

Not Without Purpose

NO ONE HAS TIME. Life on earth is faster, faster, faster. We are inundated with information, showered with technological innovation, and pestered by multiple media 24/7. Business is a blur. Life is uncertain. People are stressed. Work is hell. It's time to do something about this new way of life.

A woman with a watch knows what time it is; a woman with two does not. Most of us wear watches set to agrarian age time, others to industrial age time, and yet others to Internet time. Our bodies, our workgroups, our families, our employers, and our global environment are out of sync. Our lives are incoherent because our worlds are changing faster than we are.

Nothing is more important to business success than the knowledge and know-how of workers. In the industrial era, management's role was showing workers what to do. In the knowledge era, workers want to learn, but hate to be trained because telling them how to do something insults their intelligence.

Study after study finds that workers get 80 percent of their job know-how informally. The choice is whether they do it well or to do it poorly. Important as it is, informal learning doesn't show up on the corporate radar because it isn't recorded in industrial-age charts of account. No one has a budget for it, but organizations that fail to leverage informal learning leave buckets of money on the table. In a knowledge era, it is irresponsible to disregard the prime means of creating, sharing, and replenishing intellectual capital.

Informal learning is effective because it is personal. The individual calls the shots. The learner is responsible. It's real. It's self-service. It is the only thing that will work with the digital natives who are now entering the workforce.

In the past, learning focused on what was in the individual's head. The individual took the test, got the degree, or earned the certificate. The new learning focuses on what it takes to do the job right. That includes the business environment, work flow, colleagues, partners, and customers.

Accelerated change

Informal learning is the path to organizational agility and profits. It also respects workers and challenges them to be all they can be. Informal does not mean without purpose. Generally, payback far exceeds what you get from traditional approaches. Informal learning is currently the low-hanging fruit of worker development.

Knowledge workers demand respect for who they are. They thrive when given the freedom to decide how they will do what is asked of them. They rise or fall to meet expectations. We need to set those expectations and then get out of the way.

Training, development, knowledge management, performance support, informal learning, and mentoring are all components of performance networks. Networks expand or die. Linking nodes distribute information and power. Networks subvert hierarchy. The flatter the organization, the denser its interconnections and the faster its throughput.

Humans exist in networks. We are members of social networks. Our heads contain neural networks. Learning consists of making and maintaining better connections to our networks—social, operational, commercial, or entertainment.

A superlative engineer can be 250 times more productive than an average performer. Making a great performer better creates more bang for the buck than moving an average performer up a notch. It's a human butterfly effect.

Free-range learning

Learning is successful adaptation to change.

Informal and formal learning are the end points of a continuum. On one end, formal learning is like riding a bus: The driver decides where the bus is going, while the passengers are along for the ride. On the opposite end, informal learning is like riding a bike: The rider chooses the destination, the speed, and the route. The rider can take a detour at a moment's notice to admire the scenery or use the bathroom.

Informal learning happens outside of class. There's no curriculum and no certificate of completion. Informal learning includes things like trying and failing, asking a neighbor, reading a book, or watching television. Informal learning is how we learn about life. It's how we make sense of things.

Formal learning—riding the bus—is great for novices. It's useful to have help getting the lay of the land and getting to the destination. Training departments are very talented at setting up bus routes.

Informal learning, what the bicyclists do, is most appropriate for people who already know the territory. They want tips on the new shortcuts and the essence of a topic. They want to plug the holes in their knowledge, and they won't sit still for bus rides to their destinations. Training departments don't devote much effort to helping cyclists.

Here's the irony: The cyclists are the high performers. Raising their performance 5 percent blows the roof off. (Whereas raising the performance of novices 5 percent doesn't even register.) When it comes to learning, most corporations are spending the most money where it will do the least good.

Some training departments justify treating everyone as a bus passenger by saying that riding the bus works for novices and the old pros. This is flat-out wrong. The bike riders will always find a reason not to take the ride. Workers with the most upside potential rarely receive any focused learning at all. Here are a few suggestions to correct the balance:

Envisioning. Visualization is transformative. Humans learn twice as well from images and words than from words alone. Pictures translate across cultures, education levels, and age groups. Yet the majority of the content of corporate learning is text. Schools spend years on verbal literacy but mere hours on visual literacy. It's time for us to open our eyes to the possibilities.

Visual literacy accelerates learning because the richness of the whole picture can be taken in at a glance. Visual metaphors unleash new ideas and spark innovation. Having a sharper eye increases the depth of one's perception and life enjoyment.

Conversation. Conversation creates knowledge. Frequent and open conversation increases innovation and learning. Workers come together to share, nurture, and validate the tricks of the trade.

Work is a demanding, pressure-packed, rats-in-the-maze race with the clock to get the job done. Home is a comfortable, private space for sharing time with family and individual interests. Neither work nor home, a World Café is a neutral spot where people come together to offer hospitality, enjoy comradeship, welcome diverse perspectives, and have meaningful conversations. Shared spaces encourage dialogue.

Get a third of a million people involved in a single

conversation, and it's sure to give you that real-time buzz. IBM has adopted it as a management approach for our open, flat times.

Connections. Knowledge workers waste billions of dollars of time looking for information and the right people to talk with. Good architecture and space planning facilitate learning. Organization network architecture connects people virtually by spotting bottlenecks and opportunities for integration.

The design of the workplace is an important component of productivity, yet architects create corporate buildings with the hierarchical floor plans and grid layouts from a previous era. Corporate efforts to reduce one-time costs and maximize usable space backfire because they hamper the work of the building's inhabitants for as long as it stands. Speaking metaphorically, you can't have water-cooler conversations if you remove the water coolers.

Inside every formal organization is an informal organization that runs the show through an undocumented series of personal and professional relationships. It is a living entity with a mind of its own. The informal organization is a community of people that runs on life's rules. You can influence it but not manage it; it's not for sale.

Organizational network analysis blueprints the interactions of the informal organization. Visualizing how people interact highlights potential opportunities and likely breakdowns.

People skills. Learning is the new work. The best way to take advantage of informal learning is to get out of its way. Less is more. Informal learning has no need for the busywork, chrome, and bureaucracy that accompany typical corporate training.

Today's worker chooses the employer. Does she find the company, its vision, and its people exciting? Will she have an opportunity to make a contribution?

People are emotional animals. Gut feelings are real. Stress disrupts productivity. Acting from the heart as well as the mind makes us better people and happier campers. In nature, you either escape the bear or get eaten. In the office, however, the mind conjures up bears that never let up. All-day stress overtakes the body. Perceptions lead to stress; changing those perceptions makes the bear go away. Stressed-out people don't learn well.

Free-range learners choose how and what they learn. After all, they're the only ones who know what they already know. Besides, self-service is less expensive and more timely than the alternative.

E-learning. Five years after I coined the term "e-learning," we were living in an e-world where networks facilitate virtually all learning. It has become trite to point out that the "e" doesn't matter, and that it's the learning that counts. I don't think the learning counts

for much either. What's important is the "doing" that results from learning.

People do not know what they like; they like what they know. For example, many assume that face-to-face instruction is the one best way to teach and that online learning is inherently inferior. They seek ways for online initiatives to support the high-grade face-to-face experience. Capella University turns this view on its head, asking what face-to-face support is required to supplement online learning.

Blended is a transitory term that reminds us to look at learning challenges from many directions. It makes computer-only training look ridiculous. It drives us to pick the right tools to get the job done.

"Unconferences." Business meetings used to come in one flavor: dull. New approaches create meetings that people enjoy, often organized in scant time and at minimal cost. Unconferences are characterized by:

- no keynote speaker or designated expert
- breakthrough thinking born of diversity
- having fun dealing with serious subjects
- emergent self-organization
- genuine community, intimacy, and respect.

Getting better at getting better

Getting better at getting better is an evolutionary challenge. You don't get there by taking one step at a time. Rather, you set up millions of little experiments, let 'em rip, and see what you end up with.

Meta-learning focuses on improving the process of learning, which includes how people learn, barriers to learning, and improving the learning of both individuals and organizations.

You're going to spend your entire life learning so you might as well get good at it. Embracing mindfulness is your first step. You'll need to be flexible, look at things through different lenses, reflect on what you see, try new things, run thought experiments, and pay attention. A mindful person often cuts off the mindless auto-pilot of aimless living to follow Nietzsche's advice to "become who you are!"

Informal learning is natural. It occurs when we treat people and organizations as organisms in nature.

Thinking is a skill. You get better at it with practice. Many people confuse thinking with intelligence. That is a mistake because that thinking leads intelligent people to squander their potential by not learning to think. **TD**

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Internet Inside

Ten years ago, most business executives saw no value in the Internet beyond cheaper communications. *C/O* magazine's December 1994 issue sheepishly proposed "not to laud the future of electronic commerce nor to cheerlead the creation of a great national network that, like Godot, may never materialize."

Since then, the Internet has taught us:

Time trumps perfection. In the old days, training wasn't released until it passed through a gauntlet of editors, proofreaders, packagers, double-checkers, and worrywarts. Everything is a work in progress. If it's not finished, label it "draft" or "beta," but don't hold it up.

Online networks facilitate personal connections. The Internet enables one to rely on the kindness of strangers. Hundreds of people I didn't know before have helped me learn. I keep my karma account in balance by helping others learn. The Internet even enables you to talk with your heroes if you're daring enough.

To learn something, teach it. The Internet empowers each of us to express ourselves publicly. Sharing ideas is both selfish and generous. Explaining something online clarifies your thinking and reinforces your own learning.

It's a small world after all. Around the world in 80 milliseconds. Wow! With Skype, you can talk with people all over the globe through Voice over IP (VoIP) for free.

Me-learning. Dr. Google and Professor Amazon have taught me a lot more than four years of honors studies at an Ivy League college. Why? For one thing, I've forgotten more calculus, Wittgenstein, physics, Nietzsche, and French than I'll ever know because I was driven by someone else's agenda rather than my own.