

There are 3 Types of Learning: Each Has its Upsides and Downsides

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Repetition. People develop skills through repetition. Not from a book alone, or by listening to someone tell a story or describe how to do something. They may initially learn or discover a new skill through reading or listening, but people get good at that thing by doing it (correctly) over and over: repetition.

There are three main ways employees learn how to do their job: formally, informally and non-formally.

All three have their place in developing skill, and one isn't necessarily better than the other. There are more appropriate times to use one type, but not a "best" one. Let's take a look.

Formal learning

Formal learning takes place in a pre-established environment like a classroom at a pre-established time, with the stated purpose of transferring skill or knowledge. Think training class, a meeting or a new-hire orientation. One benefit of formal learning is it is safe for the learner to admit they seek improvement, as the planning of the event is organized to achieve that goal. In other words, formal learning takes place because it is designed that way.

Another benefit, since the learning is organized, is that the time between learning and exercising a new skill is short, so the payoff is faster.



The downside to formal learning is it is usually expensive compared to the other options, and many times competes with employee productivity. Potential downside of formal learning is it is often dependent on the skill of the teacher or facilitator, and just because it is organized doesn't mean it is organized well.

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Teaching someone what a new product is and does is not the same as teaching them how to sell it or install it. And let's not forget, if there is no practice doing it, then there is no skill development, only the transfer of knowledge.

Informal learning

Informal learning is a process that takes place between a student and a teacher, but the environment and time is not defined. "Here, let me show you how to do that" is a common way informal learning begins. Neither the student nor the teacher planned on an educative experience, but if both are willing to participate in the impromptu training session, then informal learning will take place.

Informal learning is likely the most common and the most reliable learning done in your shop. The benefits of informal learning are 1) it is usually free, 2) does not require planning and 3) can often be done with minimal disruption to the workday.

The downside of informal learning is the company has little control over its quality. The "teacher" may not be good at teaching. Knowing how to do something and teaching it are two very different skills. It is rare that someone is good at both and is readily available to do so at a moment's notice.

It isn't easy to explain the functions of a complicated machine in a way a novice can understand. Making the situation worse is the learner won't always admit it when asked if he or she properly understands something since it is being taught by a peer. I'm sure everyone can picture a new hire, eyes wide open, trying to follow along as an instructor talks in detail about a new balancer — and nodding "yes" when asked if he is following along.

Non-formal learning

The third type of learning is non-formal, defined as when the learner takes control of the process and is both teacher and student. Learners pick and choose what they want to learn and when they choose to learn. Think of an employee who wants to learn how to sell a certain type of tire outside of what he has in the past, like agricultural tires, but only has sold consumer tires. He may intensely watch a skilled salesperson interact with a customer and try to pick up "pointers." Or maybe he buys a book (OK, downloads a book), and then tries the tips provided.

The benefit of this type of learning is the learner is seriously motivated, and learning will definitely take place when the student is motivated to do so. In contrast, think of

an employee who goes kicking and screaming to a formal training event. He rarely ever “brings back” anything that was taught.

The biggest risk of non-formal learning is a complete lack of control over content, process and follow up, and since the learner isn’t guided by an instructor, the time between learning and getting good at something is usually very long.

It takes a blend of all three types of learning to create an engaged productive employee. Your best bet is to sit down with your employees and discuss what they think of each method and how effective they view the processes, and then develop a plan that favors their strengths. ■

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