Supporting Informal Learning at the Workplace

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Abstract—In times of rapid technological and socio-economic changes, knowledge sharing and learning have become critical assets for most organizations and companies. New ways of learning and training are needed to cope with the rising demand of information. The Microtraining method developed on basis of recent learning theories and concepts is an answer to the need of flexibility of learning settings related to space and time, the availability of experts and the applicability of what is learned and trained at the workplace. This concept of informal learning comprises short learning sessions with work related topics. These learning occasions facilitate informal learning at the workplace on individual as well as on organizational level, as can be seen from two case studies.

Index Terms—Informal Learning, Microtraining, Learning at the Workplace.

I. INTRODUCTION

In organizations, learning happens all the time in a multitude of learning situations which can take place in a classroom, but obviously occurs most of the time in informal settings like a discussion amongst colleagues or a search session at the internet. The nature of learning at the workplace is different from classroom learning. The workplace environment can provide rich opportunities for informal learning like creating new modes of action, new practices, new processes and products both individually or in groups [22]. In addition, research has shown that there is a gap between the knowledge needed at the workplace and the knowledge and skills deriving from formal learning [22]. But still, it is about 80% of the training budget companies seem to overinvest in formal learning settings like its flexibility in terms of time and space. This concept of knowledge acquisition and knowledge participation in communities [22]. The term of informal learning describes learning taking place outside of training institutions, which surely can be planned and structured [23].

Companies choosing for formal learning alone are not able to benefit from the advantages of informal learning settings like its flexibility in terms of time and space. Companies seem to overinvest in formal learning settings because learning in a formal structured way is very well known. The overinvestment in formal learning can also lead to a consolidation of formal learning structures in organizations like training departments delivering ready-made courses and learning materials. Formal learning is a successful approach for those who have less knowledge and skills [22], but can be counter-productive for more experienced employees [9]. For those, informal blended learning approaches seem to work very well [9, 10].

That means that ways of learning are needed at the workplace which can respond to the demands of a rapid development of needed application-oriented knowledge. Most ideas of e-learning-settings are based on the challenge to design more flexible ways of learning. In many cases, this leads to carry over the old-fashioned classroom-courses to flashy-looking e-learning scenarios, where still an isolated learner widens his knowledge separated from his workplace [7].

Criticism on approaches like this is also related to the discussion about formal and informal learning. According to Digenti [8] and Cross [2] formal learning does not work anymore, because this kind of learning only responds to...
10 or 20 per cent of the knowledge people need at their workplaces. The overall 80 per cent are covered by informal learning activities on the workplace. Informal learning is seen as a more important critical success factor than formal learning settings [2].

Informal learning at the workplace occurs within daily interactions and shared relationships in companies, independently from professionally structured or pedagogically planned programs. Informal learning is a cooperative action while formal learning often takes place as an individually (or lonely) activity. Many activities at work require collaboration with other people [22], so employees are used to this way of working and learning. Because informal learning is characterized by contextual reasoning and produces implicit and tacit knowledge as well as situation-specific competences [22], informal learning enables people to cope with situations and problems occurring in their daily work practice, while building up communities of practice.

Informal learning occurs to be a way of learning difficult to deal with and to profit from for many companies. Informal learning is hard to be predictable. Additionally, even if informal learning shows a very generic way of learning, it is hardly been seen as learning itself. That is because it mainly is arranged individually and responsibility lies in the learner’s hands. The responsibility for the learning outcome often lies in the hands of the learner, not in the hands of a trainer or coach [2; 5]. It is the way of learning where the learner is the one to define the planning, managing and controlling of where and when to learn [23]. Sometimes, learning in this sense seems to be a side effect of work.

In summary, this shows that we cannot see the difference between formal and informal learning at the workplace as a strict segregation between two sites or learning activities. We see learning as a spectrum of possibilities, which ranges from formal learning oriented on classroom-structures to informal learning seen as a self directed and social activity (see figure 1).

After showing some crucial aspects of formal and informal learning at the workplace, we want to pay our attention to an approach to promote informal learning at the workplace, to the concept of Microtraining.

### III. The Microtraining Method

We see learning as an active process of knowledge creation that takes place in social interaction, not as a lonely activity. People use social networks in their work and for informal learning processes. For planning and initiating those learning processes and evaluating the progress, well-developed systems are needed [22]. The Microtraining method is an approach to structure these activities with the aim to enable people and organizations to benefit from informal learning scenarios and to be able to create and maintain new knowledge. The focus of these activities lies in the applicability of what is learned and needed in the workplace [4].

A Microtraining arrangement comprises a time span of 15-20 minutes for each learning occasion, which can activate and maintain learning processes for a longer period if they are bundled up in series, being face-to-face, online or in an e-learning situation. Microtraining is especially suitable for those whose basic knowledge needs to be refreshed or improved and who need information for immediate use in their daily practice. The Microtraining concept is based on several theoretical considerations as shown below.

The theory of social constructivism [23; 24] gives important input to the idea of Microtraining. Training models based on the principles of the social constructivism seem to work well for informal, practical and spontaneous learning [4]. The main principles are that each person is unique regarding to knowledge and experience. People primarily learn by actively trying and learning always is related to a particular social context. The learner plays a central role in the development of learning activities with the aim to make learning more efficient. As a consequence, motivation becomes an important stimulating factor; experiences from the past always play a role and each person has his or her approach to learning, very much related to knowledge and experience acquired in the past. The Microtraining method is applicable to individual questions and problems and offers individual ways of information gathering and learning. The overall findings of the constructivism are very helpful for the development of learning programs such as single Microtraining sessions, but are less useful to tell about new ways of communication or collaboration such as so called social software.

To comprehend such ways of learning, the concept of connectivism is also very useful [20; 21]. It helps to understand how the inclusion of informal learning and the inclusion of technology as part of a learning strategy can work. The concept itself derives from recent developments in society related to the increasing amount of information, and the knowledge which is needed in everyday life. Siemens observed that the surrounding of knowledge changes regarding to the context knowledge appears in and regarding the flow and characteristics of the knowledge itself. By the quick emerge of new information media, the knowledge landscape is changing. In this new situation learning is more and more the ability to connect to different ‘nodes’ of knowledge, which are spread over a network of data, information and people and is called...
by any internal or external acteur, referring to current needs and demands. To create sustainable learning outcomes, the design of the learning occasions has to take into account the knowledge and experience of the individual learner or learning group.

To facilitate the active self-directed learning activities of the employees, some organizational requirements have to be fulfilled. It is important that the Microtraining method cannot be supported by hierarchical control and standardized learning situations, but by decentralized and autonomous working units which integrate individual learning in the daily workflow. Because active, self-directed informal learning is new to many companies and employees, it is important that a coach or trainer accompanies the start of implementing the Microtraining method in an organization. It is also crucial to offer an adequate (technical) infrastructure to foster cooperation in daily work.

The characteristics of the Microtraining method illustrate that it is an opportunity for today’s learners and trainers to foster informal learning at the workplace. Two examples of Microtraining in practice show how it can be applied in practice.

IV. PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES

Different workplaces offer different opportunities for learning. Learning on the workplace is related to aspects like the organization of work processes, the possibilities for interaction between employees, the technological infrastructure, and the culture of participation. Recent experiences with the Microtraining method show its applicability to facilitate informal learning at the workplace [15; 19; 6]. With the help of this method, people can be brought together and solve problems in cooperation. Individuals connect with each other, collaborate and produce sustainable solutions which can be used company-wide. With implementing learning activities in the daily workflow, a quick transfer from knowledge to work practice is enabled. Learning time can be used efficiently and with a focus on individual learning needs.

A. The transport company portal example

Our first example is the application of the Microtraining method in a Dutch transport company [6]. The transport world in general shows a mastery of logistics with coordinating the transport of goods, transport chains, freight handling and planning arrangements. Rapid changes in the
regulations and the organization of the transport sector make innovation an absolute necessity.

The main activity of the Dutch transport company Van der Wal is road transport, so most of the employees spend their days behind the steering wheel. This organization has chosen the Microtraining method as core learning approach and implemented it in its common learning strategy. The aim was to reach a percentage of informal learning settings to be 90% of all learning activities. By changing the learning strategy from formal to informal learning, an overall performance improvement should be reached.

The main target group of the learning activities are the company’s lorry drivers. They are no experienced learners but have an increasing demand on information and learning. Key elements of the strategy within this transport company are information exchange and improving of learning and performance. Microtraining has been realized within the on-site organizational learning activities, but also as mobile learning on the go.

As a first step, an action plan with several actions was developed by the company and an external consultant. A reference measurement was accomplished to carry out the state of the art of learning activities and performance aspects of the company. By comparing target and actual learning processes, a new learning policy was developed. The results were integrated in the strategic business plans of the transport company. This emphasizes on the importance of learning for the organizational performance and could be used as a framework to define basic and annual work profiles with individual learning needs.

Existing information resources in the company were complemented through interviews and a survey focusing on the communications needs of employees and management. It showed that especially the lorry drivers are in need of professional information. At this time their main informants were colleagues (85%). The monthly paper newsletter was considered an important information source. Online information had not yet arrived as an alternative, but it was decided to extend this tool to an electronic newsletter and pilot this product over a period of time. The aim of this was to find out which functionalities were needed and what was needed to establish a 24/7 news service. Given the importance of interaction and cooperation the focus for the technology selection was on social software tools. As a useful alternative to other systems, the Drupal content management was selected. This open source software fits to the company’s demands of skills, flexibility and budget. The core idea behind using this system was to enable the company to develop learning material and courses by themselves.

The information platform based on the Drupal system was developed in a second step and was based on the Microtraining approach with its short learning sessions. It is structured through different ‘information areas’. The platform contains the news forum as well as learning material and courses. Its content is divided into special issues related to the different working areas of the company. The system offers the possibilities to easily add content such as video clips send from the lorry driver’s mobile phones to the system.

To become familiar with the Microtraining method itself, the managers of the company were trained in the use of it for learning related purposes. In a series of workshops they dealt with the need for well trained and informed staff, the Microtraining methodology, Microtraining development and online course production based on the Microtraining method.

For the employees of Van der Wal’s transport company opportunities to attend place and time fixed learning activities is very limited due to their mobile workplaces. On the other hand, e-learning makes learning less place and time dependent. To implement this way of flexible learning, an online course about a new technical device, the Digital Tachograph, was developed on the basis of the Microtraining method. The layout of the course was based on short sessions with activating learning activities situated in a workplace context to inspire the learner. In the long term, the purpose is that the company will become largely self supporting in the development and maintenance of these kinds of learning events.

Key experiences in this company show that in the first line the electronic newsletter is highly appreciated by the lorry drivers. Employees and managers contribute to the news flow by sending in messages, links, reports, pictures, mobile phone video clips, etc. All information is being tagged to allow easy access to topic related information. Also the online learning course in the Digital Tachograph is used frequently. It was developed in close collaboration with the end users. A first test showed that the users liked the electronic opportunity, had virtually no difficulties with the navigation and considered the information given as informative and useful. The experiences with the Microtraining method, used as an approach to build up a company-wide information and learning system, was successfully in terms of learning purposes. Next steps of evaluation have to show if also the work performance could be improved with applying the Microtraining method for supporting informal learning at the workplace.

B. The do-it-yourself learning example

Our second example of Microtraining in practice shows a semantic-based knowledge platform in the Do-it-yourself (DIY) branch. This platform is the outcome of the project “RELOAD” funded by the European Union. Core aim of this project is to support the employees of this sector with learning and information.

In general, the Do-it-yourself (DIY) branch is confronted with an increasing amount of manufacturer’s information which must be transferred quickly to the daily work practice. On the other hand, the demographical structure of the branch shows that employees are older and have less learning experience. For these kinds of employees the rising amount of information is a difficult challenge [3].

To cope with the characteristics of the older and less experienced employees, a didactical concept has been developed on basis of the Microtraining approach. The didactical concept takes into account the challenges of the branch related to information needs as well as pedagogical answers how to deal with knowledge and learning in the specific work situation of do-it-yourself-markets. The Microtraining method is a crucial element of the didactical concepts. It is used to describe the structure of a knowledge platform implemented at the do-it-yourself-markets. The content of the platform is divided into several short information and learning units. The platform is also based on the idea of a semantic web to facilitate self-directed and media supported learning. For that purpose, a knowl-
The knowledge platform was designed and implemented in two companies of the German Do-it-yourself branch. The overall idea of these activities was to support informal learning processes at the workplace to support the employees of the do-it-yourself-markets with information whenever and wherever it is needed.

After the platform was designed and implemented, manufacturers as well as the companies itself were able to develop own Microtraining activities for the platform and deliver them to their employees. The employees on the other hand had easy access to a large amount of updated information. In practice, the question of a customer could be the active start for a Microtraining session. The platform offers the employee several ways of access to the given information, like a search engine, a library, a tool-finder and a so-called application-house, where information can be searched by different topics in an interactive 3D-illustration of a construction site. All information stored on the platform is also based on a semantic structure, which offers the possibility to connect the learning modules with each other and allows a self-directed, nonlinear way of learning.

The knowledge platform was used in a pilot phase in two German Do-it-yourself companies. After the pilot phase, interviews were held with selected employees. The interviews showed that that a well-structured and accompanied initial phase for the new way of learning was of high importance, especially for those how had less learning experience. The way of self-directed learning with the help of a new tool like the RELOAD-platform seems to be a difficult challenge for this group of employees. It was helpful that there was (initial) help of a trainer or coach to get used to this new way of learning.

As a second result we see that organizational requirements are also of high importance. For a real learning on the workplace it is necessary to provide each learner with the needed (technical) infrastructure. For some employees access to a computer was very difficult and they had to leave his or her workplace which seemed to be almost impossible. Because of this, the platform was not used after one or two try-outs any more. Instead of this, traditional ways of information gathering like asking a colleague or calling the manufacturer remained instead of using the new learning opportunities.

In some cases it was not clear whether the employees could use some of their working time for learning purposes or not and some did not had time at all to use the platform. This shows that implementing the new way of learning into the companies’ business plans is a necessity for the success of new learning strategies. The management has to support new ideas which should be clear to all employees’ responsibility for their own learning success and facilitates processes of motivating and supporting the employees’ responsibility for their own learning success and the transfer of knowledge to others and to their daily work tasks.

Further steps to be taken now are to implement the Microtraining method at further organizations to analyze new work situations to which the Microtraining method can be applied to and to improve the method itself.

REFERENCES


SUPPORTING INFORMAL LEARNING AT THE WORKPLACE


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