



# The Value of Informal Learning in the Workplace

*Margan Dawson*

## Introduction

“What is the value of informal learning in the workplace?” This case study examines the connection between formal and informal job-related learning through the experiences of workers in a manufacturing setting. It intends to demonstrate how learning transfer for both formal and informal learning contributes to continuous improvement in an organization. While some formal learning takes place, employees generally develop their job-related expertise through informal learning which is at the centre of the structure of the work environment. This expertise is essential to the workplace and allows the high level of performance required in today’s workplace. The failure of companies to develop this informal learning culture can result in inefficiencies and failure in their manufacturing environment.

This study took place in Nova Scotia at Elmsdale Lumber Co. Ltd. (ELCO), a fourth generation family-owned lumber production facility with 56 employees. ELCO is a manufacturer, distributor, and wholesale exporter of

rough and dressed lumber, a company that is proud of its quality product and quality control process. One key informant described it this way,

“as a company we have survived because of our quality product and our ability to service our customers’ needs. We regard our employees as the people who have helped us to achieve the level of quality and customer satisfaction this company provides.”

Four workers participated in this study and were representative of three divisions in the company: woodlands, kiln, and planer mill. Workplace instructors were also interviewed.

Most often employees at ELCO are hired as a basic-level worker, that is, someone who comes to the workplace place in an entry level position and receives on-the-job training from the skills and knowledge expert. This knowledge expert is usually the supervisor and/or a co-worker. The training procedure involves a series of steps in which the supervisor shows



and tells the employee what to do, the employee tries it, the supervisor watches and gives feedback, and the employee tries it until the learning is mastered. Throughout task performance and reinforcement of the skills and standards that are taught during the training, co-workers as well as supervisors participate in passing on the skills and knowledge of the organization to the new hire.

Learning is a part of everything that ELCO does. Personnel at all levels of the company, from the owner to the worker on the mill floor, participate in Workplace Education and Essential Skills formal training programs. These programs have included oral and written communications, numeracy, basic computer, and working with others with special focus on themes of supervisory skill development and public relations.

Management at ELCO have determined that in order to succeed in their changing and challenging industry environment, one of the key success factors is the development of a flexible workforce that is effective and efficient. This success factor is related to a culture of learning between management and employees. This culture encourages informal learning by allowing employees to expand their knowledge without fear of repercussion for mistakes made during the learning process. The partnership approach encourages a sense of learning security and risk taking in employees, which in turn leads to a cycle of continuous improvement in the manufacturing process as employees and supervisors work to solve problems in a cooperative manner. This idea is also supported by management who recognize

those employees who take the learning risk. This sense of partnership and the security allowed for learning about mistakes, develops connectedness among employees and nurtures an attitude of co-operation about issues facing the business.

Within this partnership the majority of employees become aware that they are responsible for managing their learning, both formal and informal. Ownership of the learning process by the employee helps to achieve the culture required to maintain the cycle of continuous improvement. This cycle involves both knowledge of the manufacturing systems and knowledge related to the employee's personal growth.

Each employee is connected to the practices and principles of an effective and efficient manufacturing process which includes improving the management of job requirements. Continuous improvement is essential for ELCO so that they can be responsive to the customer needs in today's highly competitive marketplace. Continuous improvement requires flexibility in the supply chain, not only in the manufacturing and operations systems. Supply chain management is the management of relationships based on a value added exchange of information between suppliers, contractors, production workers, supervisors, and co-workers. In other words, it involves anything that adds value and reduces production costs by eliminating waste of time, resources, and money. Continuous improvement focuses on the customer, operations, and on every employee in the company, and on the requirement of skills and knowledge for solving problems and making decisions around product quality.



## The connection between formal and informal training and continuous improvement

The main connection between formal and informal training is that the classroom and workplace are very similar in terms of tasks that require problem solving. Learning transfer occurs when participants take advantage of the opportunity to learn, formally or informally, and apply what was learned in the performance of their jobs. Continuous improvement in an organization occurs in two ways: first on the individual level as workers carry out their work with the new knowledge and secondly at an organizational level. Relationship building is one of those practices that leads to this continuous improvement.

### Formal training program

The Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative (WPE) supports skills development through a partnership model that takes a non-traditional approach to education. Classes are held at the work site and are customized to upgrade essential skills that are relevant to the needs of the workers and the workplace. Programs are only designed following on an organizational and educational needs assessment which determines the workers' and employers' needs, the role of learning in the organization, and the outcomes desired by both the individuals and the company as a result of their participation in the essential skills program. The design of these WPE programs

are based on adult education principles: ownership of the learning process is in the hands of the learner; the facilitator acting as a guide; and learning being viewed as a collaborative partnership. The WPE classroom environment is a safe and comfortable place to learn and there is a sense of belonging. Learning challenges are provided and risk taking is encouraged. Mechanisms for evaluation and feedback are foundational, and enough time to ask questions and work collaboratively are built into the program.

Three of four participants in this study Jason, Greg, and Warren participated in the Public Relations program, while Peter had participated in previous programs. The purpose of the program which is called "Public Relations in the Workplace" was to develop stronger customer support skills with the community, the suppliers of raw materials, and within ELCO.

Reasons for participating in the training programs were numerous. One worker explained, "I want to be better equipped to deal with the public when I meet them on a daily basis and to learn how to handle the different types of people in less than pleasant circumstances." Another employee said, "I want to be able to do my job better when meeting and dealing with people and generally for self-improvement and personal satisfaction." While another participant indicated that he "liked to learn."

The program content focused on how each person has the ability to influence the success of the company through a capacity to influence



others. It's not enough just to be good at the task side of the job; there must also be the relationship side – to be able to work with people at all levels and in diverse and demanding situations. Formal learning is specific, it is about what we have to know, how to build relationships in a positive way, and about providing value to the customers. The customer wants the right product at the right time, at the right place, and the right price, and with perfect quality. The customer expects to be valued and treated with respect. Not doing so, pretty much guarantees their business will go to a competitor.

In the Public Relations program, activities focused on the term “influencing effectively” as an essential skill. It was important for the participants to understand how people respond to different types of situations. By recognizing patterns of behaviour, our own and others, and by being able to adapt our message or styles to match the needs of others we can work smarter in challenging situations. These ideas are central to the training program.

Activities in the classroom included role play in which participants were required to influence others in situations that reflected the reality of the workplace. Part of Jason's job is to ensure silviculture harvesting performance standards are maintained and there are times when he needs to ask a contractor to come in and complete or re-do a job that hasn't met the standards. Jason wants to maintain a satisfactory working relationship with the contractor and at the same time maintain standards. The participants perceived the role play activities in the classroom to be an effective tool for learning, and as one participant reported, “these

were very helpful, more helpful than just doing it out of a book or trying to imagine the situation.” Also, stories were told by the workers in the classroom that illustrated the value of focusing on and understanding the customer's needs. One participant related the experience of a customer who had called to report that there were quality issues with the lumber they had just received, and expected something to be done. As a call to action, ELCO closed that section of the mill and all employees drove to the customer site to look at the problem directly. This account of the situation and how it was dealt with clearly illustrated the value of responding to customers' needs quickly.

By the end of the program, participants had recognized their roles and their contributions to the success of the company. Whether by being more aware of a quality control process or by adapting their communication styles and language to specific situations, stronger working relationships were developed. One worker developed his value added customer service approach in this way.

“I have a better understanding of how to deal with different communication styles. I am better able to find ways to work with different types of people. When I can spot them ahead of time I can prepare what I'll say in the situation – the more challenging ones.”

## Informal learning

Work is performance based, that is, a task is performed within the standards of the job and the industry. Workers carry out specific tasks



and the complementary work that needs to be completed daily, weekly, monthly, and so on. Performing these work tasks also involves continuous learning that includes the need to know how to learn, how to gain access to resources, and how to perform the job. In a rapidly changing and highly competitive world, continuous upgrading of skills and knowledge, along with learning to grow within and beyond the job are necessary. An example of this was the employee who started working on the *deal run* stacking lumber. As his skills developed and opportunities for advancement occurred, he moved into other positions in the company. This continuous upgrading of skills and knowledge both formally and informally increased the adaptability of the worker to the changing workplace.

Informal learning is grounded in the practical and can be triggered by a problem such as machinery breakdown, or a need in the production process around quality issues. Peter, who works in the planer mill as a grader, has been in the job for 12 years. He shared examples of his informal learning at work by describing how waste reduction is connected to the day to day operations.

Peter described the problem as a ‘*skip*’ which affects the quality of lumber produced. A skip is an area on a piece of lumber that failed to surface clean.

“It can result from different things; however, it is a manufacturing defect and affects the quality of the finished lumber. Skip is allowable on a certain percentage of pieces, but we here at ELCO sell a high end product, so this problem would affect the quality of the product.”

In describing how to fix the problem, Peter talks about his own informal learning process which included examining all possible causes of the skip. There were several steps that he took. First he used root cause style questioning with relation to machinery, methods, and materials. He then asked questions to get at the facts and information, and then he worked as part of a team and went through process of elimination to resolve the issue. As Peter explained,

“I learned how the skip occurred and where it originated in the manufacturing process. Ultimately, it helped me to do a better job and reduce waste.”

In this example, informal learning involved looking for information, working with others, and talking through the process. All of this became integrated into new knowledge.

Greg, another employee mentioned,

“Pretty near every part of my job is informal learning. Every day from my co-worker, as an example I get Jason to teach me how to download information from the GPS into the computer, so that I can make a map instead of waiting for someone else to show me how to do it. Or, I get my manager to explain stuff to me constantly on just about anything, for example why market prices go up and down.”

Warren, another worker, looks after the purchasing of day-to-day materials to keep the plant running. He looks for ways to lower cost, yet purchase quality materials. He works with the suppliers to find information and talked about his informal learning related to ordering belting. First, he needed to find information on



different types of ply for belting, and then he needed to assess which materials would wear out more quickly. He also needed to examine samples, and talk to the suppliers. As Warren said,

“armed with a better understanding of belting, I am able to make a more informed decision and order the most cost effective product.”

This is one part in a continuous improvement process. Warren also built and maintained relationships outside of the company. He listened and asked questions and worked with the suppliers who were knowledgeable about their product. All of this new learning helped him to improve performance by lowering costs.

Informal learning is also related to transfer of learning. Jason refers to the influence of the Public Relations course in the workplace when communicating with contractors and mentioned two examples. The first one was when a contractor’s work did not meet the Master Logger standards. Jason went on to say, “I used information from the communications course to influence the conversation, which went well...” In the second example he explained,

“another contractor asked to change the rate for pre-commercial thinning on a site ... the rate could not be changed, so I negotiated with the contractor on how to manage some of the more difficult areas. We agreed on what was acceptable and he was satisfied. For me, this highlighted what I learned in the course about how everyone is different and how I have to adjust my communication style depending on the person and situation.”

Jason experienced the transfer of learning when he turned new knowledge into an action; action that led to building the ongoing relationship with the people in the supply chain.

Greg had some interesting insights on informal learning.

“We learn something every day, even when we don’t realize it. Co-workers are the best people to learn from. Even on days when you don’t do anything new, you learn how to do things you already know either better or faster, or both. You can’t stop learning, even if you want to.”

He provided several examples of working with his supervisor and co-workers, where his learning activities were hands on. These included learning how to repack a cylinder and improving his skills while tearing a bridge apart. “I learned a different way to lift timbers so that we don’t get so much dirt in the brook.” Greg also pointed out that working in the woods always requires being aware of the environment and working more efficiently. “I always learn a new technique every time we build a bridge.”

## Attitudes toward lifelong learning

Based on the results of the ELLI and interviews four points of view on lifelong learning emerged. First, learning is natural. Jason remarked,

“It’s part of our nature to learn...I don’t think you can shut off even if you want to. Your body is designed to retain things and to be observant, and you learn just by looking around.”



Secondly, learning is about curiosity, Greg stated, “I like to learn everything, life lessons or work, whatever there is to learn.” Next, learning is an ongoing process, particularly in the workplace. As Warren commented,

“I’m learning all the time. I dropped out of high school in grade 11, but I’ve made a career here. I’ve gone to school here.”

And, finally, learning is not always a conscious act. Peter commented,

“lifelong learning is about working smarter – finding an easier way of doing something, but you don’t always realize you’re learning.”

Responses from the survey suggested that learning must be relevant. All respondents indicated they find it easy to learn when they are interested in something or some activity. Reflection must be a part of the learning process. Respondents also indicated they were open to learning and had a willingness to experiment with new approaches to learning. For the most part, these workers were independent learners unless the process was not clear.

As one employee said “I often change the way I do things as a result of what I have learned”. Because of the nature of the work at ELCO, making connections with others is a highly valued means to learn as in asking questions and thinking critically about how to work better. Not everyone is motivated to learn and not everyone recognizes that they are learning. One barrier to lifelong learning at work may be that an individual “doesn’t know how to go about it.” In such cases, the rule of thumb is to

ensure a choice of approaches to learning and development and this is what happens at ELCO.

## Continuous work improvement

Learning is a key part of work. Continuous work improvement is the ongoing effort to improve every part of an organization by focusing on the customer and finding new ways to meet or exceed customer expectations in the short and long term. This involves incorporating quality improvement into all tasks within the manufacturing system, and by enhancing the processes and supports for all employees to carry out their duties. Teamwork and strong partnerships are crucial to improving service delivery, solving problems, and correcting errors in all parts of the work process. Education and learning are essential to success because they both create awareness. Taking an essential skills approach towards working with others and problem solving translates into a common sense approach for managing the organizational and individual needs.

Workplace education instructors indicated that employees who participate in skills programs and informal learning are generally motivated by personal accomplishments and the ability to be able to work independently and be more productive. One instructor stated that,

“workers should expect to get a return on their investment of time for skill development, whether it is the confidence to problem solve, improve their math skills, or come away with a



desire for more learning. Generally they expect to feel better about their working lives.”

Informal learning occurs in a company when there is a culture of organizational learning and a worker can look for and take advantage of new opportunities. ELCO is an excellent example of this because they recognize learning as a requirement for continuous improvement and that employees are responsible for their own learning. From an employees’ perspective, it’s

an opportunity to grow and to learn. Both formal and informal learning benefits the employer by having its organizational problems solved. It also enables workers to take ownership in the continuous learning process. There may be challenges and risks implicit with learning, yet the workplace now requires a high level of flexibility and willingness by the whole organization to learn. This is the case at Elmsdale Lumber Co. Ltd.