

## **Measuring Informal Learning - Encourage a Learning Culture and Track It (Mar 09)**

*By Tom Kelly, Written for TrainingIndustry.com March 2009*

The evolution of informal learning has been interesting to watch. We've witnessed decades of changing landscapes within learning organizations and, regardless of the latest or greatest learning theories and behaviors, people continue to learn – from each other.

Though it seems as though the term “informal learning” has found a new life, it's actually been around for centuries. It has passed the test of time from old world storytelling to hands-on vocational training, but learning organizations are often resistant to embrace it. “Fill rates” and “percentage of employees trained” are comfortable statistics, but they lack luster, depth and any suggestion of importance or impact to executive leadership. While we knew for decades that people learned from each other at the water cooler, on the phone and inside meetings, technology has made the discussion of informal learning a whole new conversation. The question becomes, “We know it happens, but how do we measure it?”

Over the course of my career, I have often had to decide what metrics mattered to the executives in the enterprise where I was employed. What truly matters depends on the priorities and the size of the company, but there are a few recommendations that I have made repeatedly related to capturing informal learning and turning it into measurements that count.

### **Create a teaching culture – and make it measurable!**

An organization whose people are learning at the pace of change is going to be more successful, in a faster timeframe, than an organization that cannot keep up. With a continually changing marketplace, new products and cutting-edge technologies that drive productivity or sales, having up-to-date employees is critical to an organization's success.

To create such a learning organization, you have to build a teaching culture. A teaching culture is one that believes in recognizing and rewarding people for sharing how they achieve, what they know, how they learned it, and where they find information. An organization that fosters this culture will grow faster and make fewer mistakes than an organization that does not.

An enterprise does not need one best sales person, they need dozens or hundreds or thousands who understand that they are not competing against each other, but rather, against other companies. The same applies to Engineering, Support, and each functional job in the company: you need an army of great people. High potential “stars” and other successful people empowering their peers is a real winning strategy.

When discussing measurement – harness this culture and use tools that provide reliable use data. We'll discuss those techniques below.

### **Encourage employees to create content based on their successes (and even failures).**

I have recommended decentralizing content creation for almost 20 years, but these days it is so easy! Content creation tools finally exist that make it easy for anyone who is an expert to share knowledge. They work well for anyone who has experienced some success and wants to share it with partners/colleagues/employees looking for a new or different way to be successful.

With wikis, blogs, audio-over-slides, video, and social networking tools, learning organizations can manage public forums where knowledge is openly shared. Peer to peer teaching tools require training organizations to give up some control of the content creation process, but these tools also increase the accessibility and speed by which content can be updated or corrected.

Professionals want to learn tips, tricks, and techniques from successful peers in their community. They don't really want to listen to scripted "talent", or to professional trainers. Those tips and tricks should be brief, focused knowledge nuggets that are two, five, seven or 10 minutes long. Short, direct, and specific answers or coaching comments that teach professionals how to be successful, how to approach a situation or customer, address different vertical markets, or solve any other narrow problem are immensely impactful. They are also easily searched within a database and are much more easily updated and replaced than courses, white papers or one-hour video segments. Decentralize content creation and you will capitalize on a scalable formula of successful informal learning.

The beauty of wikis, blogs, message boards and other knowledge-sharing tools is the ability to monitor, track and measure their success. How many people are searching for specific topics? How many best practices are being shared and how are improvements being realized in that area? What questions are prevalent that can be addressed company-wide and what are the results once they are answered? It's as if we've recorded water cooler conversations, put them in one place and have the ability to effectively respond to questions raised.

### **Measure and report the right metrics.**

I am fond of this back-to-basics reminder. There are only three reasons for companies to have a training function:

- Drive enterprise revenues up.
- Increase employee productivity.
- Increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

If you cannot show that kind of impact, they are likely the wrong metrics. When tracking informal learning, how are people communicating about these objectives? How are people learning from others and becoming more productive? Where are people learning tricks that save time and money? What best practices are being shared about how to keep customers happy? When you can correlate informal learning activities with solid metrics that support these objectives, you will have the attention of executives.

### **Research**

Expertus and Training industry, Inc. recently announced the findings from their joint November 2008 study, "**Measuring Learning as Budgets Tighten.**" The survey was completed by 84 corporate and government training professionals in organizations with varying sizes throughout 19 industries.

The study had many interesting findings, including:

- More than twice as many organizations' budgets went down than up in 2008. During 2008 (through early November), 38 percent reported training budget decreases compared with only 11 percent who reported increases. About half of the budgets remained the same.
- Fewer learning leaders expect budgets to increase in 2009. Only 17 percent reported budget increases from 2008 to 2009 compared with 31 percent who reported budget increases from 2007 to 2008. 2009 budgets changes are more likely flat or lower.
- More difficult-to-collect metrics are used less often. Return on investment and other types of business impact metrics, which are arguably the most difficult to calculate, are used the least often – by one in four respondents or less. Conversely, simple metrics such as numbers of course completions and registrations are among the most often used.

Since far more training budgets are decreasing than increasing in 2009, there is heightened importance in demonstrating the impact of training spending through effective measurements. There are traditional measurement tools that should be reevaluated and updated, but it also opens up the discussion for measuring informal learning. It can even be less expensive than traditional training if you encourage people to talk, share and ask questions.

Everything can be tracked in some shape or form, but measurement can be perplexing. When framing your thoughts around how to implement measurement techniques, here is my advice.

### **My “Top Five” Thoughts on Measurement**

1. Look beyond formal training sources for your impact metrics. Informal training sources have become more important than ever before.
2. Do not settle for easy metrics, they are of little interest and no real value beyond annual funding discussions. The harder the data is to gather is generally directly related to its relevance.
3. Focus on macro numbers and trend lines, not individual (micro) employee statistics. For example, is there a relationship between how many salespeople/partners view training materials before product sales take off?
4. Map trends of training usage and timing with changes in sales; internally and through channel partners. Finding correlations between training trends and selling – it’s a holy grail.
5. Find data showing impact on or alignment with your enterprise priorities. What are your training products doing to grow revenues? Improve customer satisfaction? Increase employee productivity?

To recap, informal training is rapidly overtaking “formal” training in its importance to the learner community, so it is time for us to embrace and leverage that capability. I highly recommend some paradigm shifts within organizations that are still using old ways of learning and traditional measurement techniques.

If I were to share some simple “take-and-go” final thoughts, it would be to (1) build a learning organization and a teaching culture, (2) decentralize your content creation – maximize the new ways of information sharing – and (3) centralize content deployment; focus on processes that allow access to new success metrics that evidence alignment with and impact on enterprise goals.

***Tom Kelly has more than 25 years of experience in the education and training industry and has held executive and leadership positions at NetApp , Cisco, Oracle Corporation, Sun Microsystems, NeXT Corporation and Control Data Corporation. He is also co-author of The Business Case for E-Learning. Tom is currently a trusted advisor for a growing list of clients, including small to mid-sized companies focusing on learning organizations, systems, and strategies.***