

Informal learning at workplace

Real case study from the private companies in Bulgaria

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Introduction

Informal learning accounts for over 75% of the learning taking place in organizations today. Often, the most valuable learning takes place serendipitously, by random chance. Most companies, however, focus only on formal learning programs, losing valuable opportunities and outcomes. To truly understand the learning in the organization we have to recognize the informal learning already taking place and put in practices to cultivate and capture more of what people learn. This includes strategies for improving learning opportunities for everyone and tactics for managing and sharing what people know.

“Organizations today are seeking new ways to understand and deliver learning outside the classroom ... The reasons for this trend are many, but it is in large part fuelled by radical changes in the global market-place that have pushed many organizations to work, organize, think and learn in very different ways... Businesses that cannot respond quickly to customer needs and often find their markets overtaken by 'foreign' companies. The threat to the bottom line has forced businesses into re-evaluating timehonoured ways of working... Businesses have turned to their human resources to help them survive and flourish. A key component of a new way of working with employees is continuous learning for continuous improvement ...” (Watkins&Marsick, 1992, p. 287)

“The most challenging question might be if it is possible or preferable at all to formalise the non-formal without losing the potential of the non-formal in itself. Non-formal learning does not necessarily contrast formal learning, but still non-formal learning has its main characteristics as something taken place alongside and opposing the formal, which gives it strength. If non-formal learning is put into schemes and curricula, then it is endangered of just becoming formal, with "no chance of escape". If the "non-formal" becomes "formal" it might turn into a new set of overwhelming demands socially and on the individual, feeling forced to comply.” (Jensen 2005)

Informal Learning

In 1977, the OECD concluded that self-directed learning (the conscious part of informal learning) accounts for “approximately two thirds of the total learning efforts of adults” (OECD, 1977, p. 20). In the first Canadian study on (conscious) informal learning, Livingstone (2000) finds that 95% of all adult Canadians study informally and for an average of 15 hours per week. Moreover, the survey confirmed informal learning as relevant to many areas of life (e.g. work, volunteering, household, hobbies/areas of personal interest).

In job-related education, the “Berichtssystem Weiterbildung VII” (reporting system for advanced vocational training VII) (BMBF 1999) found that almost three of four employees study informally to increase professional knowledge. Allen Tough rounds up with a slightly higher percentage (Tough, 1978). Staudt and Kriegesmann conclude from a poll that only 20% of all educational processes are covered by advanced vocational training (Staudt & Kriegesmann, 2002). Analogically, Sam Campell discovered in the Honeywell-Studies that 80% of all learning by managers results from professional experience and personal exchange with colleagues and employees (Zemke 1985).

One of the studies about informal learning, conducted in small- and medium-size companies in the IT sector, was presented by Dehnbostel et al (1999). In its quantitative section 110 companies were polled, the qualitative section offers a detailed description of on-site informal learning processes within the companies. Considering all learning activities, the focal point were communication processes such as continuous exchange about work tasks or professional challenges among colleagues. Deliberation resulting from this exchange between co-workers is at the focus of these learning strategies.

Most notable in the review and comparison of existing studies on informal learning reveals a plethora of considerably diverging definitions and terminologies. This diversity of perspectives is symptomatic for an examination of a multilayered phenomenon such as informal learning.

Definitions and Discussions

The category of informal learning originated from the stock of terminology by John Dewey. Later, derived from “Informal Adult Education” by Knowles (1950), it was adopted by American adult education. Later Coombs and Ahmed defined informal learning as the lifelong process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment — at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitude of families and friends; from travel, reading newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally informal education is unorganized, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet accounts for the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning — including that of a highly “schooled” person. (1974) More recently, Marsick and Watkins have said that “informal learning can be deliberately encouraged by an organization, or it can take place despite an environment not highly conducive to learning.” It is “usually intentional but not highly structured” (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 12, quoted in Marsick & Watkins, 2001, p. 25). Alan Rogers offers a broader definition of informal learning as “all that incidental learning, unstructured, unpurposeful but the most extensive and most important part of all the learning that all of us do everyday of our lives” (Rogers, 2003, quoted in Rogers, 2004). Finally, Sousa and Quarter sum up such learning, saying that it is learning resulting from daily life activities relating to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or incidental/random) (2003)

For its own discourse on education within the European Union, the European Commission has agreed on the following definition (European Commission 2001):

Formal Learning

Learning or studying, usually happening in an educational or vocational context, which is organized and structured (in regard to goals of learning, time slots assigned to learning or learning support) and leads to a degree or certificate. For the student, formal learning is goal oriented.

Non-formal learning

Learning or studying, occurring in an institutional context (e.g. an educational or vocational institution), which does not result in formally recognized grades, degrees or certificates. Nevertheless, non-formal learning is methodic (in regard to goals of learning, duration of learning and learning instruments). For the student, non-formal learning is goal oriented.

Informal Learning

Learning or studying, happening in daily life, at work, within family life or on leisure time, which is not structured or organized (in regard to goals of learning, time slots assigned to learning or learning support) and usually does not lead to any kind of certificate. Informal learning may be goal oriented but in most cases happens unintentionally, coincidentally or at random.

In summary, the difference between formal/non-formal and informal learning may be specified accordingly: “On the one hand, informal learning means by-product learning, occurring along the way, considered neither the aim nor the effect of any action. On the other hand, the term encompasses all learning activities outside organized forms of education, undertaken with the deliberate goal of learning but facilitated in informal settings. These processes of learning – unlike formal or non-formal learning – are arranged not by any kind of institution but by the individual learner.” (BMBF, 2004, p.146).

Given the fluidity in the definition of these terms, other authors advocate for the intersection of informal and formal studying as a continuum (Sommerlad & Stern 1999).

Frequently, informal learning is part of organizational, professional or occupational contexts and serves to cope with tasks, requirements or facilitates in problem solving. In other words: “Informal learning is instrumental learning, a means to an end. Unlike formal learning, its goal is not information itself, but

improving one's solution to an extracurricular task, a given requirement, or a problem of life by learning" (Dohmen, 2001, p.19).

There exist different views as to what extent informal learning is categorically not focused on educational objectives and results. In contrast to the definition above, Dehnbostel and Uhe demarcate formal and informal learning distinctively – the latter focusing on practical objectives and purposes, not learning options (Dehnbostel & Uhe, 1999).

Further, the question of informal learning including subconscious routes to knowledge and subsequently, whether and how it may be delineated from generic cycles of socialization yields substantially divergent answers. Livingstone, for example, bases his studies on informal learning in Canada on an interpretation of the term closely aligned with self-directed learning and delineates everyday perception and common socialization by relating informal learning to a deliberate act of acquiring important knowledge (Livingstone, 1999).

An early and influential study on the subject in the context of work by Marsick and Watkins (2001) includes the attempt to develop a "Theory of Informal and Incidental Learning in Organizations". The authors understand informal learning as umbrella term, including any conscious, deliberate, as well as subconscious and random learning efforts outside academic settings. They outline their term consequently:

- "Reflection without action", theory-based studying without action is a feature of formal study.
- Generally, informal learning means contemplated studying efforts outside academic settings ("action with reflection")
- Unintended learning in a non-academic setting is a special kind of informal learning ("action without reflection")
- When an "absence of action and reflection" may be attested, "non-learning" is the result. That is to say: a behavioural change without a personal effort of studying may be rather attributed to indirect effects of socialization than to learning (Watkins&Marsick, 1992, p. 290).

The importance of informal learning at work

Another major issue arising from the research relates to the importance of informal learning at work. Informal learning has been under recognised both in terms of reporting in statistics and its importance as a valid form of workplace learning. It is argued that both formal and informal learning are valuable to skill formation, and it is important to find the right balance between them. In a study of workplace trainers, Harris, Simons and Bone (2000) found informal workplace learning to be of central importance and, furthermore, that there was an inter-relationship between learning and work.

That is to say, informal workplace learning is not merely an ad hoc process, but part of a deliberate strategy which takes into account the work which needs to be done and the skills needed to do the work. This may, for example, involve giving employees a variety of tasks, or arranging the work in a manner which maximises learning opportunities.

Informal workplace learning is of particular importance to small businesses. Various studies have found that, contrary to available statistics, there is a considerable amount of training taking place in small businesses, although it tends to be informal. For example, Smith et al. (2002) point out that small businesses are committed to training but lack the internal resources to undertake more formal approaches. Kearns (2002) points to the fact that small businesses rely to a large extent on informal learning as a way of achieving immediate business needs. He also argues that in the future more attention should be paid to developing formal approaches. Figgis et al. (2001) argue that formal and informal learning should be used together, with informal learning amplifying the value of formal learning.

While there is now considerable agreement that the workplace is an important site for learning some believe that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of privileging "informal" learning (Rainbird, Munro & Holly, 2004) and that the potential benefits of employee learning through traditional knowledge and skill-based courses and qualifications have been downplayed (Pajo, Mallon & Ward, 2005).

In an effort to establish some measure of rapprochement amongst these diverse approaches to employee development Fuller and Unwin (2004) proposed a heuristic that categorises work place learning environments on a continuum ranging from restrictive to expansive. According to Fuller and Unwin expansive learning environments are identifiable by such features as: employee participation in multiple

communities of practice including those external to the workplace; a shared tradition of development within the primary community of practice; encouragement of diverse learning in terms of tasks, knowledge and location of the development experience; promotion of learning as a vehicle for employee career advancement and building organisational capability; organisational acknowledgement and support for employees as learners; employee development initiatives that provide opportunities for boundary crossing; a workforce where skills are broadly distributed; and a workplace where technical skills are valued and managers act as facilitators of employee development. In contrast a restrictive learning environment is one where: participation in multiple communities of practice is limited; there is no shared tradition of development within the community of practice; learning opportunities are limited in terms of tasks, knowledge and location of the development experience; most learning is on-the-job with few chances for reflection; workplace learning is purely focussed on developing skills required for the employee's current job; there is little in the way of organisational acknowledgement or support for employees as learners.

Access and opportunity appear to be two key determinants in the ability of workplaces to provide positive learning experiences for their employees which bring benefits to the wider organisation.

Individual responsibility for learning

The interaction between individual agency and organisational factors is a feature of the workplace learning models proposed by Billett (2002a; 2004) and Fuller and Unwin (2004). They suggest that the quality of learning at work is a product of both workplace affordances (Fuller and Unwin's expansive or restrictive learning environments) and individual engagement. Individual engagement is the process by which a participant chooses to take up the opportunities present in the workplace, a decision determined by a participant's values, knowledge, understandings and learning history. Learning at work is premised on the dual and reciprocal interaction of these two elements. As Billett (2002b) has observed "individual agency mediates engagement with activities and what is learned through participation" such that individual engagement is co-participative "an interaction between how the workplace affords participation and individuals engage in that social practice" (p.29).

An emerging body of research on proactive individual behaviour in organisations (Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001; Parker, 2000) may assist in understanding the interplay of individual and organisational factors influencing learning and the development of capability in and for the workplace.

In developing a model of antecedents and consequences of proactive behaviour Crant argues that there are two classes of proactive behaviour: 1) challenging the status quo, and 2) creating favourable conditions, that lead to improved job performance and career success. The antecedents of these are a combination of dispositional and situational factors. For instance, personal disposition or proactive personality, and the context of organisational norms towards proactive behaviour.

In an attempt to understand these dispositional factors Frese and Fay (2001) argue that personal initiative and proactivity at work are linked to individual self efficacy and self esteem. In a work setting it has been found that self esteem is impacted by feedback from managers, job designs which convey trust in workers as competent people, opportunity to experience success and recognition for it (Gardner & Pierce, 1998). Self-efficacy has been extensively researched in the employee development literature, particularly with regard to individual characteristics affecting motivation and participation. Self-efficacy has been strongly linked to motivation to learn, post-training self-efficacy and transfer.

Contextual & Organizational Factors Shaping Informal Workplace Learning

The workplace has always been considered an important setting in which adults learn (Dirkx, 1999; Matthews & Candy, 1999). However, interest in workplace learning has intensified in recent years (Billett, 2002; Boud & Garrick, 1999; Collin, 2002; Ellstrom, 2001; Illeris, 2003; Stern & Sommerlad, 1999). Workplace learning can take many forms such as formal, institutionally sponsored learning including training and human resource development initiatives, as well as informal and incidental learning (Matthews, 1999; Watkins, 1995).

Research, however, has suggested that informal learning takes precedence over formal learning, and comprises the majority of learning that occurs in the workplace (Day, 1998; Enos, Kehrhahn & Bell, 2003; Leslie, Aring, & Brand, 1998; Lohman, 2000; Marsick & Watkins, 1997; Skule, 2004).

Although it is not a new phenomenon, informal workplace learning has attracted considerable attention in the literature (Skule, 2004). The trends toward employees assuming more significant roles in their own learning processes, the importance being placed upon learning as a core competency and lifelong process, and the recognition of learning as a source of sustainable competitive advantage for individuals and organizations alike have also stimulated tremendous interest in informal learning (London & Smither, 1999; Westbrook & Veale, 2001). Additionally, the growing focus on creating organizational environments that promote cultures, policies, and procedures conducive to fostering continuous learning has also influenced the importance of informal learning in the workplace (Dirkx, 1999; Senge, 1990; Marsick & Watkins, 1999).

It has been acknowledged that an organization provides an environment for learning that either facilitates or inhibits learning, yet few research studies have examined the extent to which the organization's environment serves to enhance learning (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Watkins and Cervero (2000) have suggested that there is some evidence in the larger field of human resource development that a focus on the learning of individuals is less significant than a focus on the organization as a context for learning.

While the notion of context permeates the informal learning process, the interplay between informal learning and the context in which it occurs has been a largely unexamined area of inquiry (Cseh, 1999; Lohman, 2000) contextual factors that may shape employees' informal learning and their facilitation of others' learning is critical to advancing our understanding of how informal learning is facilitated, encouraged, supported and nurtured within the workplace. In particular, Skule (2004) has acknowledged that research on assessing and measuring the contextual and organizational factors that promote or impede informal learning at work is underdeveloped. Although the Marsick and Watkins model of informal and incidental learning that has been empirically tested in numerous studies that have focused on how individuals learn in organizations, they suggest that their model would be enhanced by additional studies.

Informal Learning by Professionals

However, there has been much less effort expended on determining how professionals in practice carry forward their learning and development beyond the initial qualifying period. Empirical research by Cheetham and Chivers was conducted in the late 1990s, involving a large number of professionals in England reporting on their informal learning following their entry into the relevant profession. Interviews with 80 professionals from 20 different professions, and a questionnaire survey of 372 professionals from six selected professions have revealed that English professionals learn by a whole variety of informal methods (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001).

The research has revealed that while these informal learning methods are well established and widely used, many individual professionals have pro-actively employed only a small number of them. More recent research by Eraut et al., (1997) into the development of knowledge and skills in the workplace should also be acknowledged. This latter study included some professional occupations, although it was not specifically focused on professions; but rather on higher level workers in three occupational fields; engineering, healthcare and business. Eraut's team conducted semi-structured interviews with managers, technicians and a number of professionals from each sector. This research revealed once more that higher level workers, including professionals learn a great deal by informal (and incidental) methods at work (and even outside work), and do so in a wide variety of ways.

In considering the Eraut et al. list of learning episodes, it is also notable that learning by reflection on practice does not explicitly appear. Given that the study included professionals in the sample of interviewees, and given the generally very strong emphasis on Donald Schön's work on reflective practice when considering professional learning and development, this result may seem anomalous.

There is no doubt that Schön's research and publications have had a major impact on thinking and practice concerning the development of professionals in the USA, the UK and many other countries around the world (Schön, 1983 and 1987). Indeed, for certain professions in England, such as teaching, nursing and social work, initial professional development programmes include much formal teaching and learning about reflective practice. Research concerned with professional development has until recent years largely focused on specific professions.

Gear et al., (1994) reported that up to the 1990s there seemed to have been a dearth of research which was cross-professional rather than profession specific, and which had a significant focus on informal learning. Gear et al., (1994) themselves carried out an investigation across seven professions in regard to 'informal learning projects'. Informal learning methods involved included: reading, visits, meetings, practice, audit and conversations.

More recently Eraut et al., (1997) have looked at the development of knowledge and skills in the workplace. This study included some professional occupations, but was not specifically focused on professions. The study involved semi-structured interviews with managers, technicians and a number of professionals drawn from the engineering, healthcare and business sectors. These researchers identified nine broad types of learning episode, such as short courses, organised learning support, consultation and collaboration within the working group, the challenge of the work itself, etc. And various factors that affected learning at work – confidence, how a person is managed, the micro-climate of organization, etc.

Poell et al., (2000) have gone further into how the nature of the work of different types of work organisation influences the ways in which workers, including professionals, seek to gain knowledge. These researchers have studied in considerable depth how some groups of professionals organise themselves to learn from so called 'learning projects'. However, the focus of the empirical research reported here has been on how professionals learn through their careers from an individual perspective.

There remains significant scope for considering the issue of the workplace as a venue and conduit for learning from the perspectives of both individual and organisation. There is still need for in-depth case study work, to ground further theory development in current workplace practices. Furthermore, studies are still required which look at individual learning in specific context, recognising that individuals will identify a range of structural conditions which may limit or facilitate their development (Huysman, 1999)

Methodology

Background and aims

The research in Bulgaria addressing the informal learning at work suffers of the lack of multi-layered methodology and investigations, Nevertheless this fact on the basis of a review of existing national surveys on skills, learning and training and mainly on the basis of a literature review and case studies described, the SM, NBU run a study of the informal learning at work between October 2008 and September 2009.

The aims of the study were to:

- a) Review existing literature and survey data on informal learning in the workplace;
- b) Provide an analysis of practices about informal learning at work in 24 private companies in Bulgaria;
- c) Propose ways to target case study material at a business audience in order to illustrate the range of practice of informal learning at work.
- d) Outline (design) next steps for future research in this context

Research question 1: To what extent and in what ways did employees engage in informal learning activities?

Research question2: What are the factors (personal and environmental) influencing their engagement in informal learning?

Research question3: What characteristics of the organizational culture support the informal learning at work?

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

As we mentioned before, there is a growing interest and emphasis on informal learning activities at work and on creating organizational environments that are conducive to fostering learning. Several scholars suggest that these types of learning oriented organizations represent new frontiers for adult learning that occurs in the workplace (Marsick & Watkins, 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Yet, despite the importance of the work environment on informal learning, there is not a thorough understanding of how contextual factors within such organizations shape informal learning and the facilitation of informal learning (Karakowsky & McBey, 1999; Lohman, 2000; Marsick & Watkins, 1997).

Therefore, an organization that espouses a philosophy and commitment to employee development, individual, team, and organizational learning by implementing strategies consistent with the learning organization literature was selected and presented an optimal setting in which to explore the types of informal learning activities and environmental factors that shape informal learning. Environmental factors may be more manifest within such an organization that espouses an orientation to learning. However, it is possible that the espoused philosophy and commitment to learning may be rhetoric. Therefore, the purposeful selection of 24 private companies represented a unique environment to situate this study.

Selection of the Companies, Participants and Demographic Profile

A stratified purposeful strategy was used to identify practitioners at different levels within the organizations representing different functional areas to provide a richer and broader understanding of how people engage in informal learning at work and the organizational factors that may shape informal learning and its facilitation within this organization. A total of 145 employees representing senior management level (12.43 %), mid- supervisory level (16.54 %) managers, and lower level employees (71.03%) from various functional areas (such as human resources, finance, quality and customer service, product development and design, process improvement, strategy, and manufacturing) were chosen.

This study was conducted in 24 private companies in Bulgaria - small (25 %), medium (42 %) and large companies (33 %) located in Sofia. The companies were from different sectors, leading providers of insurance and bank products, building sector, water transport, consultancy, manufacture, telecommunications, TV, automobile sector, etc. The management of these companies was as follows: 58 % typical Bulgarian management and 42 % - with a mixture of Bulgarian and foreign type of management. (See Table 1). This site was selected for the study because of the strong companies desire to form a research partnership, and its interest in the outcomes of the study (Jacobs, 1997).

Table 1 Characteristic of the companies and type of management

| Position in the companies | n | % |
|----------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Top manager | 18 | 12.43 |
| Middle manager | 24 | 16.54 |
| Expert/Specialist | 103 | 71.03 |
| Total | 145 | 100 |
| Size of organizations | | |
| Small | 6 | 25 |
| Medium | 10 | 42 |
| Large | 8 | 33 |
| Total | 24 | 100 |
| Type of Management | | |
| Bulgarian | 14 | 58 |
| Mixed | 10 | 42 |
| Total | 24 | 100 |

All of the 145 employees invited to participate, took part by completing a questionnaire survey adopted for the study. The participants were 102 (70 %) women and 43 (30 %) men, and their average age was thirty seven years. 58 % of the participants had between 1- 5 years of work experience for current employer, 27 % had six to ten years of work experience, 8 % had 11 - 15 years, and 7 % had between 16 – 20 years. Most participants (53.8 %) had a bachelor's degree, 38 % held a master's degree and only 8.20 % held a college degree (See Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents n %

| Gender | n | % |
|--|------------|--------------|
| Male | 43 | 30 |
| Female | 102 | 70 |
| Total | 145 | 100.0 |
| Years Worked for Current Employer | | |
| 0 - 5 | 84 | 58 |
| 6 - 10 | 39 | 27 |
| 11 - 15 | 12 | 8 |
| 16 - 20 | 10 | 7 |
| > 20 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 145 | 100.0 |
| Educational Level | | |
| High school | 12 | 8.20 |
| Bachelor | 78 | 53.8 |
| Master | 55 | 38.0 |
| Doctorate | 0 | |
| Total | 145 | 100.0 |

Data Collection

Some months prior to the study, SM, NBU with the support of HR professionals and in some places with the support of managers employed by the companies conducted focus group interviews with employees to see their perception about informal learning at work and how people engage in such type of activities. The use of these perceptions not only served as data collection tools, they also represented approaches to strengthen the data collected from the questionnaire.

Procedures

All data were collected using a questionnaire survey. Using the sponsoring company’s internal mailing system, the questionnaire were mailed to 145 employees. The practitioners were given a five -week period to take part in the study.

Empirical research methods

The research conducted by SM, NBU which forms the substantial basis of this paper took the form of questionnaire survey with 145 practitioners from 24 private companies. Descriptive statistics (frequency counts, means, and standard deviations) were used to analyze the responses to the closed-ended items. The themes that emerged relating to the informal learning at work and organizational factors shaping it for the dataset are presented following the brief overview of the research setting.

1. Informal learning activities –frequency of engagement

The survey respondents (N = 145) were invited to rate the frequency of each of eight types of informal learning activities (on a 1-7 point scale - 1 _ never, 2 _ seldom, 3 _ sometimes, 4 _ often, 5_ usually, 6_ almost always, 7_ always). The score was calculated by accumulating participants’ responses to each suggested item to the appropriated level of the scale.

- reflect on employee own previous knowledge and actions
- learn from own trial and error
- observe others without interacting with them

- search the web (including intranet)
- read professional magazines and/or journals
- talk with other people at work face to face
- interact with other people at work via email, social networks
- ask questions in professional listservs

2. Personal factors: was a measure of participants' perceptions of the degree to which the personal factors supports (influences) the informal learning at work. Perceptions were measured using a seven-point scale (1 _ not at all, 7 _ very much). The score was calculated by accumulating participants' responses to each suggested item to the appropriated level of the scale.

- job satisfaction
- interest in the current professional field
- self-evaluation of the professional capabilities
- the type of job itself

3. Work environment factors: was a measure of participants' perceptions of the degree to which the work environment factors supports (influences) the informal learning at work. Perceptions were measured using a seven-point scale (1 _ not at all, 7_ very much)

The score was calculated by accumulating participants' responses to each suggested item to the appropriated level of the scale.

- physical proximity to colleagues
- relationship with colleagues
- employee access to computer technology
- employee work environment (e.g., cubicle vs. office)
- monetary rewards given for good performance

4. Organizational culture factors. Was a measure of participants' perceptions of the degree to which the organizational culture supports (influences) the informal learning at work?

Perceptions were measured using a six-point scale: 1 _ almost never, 2 _ seldom, 3 _ sometimes, 4 _ often, 5_ usually, and 6 _ almost always.

The score was calculated by accumulating participants' responses to each suggested item to the appropriated level of the scale.

- people openly discuss mistakes in order to learn from them.
- people view problems in their work as an opportunity to learn.
- people give open and honest feedback to each other.
- teams/groups focus both on the group's task and on how well the group is working.
- teams/groups revise their thinking as a result of group discussions or information collected.
- teams/groups are rewarded for their achievements as a team/group.
- organization uses two-way communication
- organization recognizes people for taking initiative.
- organization invites people to contribute to the organization's vision.
- organization supports employees who take calculated risks.
- leaders generally support requests for learning opportunities and training.
- leaders mentor and coach those they lead.
- leaders continually look for opportunities to learn.

Results

Three research questions concerning the informal learning engagement of employees were examined. A report of the findings is presented in this section.

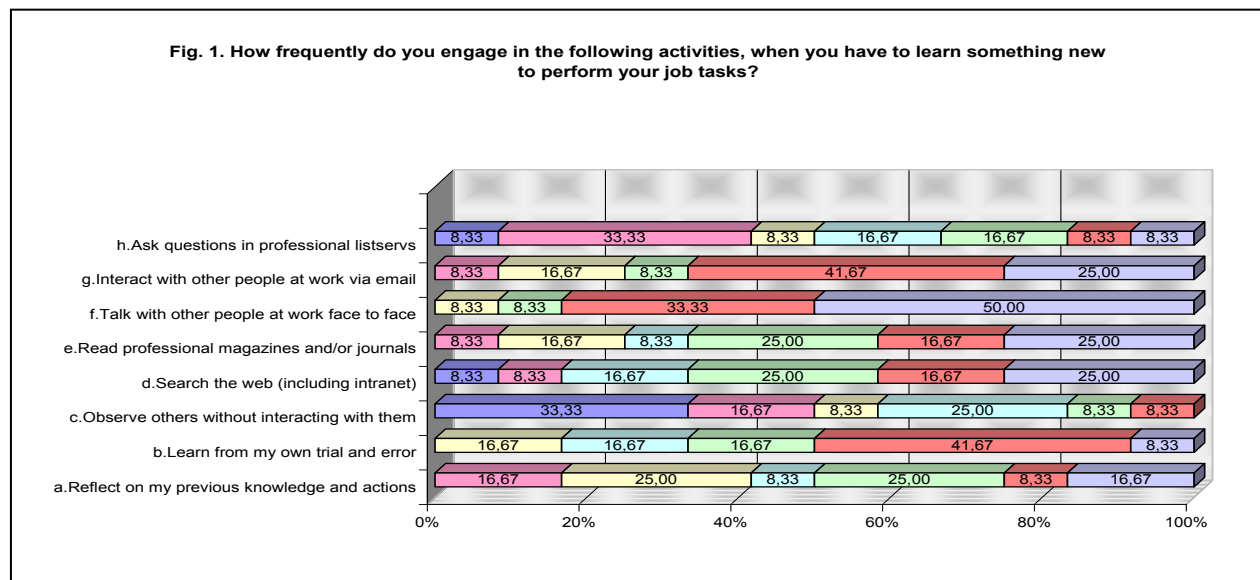
Informal Learning Activities

The Mean scores for the frequency with which the respondents use each of the eight informal learning activities ranged from a high from a high of 3.0 (SD = 2.45) when talking with others to a low of 1.71 (SD = 1.11) for observing others.

| Mean Score of the frequency with which respondents engage in informal learning | N | M | SD |
|--|-----|------|-------|
| Reflect on previous knowledge and actions | 145 | 2 | 0.894 |
| Learn from own trial and error | 145 | 2.4 | 1.52 |
| Observe others without interacting with them | 145 | 2.0 | 1.26 |
| Search the web (including intranet) | 145 | 2.0 | 0.894 |
| Read professional magazines and/or journals | 145 | 2.0 | 0.894 |
| Talk with other people at work face to face | 145 | 3.0 | 2.45 |
| Interact with other people at work via email | 145 | 2.4 | 1.67 |
| Ask questions in professional listservs | 145 | 1.71 | 1,11 |

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently used informal learning activity was “to talk with other people at work face to face” (50 % of respondents always engaged in this type of activity). The second and third most frequently used activities were “interact with other people via e-mail” (M = 2.4, SD = 1.52) and “learn from own trial and error” .

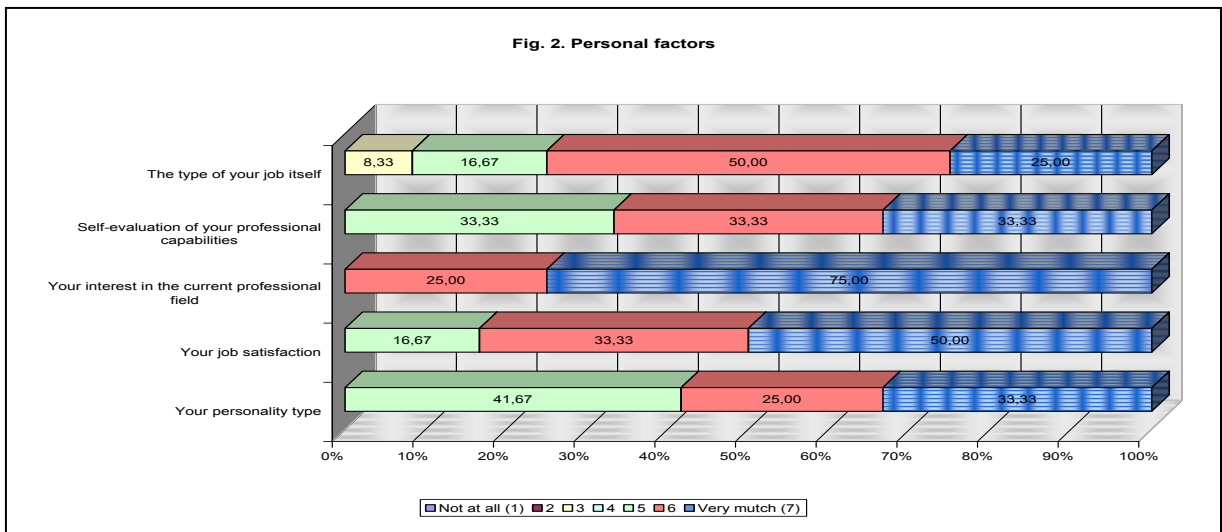
The less frequently used informal learning activity was “observing others without interacting with them”. Approximately thirty three percent of the participants (33.33%) indicated that they never engage in this informality at work.



Personal Characteristics Enhancing Motivation to Engage in Informal Learning

Figure 2 shows the extent to which each of the five personal characteristics enhances the employee engagement in the informal learning activities. A ranking of the mean scores showed that two personal characteristics were most useful in enhancing the motivation of the employees to engage in the informal learning activities – “interest in the current professional field” (M = 4, SD =1.1) and job satisfaction (M = 3.5, SD =1.16)

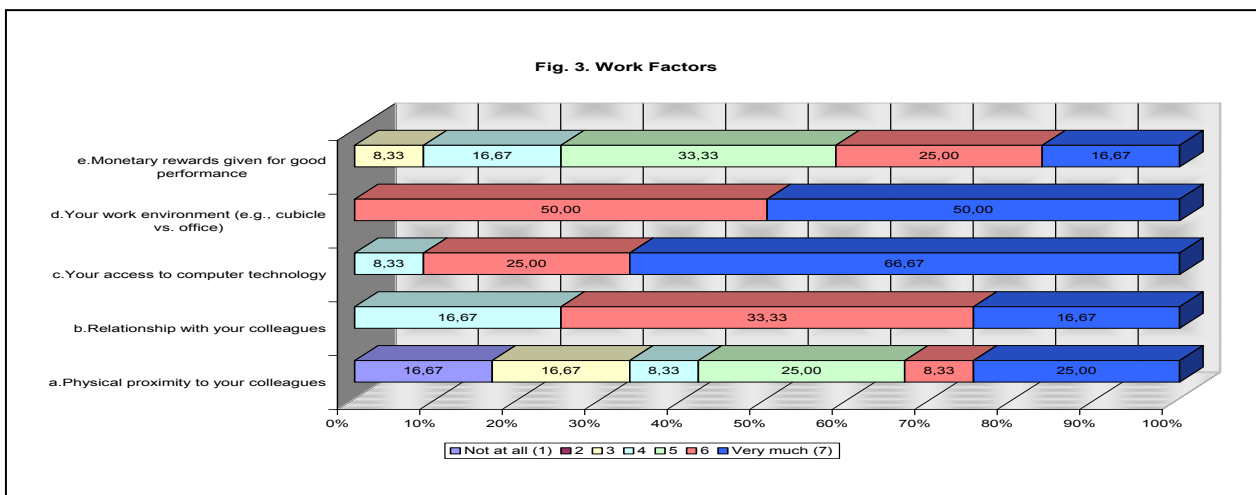
The interest in the current professional field, was reported by 75% of participants (answering with “very much”). Job satisfaction was cited by 50% of respondents. The self-evaluation and the personality type was cited by 33, 33% of respondents. The type of job itself was reported by 25% of respondents.



Work Factors Influencing Informal Learning engagement

As shown in Figure 3, two organizational factors were found to be very important for the engagement of professionals in the informal learning activities: the access to computer technology (66,67 % of respondents answer with “very much”) and the work environment (50% - answer with “very much”). The remaining three factors—physical proximity, monetary rewards for good performance, and relationships with colleagues were not perceived by the respondents to be so important factors for engagement in informal learning activities. The less important factor is the physical proximity with colleagues (16,67 % of respondents answer with “not at all”).

The mean scores for the factors from this group range from a high of $M = 4.1$, $SD = 1.6$ to a low of $M = 1.4$, $SD = 0.82$.



Organizational culture factors

The analysis of the responses to the questions in this section of the survey found that mainly three factors from the context of organizational culture have impact on the informal learning activities studied (see figure 4, 5, 6 and 7).

Particularly, the supportive organizational culture included the following issues:

- Leaders generally support requests for learning opportunities and training (41, 67% of respondents answer with “almost always” and 25 % - with “usually”)
- Teams/groups focus both on the group's task and on how well the group is working. (16, 67% - “almost always” and 25% of respondents answer with “usually”)
- People openly discuss mistakes in order to learn from them (41, 67% of respondents answer with “almost always” and 16, 67 % - with “usually”)

Fig. 4 Organization's Culture

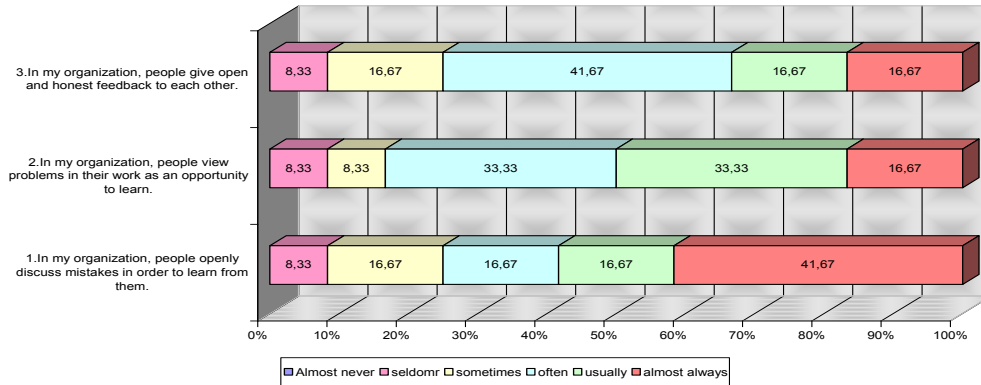
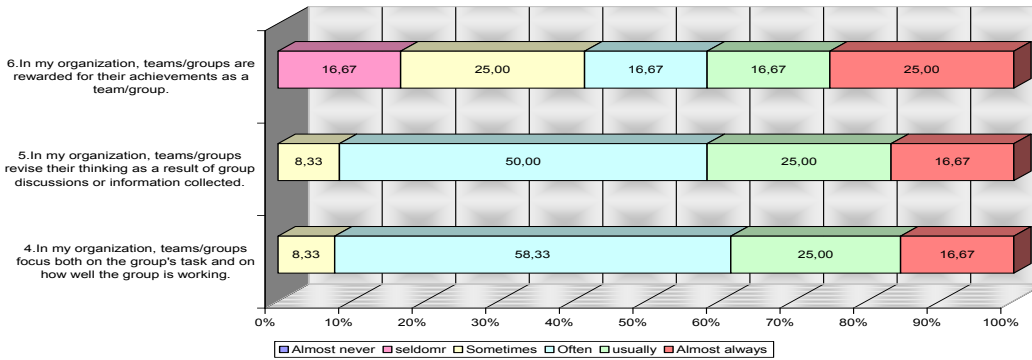


Fig. 5 Organization's Culture



The mean scores for these factors – for all learning activities were above 3.9, indicating that they were perceived by employees to be important for their engagement in informal learning at work.

Factors which have the least impact on informal learning:

- The teams/groups are rewarded for their achievements as a team/ (16, 67 % of respondents answer with “almost never” and 25% with “seldom”).
- People view problems in their work as an opportunity to learn. – (8.33% of respondents answer with “almost never” and 16, 67% with “seldom”).

The mean scores for these factors – for all learning activities were below 2.1, indicating that they were not perceived by employees to be important to engage in informal learning at work.

Fig. 6 Organization's Culture

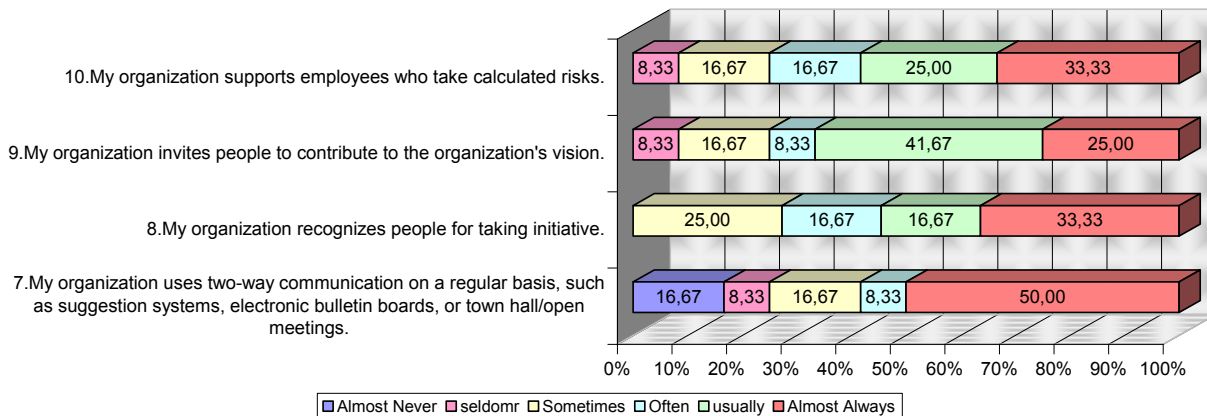
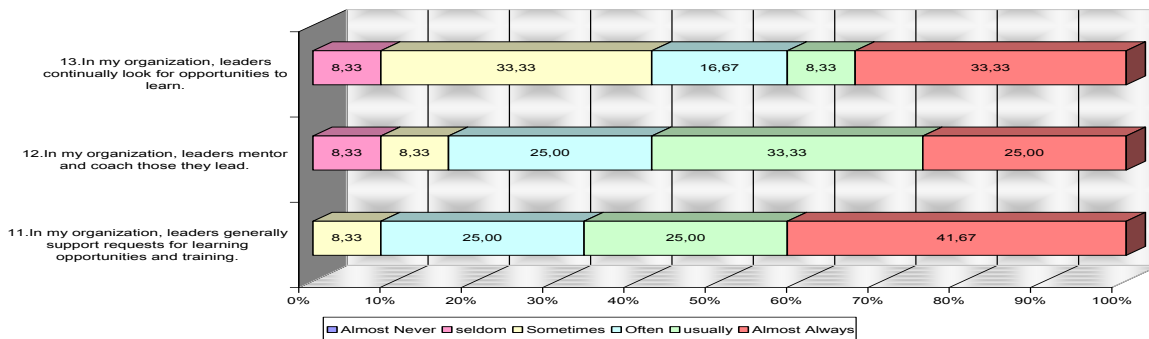


Fig. 7 Organization's Culture



Conclusion

A survey with 24 private companies in Bulgaria was conducted to describe the types of informal learning activities people engage in at work and factors that influence the informal learning in the workplace. 145 managers, HR practitioners and professionals participated in the study. Analysis of the data found that there were certain types of informal learning activities in which practitioners most likely to engage, such as “talking with other people face to face” and “interacting with others via e-mail”. The findings also include personal (interest in the current professional field and job satisfaction) and work factors (access to computer technology, work environment) that people perceived to influence their engagement in informal learning. The rank-ordered lists of factors that influence informal learning engagement are likely to be useful to practitioner for prioritizing informal learning interventions. The results of this study suggest that the degree of engagement in informal learning alone would not be a sufficient construct for predicting the presence of learning organization characteristics. In the light of these findings, companies should harness and leverage informal learning and cultivate the adequate competencies, as opposed to increasing spending on formal training programs. By applying these strategies, companies may develop more proficient employees, and gain a competitive advantage.

Future Research

The fast pace at which corporations operate today and the need for companies to remain competitive has unloaded a heavy burden on organizations and their staff. Opportunities for informal learning and supportive organizational culture must be harnessed and encouraged.

The study has several limitations (based mainly on quantitative data), so the results have to be interpreted as general tendencies, which need further exploration and multi – layer investigation, including more qualitative analyses and case studies.

The first important area for future research is to study whether the type of profession could influence stronger the engagement of people in the informal learning activities at work.

Second, to analyze and compare results in this context on the basis of several criteria:

- size of organizations – small, medium and large
- type of management – Bulgarian and mixed one (to see cross-cultural issues)
- generations working (baby boomers, X and Y)

A third important area for future research is to assess the degree to which an organization's culture, design, policies and procedures, and people support engagement in informal learning.

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