concern with emerging communication and information-sharing technologies. However, it is also tied with another concern for the first place position. The issue of "poor resource control" was also top of mind for survey respondents.

The concerns survey respondents have for security, compliance and the quality of the information resources that employees access via social media demonstrate how

important the issue of "source" is. Survey participants want to be sure the resources their employees are using to increase their knowledge and skills are legitimate.

Survey Reveals an Adoption Hurdle

In the cycle of technology adoption, there is a period when early adopters are far ahead of the general population. It's a time of nervousness for the unindoctrinated. Social media have become part of mainstream social interaction and it is influencing the way employees gather information and knowledge to do their jobs. Barring the workforce from social media learning opportunities could result in the business missing out on key advantages. However, productivity, security and quality risks keep most businesses and learning leaders on the sidelines watching.

In terms of informal learning, this survey indicates we are at a key turning point in the evolutionary adoption and acceptance of social media-based informal learning in the workplace. Businesses are taking cues from the workforce as to what social media might offer informal learning. Concerns are widespread, such as whether these tools are productivity drains that distract employees from the job and whether businesses can manage the information-sharing in smart ways that protect intellectual capital and corporate confidentiality.

Similar periods of confusion and caution can be seen when you look at the gradual integration of e-mail and mobile phones into the workplace. These two evolutions in technology-enabled workplace tools were also employee/user driven. First, employers stood on the sidelines to watch and see how these now business-essential tools could be integrated into the workplace. They had questions and concerns. Are cell phones too much of a distraction? Will they take people and business out of the office? Are they obnoxious and disruptive? Is e-mail too informal? Does it encourage less clarity and accuracy of language, hurting the professionalism of communications? Few businesses banned these technology innovations outright, but most were cautious in their integration. They allowed employees to pave the groundwork and then build the structure of rules and regulation around them.

A "Social" Conflict

While some of the concerns can be attributed to the very common resistance to new technologies and processes, the survey reveals one important divergence in the informal learning employers are embracing and

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the social learning enabled by social media. According to participants, in-person, interactive and collaborative social learning approaches (lunch and learns, mentoring and coaching) are the most useful in the workplace. Social media, however is more physically isolating, placing the learner in front of the computer screen but not face-to-face with peers, managers and colleagues. It can be collaborative and it can be social but it is not personal.

How valuable is the in-person, face-to-face, eye-to-eye contact in the learning process? For every skill it is different. No doctor will learn excellent bedside manner through blogs, wikis and social networking. That requires interaction with patients, shadowing good doctors and practice. Similarly, sales professionals need the human

element (eye contact, questions, body language) to learn how to successfully interact with prospects. This can happen through mentoring and coaching but social media's artificial environment does not offer a realistic informal training ground in many areas.

As with all training mediums, there are limitations and ironically, social media's limitation is a social one. It does not allow for some of the most effective informal learning interactions, such as the eye contact and social cues, which are essential to learning things like behavior and language. This shortfall must be reconciled as businesses consider how to incorporate social media into learning in terms of both formal programs and the cultural embrace required to foster informal learning.

CARA's Advice:

Leverage the Social Side of Social Media to Enhance Informal Learning

Despite concerns that expertise through social media is hard to verify, security is challenging to maintain and risks of distraction are high, social media's strength and popularity continues to grow. In fact, this resilience despite marketplace concerns is often the hallmark of technology adoption. With the very large and influential millennial generation joining the workforce in a marketplace rife with social media tools and technologies, employers cannot afford to ignore its influence in the workplace and on employee habits and skills.

To make the most of social media-sponsored informal learning, CARA advises employers to consider the following strategies.

Strategy One:

Choose Your Tools

Identify the social media tools you feel are most beneficial to your enterprise and endorse them as workplace-friendly learning resources. If employees know that LinkedIn is considered a work-friendly workplace tool, but not MySpace or Facebook, they have guidelines for their informal learning choices. Some businesses—especially those with heavy regulatory restrictions—will choose to create internal collaboration and social media applications that allow for the rich networking and information-sharing abilities while minimizing security and confidentiality risks. Others will align social media sites and tools with their industry and guide employees to the resources that offer the most learning potential.

Strategy Two:

Begin to Build a Code of Conduct for Social Media

Employees, like employers, are still learning their way around social media. Recent court cases regarding what can and can't be said via social networks are just one piece of evidence that this is very new workplace territory. CARA advises businesses to work in partnership with employees to define how social media can and should be used in the workplace for learning purposes. For every organization, this process will be different so it is important to incorporate learning teams, employees and management into the collaboration process.

Rather than looking at this from a Draconian perspective—what cannot be done, what rules should be in place, what punishments should be—CARA encourages businesses to embrace the knowledge opportunity. Find out from employees how social media are enhancing their productivity. Find out how to encourage more self-directed learning and ideas for maintaining focus and security integrity.

Strategy Three:

Social Media Lunch and Learn

Consider hosting some lunch and learn sessions via an internal social media tool. For example, every third lunch and learn could occur via webcast as a way to include colleagues from many geographies and increase the use of new media workers across all generations. This approach will not only help workers across generations increase their comfort with web-based collaborative learning, but will also give learning leaders ways to analyze the pros and cons of in-person versus online informal learning events.

A Young, Ambitious and Impossible to Ignore Learning Medium

The results of this survey leave little doubt that social media have an important role to play in the learning and development of today's business professionals. However, we are still in the infancy of this technology-enabled learning advancement. Businesses that recognize the opportunity and address it are not only placing themselves ahead of the curve in terms of technology but also in terms of workforce recruitment and retention.

Ignoring social media's informal learning influence is tantamount to ignoring the fact that a new generation of workers—workers adept at and immersed in social media—are beginning to flood the market. Keeping pace with their learning resources and habits is essential to successfully managing, training and cultivating the workforce both today and tomorrow.

About CARA Group

The CARA Group, Inc. is a consulting firm specializing in custom learning and performance solutions for Fortune 500 organizations. Headquartered in Oak Brook, IL, CARA provides clients with highly qualified consultants who design, develop and implement flexible solutions to meet their training needs. By quickly and cost effectively delivering world-class consulting services, CARA helps clients build programs that directly contribute to an organization's productivity and growth.

To learn more or to see how CARA may be able to help your organization achieve its productivity goals, please contact the CARA Group, Inc. at 866.401.2272 or info@caracorp.com. Visit us online at www.caracorp.com.

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