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Operationalizing on-the-job learning

Breaking away from tried-and-true formal learning practices and into more informal on-the-job (OTJ) learning can be a daunting challenge. But promoting and implementing learning from experiences, or OTJ learning, can be a more cost-effective method for making moments of learning already happening in your organization become more impactful and sustainable.[1] OTJ learning leverages ongoing employee interactions while fulfilling employee demands for continuous professional development. It's no surprise, then, that business leaders across the globe are confronting big questions about this model for employee development. Namely, how can you help your organization think of learning beyond formal programs? How can you create a culture of professional development and ongoing learning? How do you start an OTJ program, and how do you maintain and sustain it once you know it is working?

If you don't have the answers to these questions, you are not alone. Learning leaders are aware of the need for a less formalized learning strategy, but because of the difficulty of adjusting the organizational culture and employee behaviors around learning, few are willing to move away from more traditional structured programs.

To view learning as a normal part of work would certainly mean a mindset shift around the definition of learning and how it is promoted within organizations. In some companies, a culture shift may be required to fully embrace and maximize the return on investment of OTJ. Creating a culture of ongoing feedback, development, and reflection does not happen overnight and typically cannot be driven by the learning organization. However, once established, OTJ learning can become an integral part not just of an employees' learning but of their professional development, enabling organizations to do more for their people with less effort.

As brain food for business leaders interested in OTJ learning, this paper will focus on how organizations can change their learning by integrating three key components: structure, reflection, and professional development conversations.

- **Structure**, in the form of guidelines or frameworks for OTJ learning, is crucial for encouraging employees and leaders to change their mindset about when, where, and how learning occurs
- **Reflection** keeps an OTJ learning program on track by helping employees turn their OTJ experiences into moments for learning and professional development
- **Development conversations**, often limited to formalized, infrequent conversations with managers, should and can take place more regularly and informally within OTJ learning

In order to fully leverage existing work experiences and accelerate talent development, all three components are required. To successfully implement these components, a partnership is required among the learning organization, the business, and the HR/Talent organization. This paper will discuss some ways you can bring each component to life in your organization.
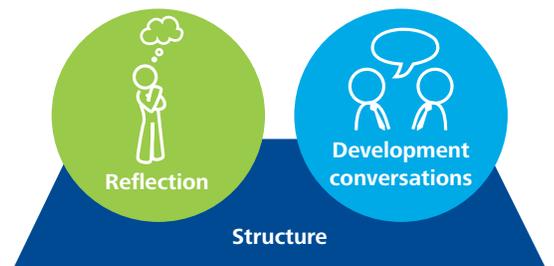
1   "Accelerating Talent Development through Experiences" Deloitte Study, 2012

Structure

Classic ways of learning do not work for OTJ learning.
Classic learning typically includes taking weeks to design, develop, and deliver in-person or eLearning courses which may or may not address the specific development needs of the learner. Given the organic and immediate nature of OTJ, it cannot be treated the same as formal learning programs.

Consequently, as effective OTJ programs move away from traditional, familiar models of learning, the most important criteria for successfully implementing an informal learning program is its structure. Clear guidelines and frameworks allow learners to turn experiences into learning opportunities without overly controlling the learning process, as a formal learning program might. Moreover, guidelines and frameworks help facilitate the organizational mind shift needed for an informal learning program to be effective.

The notion of replacing complete control of a learning program with guidelines or a framework may make learning leaders nervous. But giving up control at the leadership level allows learning from everyday experiences to happen. When interviewed for the *Accelerating Talent Development through Experiences* whitepaper, one CLO said, "We need to quit managing a buffet of learning events and view learning as part of work."[2]

An OTJ learning structure can also help organizations manage the challenge of "letting go" and allowing learning to happen naturally via existing experiences and daily interactions. This is a daunting challenge because learning organizations are constantly being asked to show the return on investment or the value that learning programs have on the business. The standard metrics typically used to evaluate learning do not work as easily for OTJ, and therefore, informal learning programs can be perceived as non-specific or unproductive.

But many formal learning programs designed to address specific learning objectives and meet targeted business needs often fail in their mission. Why? These programs address individual learning needs with one-size-fits-all solutions that may not work for every learner. Given the informal and inconsistent nature of OTJ learning, it is much more difficult to structure, control, and measure results. However, through the use of basic guidelines, learning through ongoing experiences enables individuals to customize their professional development as well as their learning goals, avoiding the trap of an over-engineered learning program. That said, learning organizations might find it risky to give up the familiar formal programs for an unknown approach that has not been fully tested or deemed beneficial for the organization. When implementing guidelines and structure, there are four key points to consider:

- Make guidelines and structure simple and easy for the individual to implement. For example, creating a weekly/monthly theme for individuals to consider, supported by messages and examples from leaders, can be very impactful.
- Stay nimble and open to evolving and adapting OTJ structures based on learner feedback and changing learner needs. Creating guidelines and structure takes time, effort, and organizational focus.
- Partner with stakeholders and targeted business units to get buy-in and support for the structure.
- Remember that the overall goal is to promote natural talent development from daily experiences and interactions and not over-engineer the structure.

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2   "Accelerating Talent Development through Experiences" Deloitte Study, 2012

Relevant examples

What does an over-engineered program look like?
A financial services firm established a formal rotation program allowing new hires to gain different experiences through a variety of rotations. The idea was a big selling point with campus recruits who saw the advantages of trying new roles within their first two years working at the company. Unfortunately, the program was unsuccessful because as new hires became skilled on their project work, business leaders became reluctant to let them rotate to a different role/project. This reality disappointed the employees who had been promised the opportunity to try different positions while developing new skills.

The company is now evolving its structure from trying to formalize experiences through rotation programs to leveraging ongoing experiences to promote talent development. The new structure allows employees the opportunity to learn new skills and experience professional development opportunities through their existing projects.

What does a well-designed program look like? A well-designed program can help the business rapidly address skill gaps by making use of established OTJ models. For example, the demand for healthcare workers in the U.S. and internationally has remained high for many years. Currently, healthcare providers face a range of employment and workforce issues. There are significant shortages of healthcare workers in certain occupations and geographic areas, while there is oversupply in other areas. Therefore, healthcare providers offer apprenticeship programs emphasizing on-the-job learning, classroom learning, demonstration of competencies, and licensing requirements. By including OTJ learning in the form of apprenticeship, the supply of skilled healthcare workers increased[3] due to the following:

- Apprentices can enter the workforce sooner than workers who must complete all their required learning before starting a job.
- Though apprentices have fewer skills in the beginning, employers know which skills apprentices will acquire through the OTJ learning period and can make labor planning decisions accordingly.
- The "earn while you learn" model is extremely attractive to potential workers. By introducing apprenticeship in areas of expertise or geography where there are shortages, employers can increase the numbers of people entering those areas.

Reflection

Effectively implementing OTJ learning requires a method that allows learners to spend time on meaningful reflection. Through ongoing reflection, learners are able to contemplate their performance and potential professional development opportunities. Reflection can transpire through a number of avenues: conversations with peers and managers, journals, or self-assessments. Reflection should be encouraged and promoted by supervisors and managers until it becomes part of the daily work routine and organizational culture.

In most companies, allowing time for reflection will likely be an uphill battle. Similar to the implementation of an OTJ learning structure and guidelines, reflection must have leadership backing to gain traction. Just asking employees to reflect as part of work is not enough. Reflection is a broad concept, and people have valuable work experiences every day. They do not, however, necessarily

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3   "Using Registered Apprenticeship to Build and Fill Healthcare Career Paths," U.S. Department of Labor, 2011

take the time to pause and think about what went well and what they might do differently in the future. Reflection encouragement from managers and supervisors is a first step in moving toward a culture where employees continuously evaluate their experiences in this way. Many times, reflection is not part of daily behaviors or the organizational culture. But without established guidelines around reflection, it can be difficult for employees and managers to identify when learning occurs and when skills are being developed or improved. When promoting reflection, consider the following:

- Required time commitment should be enough for individuals to reflect on their experiences and generate three to five takeaways. A takeaway can be something they observed and want to emulate, an action/statement they performed that did not work and want to do differently next time, or a success they want to repeat in the future. For example, an employee might include as a reflection that they appreciated the way a coworker handled a problem or that their personal performance during the day revealed a need to seek help from others when experiencing problems in the future.
- The more frequent the reflections, the less amount of time will be needed. A daily reflection, for example, may be productive when an employee spends just five minutes on it, whereas a weekly reflection might be productive only when an employee spends an hour or more on it.
- Pre-prepared forms or even a mobile app to help record takeaways can make it easy for individuals to track their reflections and also serve as a reminder to reflect. It will also help employees to go back and review past reflections at a later date, possibly as part of an effort to reach a larger performance management goal.

Potential benefits of emphasizing employee reflection

Accelerating retail employee development. In the retail industry, customer interactions are crucial. Encouraging employees and leadership to reflect on daily customer interactions can lead to rapid improvement in professional development. Managers can conduct five- minute conversations with their team members in

order to identify why certain customer interactions were more successful than others and identify corresponding areas of development for their employees. Alternatively, managers can ask employees to write down their most and least successful customer interactions of the day, followed by a reflection on how future customer interactions can be successful. Retail organizations can introduce reflection opportunities to their customer call centers or retail store employees as a supplement to formal customer interaction learning.

Achieving OTJ safety through OTJ learning. Safety is key for power and utility organizations. These companies go to great lengths to ensure employee safety through formal learning programs and other professional development opportunities. But by incorporating reflection into ongoing work experiences, companies can add an additional level of safety training without an additional expense. For example, when new line workers join a power and utility company, asking them to reflect on different tasks they complete in the field can enable them to continuously reflect on, and consequently improve, their skills. Reflection can take place through informal conversations with more experienced colleagues or supervisors who were present at the job site. If power and utility companies incorporate learning from experiences in addition to formal learning, they might be able to reach a higher level of on the job safety at a more rapid pace.

Development Conversations

One of the inherent challenges of learning from experiences is balancing the development areas that individuals would like to focus on with those development areas that the organization needs to meet its goals. A reflection process is a start, but it assumes that individuals have the self-awareness to reflect on and identify their own development needs. This is not always the case. The third most important aspect of a successful OTJ learning plan, development conversations, bridges this gap between individual areas of interest and a company's goals.

The word "feedback" can be a stressful one to many employees. Even though feedback can be positive, the thought of receiving developmental feedback is daunting. Formal development conversations usually happen once, maybe twice, per year in most organizations. One reason for this low frequency: it is time consuming for supervisors and managers to meet with their staff for 30 minutes to an hour in order to discuss their performance. But using performance management development conversations as a learning tool can increase the effectiveness of learning from experiences. A recent performance management trend is for more frequent feedback than the traditional once or twice a year formal feedback conversation.[4] The trend focuses on more frequent informal checkpoints that are much shorter than the traditional process. Such informal checkpoints align with OTJ learning and the need for timely feedback. Shifting from formal conversations to ongoing feedback will help employees to better learn on the job and identify experiences necessary for professional development as they become aware of them.

Allowing employees to outline preferred experiences with input from leadership (through development conversations) can promote professional development in two ways:

- Leadership and feedback providers will be more aware of desired/necessary experiences and more likely to help identify and provide them when possible. This helps employees overcome the significant challenge of finding opportunities to gain desired experiences.

- The involvement of leadership or feedback providers to help identify the appropriate capabilities for employees is a powerful motivational tool. Employees typically feel more valued by the organization and are more likely to actively participate in OTJ learning activities.[5]

Even though leveraging developmental conversations may seem relatively easy because many learning organizations view these conversations as formal tasks, leadership may shy away from implementing them due to time constraints. To combat this view, leadership and employees alike should seek out development conversations and view them as informal opportunities to both give and receive feedback and identify experiences to support professional development. When implementing a new approach to developmental conversations, consider the following:

- Partner with the HR/Talent organization to co-develop the approach to align with the broader performance management process.
- Emphasize the importance of identifying desired experiences in the conversations. The standard conversation that covers strengths and development areas needs to be expanded to include identifying potential experiences that might help a learner's development.
- Clarify responsibilities. Leadership should not be responsible for enforcing the experiences, but should check in periodically to see if learners have had the experiences. If not, leadership can collaborate and brainstorm with employees to potentially outline a plan of how the employees can reach their goals.
- Create a culture of ownership. Learners need to ask for regular conversations and experiences, and leadership should provide honest and developmental feedback while proactively identifying experiences and opportunities for learners.

4   "Time to Scrap Performance Appraisals?," Josh Bersin, Forbes, 2013

5   "High-Impact Learning Culture: The 40 Best Practices for Creating an Empowered Enterprise," Bersin & Associates, 2010

Relevant example of development conversations

Checking-in to improve collaboration. A global media organization identified an opportunity to bridge cultures, strengthen work relationships, and provide development experiences through an OTJ secondment (temporary job transfer) program. Employees would perform their role in another location, while reporting to both their leader and the leader in the new location. Employees were required to draft their personal and professional development objectives prior to the experience, including any additional training they perceived they would need to be successful (e.g., language and/or cultural training). Frequent check-in conversations with both leaders provided employees with a forum for sharing their experiences in both locations and making recommendations for process and collaboration improvements.

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all OTJ learning program, but integrating the three key components of structure, reflection, and development conversations will help fully leverage existing work experiences and accelerate talent development. The resulting continuous learning through ongoing experiences can allow organizations to shift their learning culture to a more productive blend of informal and formal learning programs. A productive blend will enable the learning organization to more quickly and effectively support the business as learning needs shift and therefore be seen as more valuable to the organization at large.

Shifting organizational culture and changing employee behaviors is not an easy task, especially when buy-in is needed across the board. Different programs might be necessary depending on the diversity of needs — the learning needs of sales representatives will vary greatly from product developers. This will require innovative and creative thinking and partnership with the learning organization, the business, and the HR/Talent organization. Finally, as the learner needs change, even the most successful and innovative learning programs will need to progress. Organizations that continually evolve and adapt will be more effective with their OTJ initiatives and better able to accelerate talent development in a cost-effective manner.

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