



# Current Shifts in Corporate Learning Meet 'Enabler Competencies'

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*Abstract: In our global and digital reality, new tools of social communication have unavoidably ushered in an era where all of us (including those not using online social platforms) have to rethink the corporate learning and workforce development process and rebuild it in a way which is fundamentally different from anything before. Universities are introducing concepts and the web of relations between them, while in corporate environments, where multinational, multicultural, multigenerational and tech-savvy surroundings are the basic settings, these concepts are placed and validated in diverse contexts. Workspaces are (or will be shortly) transformed into mobile-enabled, multi-platform-driven, game- and community-based learning spaces. Are learners and organizations prepared to leverage them? Research indicates that the key priorities of organizations' learning leaders must be the facilitation of learning and knowledge sharing through predominantly informal ways and the establishment of the necessary structures around them i.e. through a 'corporate university' and the development of 'enabler competencies'.*

*Keywords: Corporate learning, Corporate university, Informal learning, Competencies*

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 The Corporate University Concept

For those individuals who would like to take a shortcut between entry-level knowledge (brought from university or prior positions) and the practical knowledge needed on-the-job, the participation in a corporate learning program is an excellent opportunity to step out of the comfort zone of their position and take advantage of the knowledge management systems that have been developed by the company.

Whether called a ‘corporate university’ (most prevalent in the United States, Western Europe and Japan), an academy, institute, center for excellence or learning lab, its distinguishing feature remains the same: the alignment of key learning programs for the active support of the strategic interests of the business. In addition, it should be increasingly important to keep each learner engaged and entertained (regardless of the learner’s age, function or position).

In a corporate university, employees build individual and organizational competencies, thereby improving the company's overall performance. A corporate university also shapes corporate culture by fostering leadership, creative thinking, and problem-solving [1].

However, a corporate university can make two fundamental mistakes: the first is attempting to be a school, the second is not attempting to be a school. We may try to build a bridge between ‘know how’ (concepts from the university) and ‘know when’ (on-the-job context in a corporation), but the problem is that we do not know how to get from ‘know how’ to ‘know when’ [2].

## **1.2 Building the Bridge**

When meeting and listening to corporate learning professionals of all types, I have found myself asking where their ‘post-experiential business education’ [3] practice is taking them and how to ensure that they create educational programs which match their learners’ competency levels. With the ever-increasing importance of informal learning and learner-generated content, there are competency areas which need to be developed in order to enable the fortification of other individual and organizational competencies, thereby improving the company’s performance the primary goal of a corporate university.

However, these currently evolving ‘enabler competencies’ which enable and support self-paced informal learning do not seem to be sufficiently emphasized yet and there is a considerable gap between the planned and the real leverage of these new learning methods.

This study aims to look into corporate university heads’ and corporate education leaders’ current understanding of their own learning approach in order to identify some of the key pillars of the bridge between ‘know how’ and ‘know when’: the shift between types of learning and content generating, the necessary competency areas to leverage them and the practical side of it through the example of a market leading corporate learning institution.

## **2 Shifts in the Learning Approach Framework**

### **2.1 Informal Learning on the Rise**

It is difficult to make a clear distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning as researched on several occasions with varying organising principles. The concept of formal and non-formal learning in the workplace [4]; the framework of Lifelong Learning [5]; the approach to formal, non-formal and informal adult learning [6]; the rejection of informal learning [7]; and the theories regarding why informal learning is not only more common but also more effective than formal learning [8] provide a vast theoretical background.

The reasons why informal learning is becoming so popular have to do with immediacy and relevancy. Informal methods of learning are seen as techniques that a learner can take advantage of right away and with immediate application to their job. Further reasons are that learners can drive their learning in a more meaningful, self-directed manner and get immediate feedback from subject matter experts and communities of practice [9]. The problem is often that since these networks are not controlled, many companies ignore their existence. As an example, peer mentoring can be distracting and unproductive if left unchecked, but when fostered correctly, it can be very powerful, especially for the experienced learner. The easiest way to control and encourage these communities is to sponsor them within the corporation itself [10].

When creating a corporate learning system, it is essential to ensure that learners understand how their development will contribute to improving the organization's overall performance. Furthermore, it is crucial to define those skills and abilities which need to be developed as well as the changes that can be expected in one's behaviour [11]. So the challenge for organizations is to use this approach when describing their learning processes, thus trying to enable *and* control informal learning methods.

Content-wise, in a world where collaboration and interdependencies are important parts of an ever more interconnected social lifestyle, dry, dull and stale encyclopedia-like learning content (created and structured by the organization) is becoming increasingly outdated. In this technological age, users are generating more and more learning content themselves, using Web publishing and interaction tools. To make the individual's learning process more interesting and engaging, organizations have to recognize the potential of user-generated learning content and create platforms to enable learning interaction [12].

### **2.2 The Scope of the Study**

The challenges above raised the willingness to investigate the existing and the 'possible' of corporate learning approaches, which has led to the following hypotheses:

H1: At present, the majority of corporate learning leaders characterize their organization’s learning approach as dominantly formal and driven by organization-determined content.

H2: The majority of corporate learning leaders perceive a possible shift from a formal to an informal learning approach.

H3: The majority of corporate learning leaders perceive a possible shift from the content created by organizations to the content created by learners.

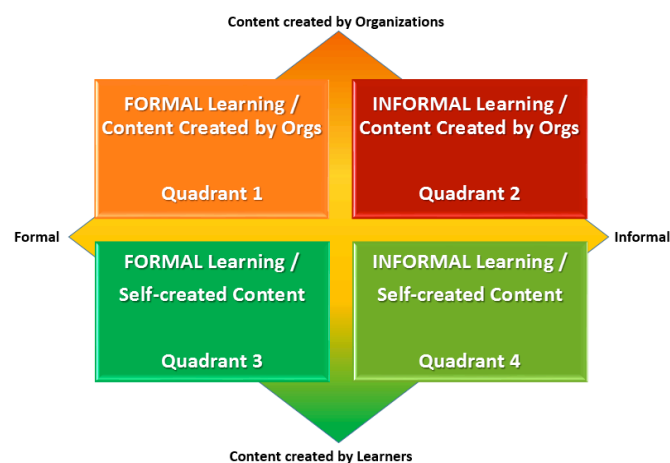


Figure 1  
Learning Approach Model

To test the hypotheses of this study, I propose in Figure 1 a simplified way of thinking about learning in an organization. This model has four quadrants with formal learning anchoring the left side and informal learning anchoring the right. The upper quadrants include learning which involves planned events, documented on an employee’s development plans, created and guided by the organizations. The programs falling into these quadrants are generated by the organization through some formal channel and generally have been documented in an information system, such as a Learning Management System. The lower quadrants include activities that happen when people learn from each other, which are typically ignored by employee development plans. Learning in these quadrants is both social and collaborative and can include a hidden curriculum.

A good example to illustrate Figure 1 is IBM’s On Demand Workplace [13]. This portal meshes learning and work through the approaches of ‘work-apart learning’, ‘work-enabled learning’ and ‘work-embedded learning’. Work-apart learning, which fits into Quadrant One, is time spent away from a job to build the skill set necessary for future roles, guided by the organization in a formal way. Work-enabled learning is more

informal, although it relies on structured activities and guidance from the organization as shown in Quadrant Two. Work-embedded learning is built into the natural workflow of the job and the content is determined and driven by the learner, such as the help agent that pops up to assist the employee in software programs, and fits into Quadrant Three. Finally, an example for Quadrant Four could be the concept of peer-to-peer learning, where learners generate the content on topics relevant to their work environment and are able to share knowledge directly with each other.

## **2.3 The Research Study**

### **2.3.1 Method of Research**

The sample for this study consists of the participants of an Annual Corporate Universities and Academies Summit, where more than 100 senior-level industry practitioners were counted among the audience in July 2013. Organizations represented multinational companies in retail, telecommunications, oil and gas, banking and finance, manufacturing and transportation industries, public agencies and education.

This diverse sample included VPs of HR, HR Directors and Managers, Heads of Corporate Universities/Academies, Directors of Learning and Development, Directors of Corporate Education, Directors of HR Planning, Directors of Talent Development, E-Learning Managers, Business Development Managers, Chief Innovation Officers, Deans and Professors.

Data for this study was collected at one point in time and the response rate was 52%. In this sample, N=21 (39%) of the learning leaders came from truly giant multinational firms with more than 10,000 employees, N=11 (20%) from organizations with staff rosters of between 100 and 1,000 employees and N=9 (17%) came from a companies/institutions with an employee base of more than 1,000, but less than 5,000. The number of different generations working together was four in the majority of the organizations: N=21 (39%), three generations were represented at the same workplace in N=17 (31%) of the organizations and N=9 (17%) of the corporate learning leaders reported that five generations were working together in their workplaces.

<b>ORGANIZATIONS' CHARACTERISTICS</b>		N=54	100%
Number of Employees			
	<i>Less than 100</i>	7	13%
	<i>100 – 1,000</i>	11	20%
	<i>1,000 – 5,000</i>	9	17%
	<i>5,000 – 10,000</i>	6	11%
	<i>10,000+</i>	21	39%
Number of Generations working together			
	<i>2 Generations</i>	7	13%
	<i>3 Generations</i>	17	31%
	<i>4 Generations</i>	21	39%
	<i>5 Generations</i>	9	17%

Table 1  
Organizations' Characteristics

### 2.3.2 Research Findings

As we see in Quadrant 1, corporate university and corporate learning leaders from diverse industries and multicultural, multigenerational environments have described their existing learning approach in N=48 (89%) as formal with content created and guided by the organization, thus confirming Hypothesis 1. Only N=2 (4%) of the respondents positioned their learning approach into Quadrant 2, N=3 (6%) into Quadrant 3 and 1 (2%) into Quadrant 4.

The learning approach which they marked as 'possible', directed towards Quadrant 4 by a total number of N=29 (54%) emphasizes the importance of informal learning and user-generated content and proves the acceptance of Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3. The majority of corporate learning leaders perceive a possible shift from a formal to an informal approach to learning, and from content being created by organizations to content being created by learners. N=21 (39%) of the respondents thought that their learning approach would become more informal but remain organization-driven and N=4 (7%) indicated that their learning would continue to be mostly formal, but with predominantly self-created and self-guided content. Finally, N=2 (4%) indicated an already informal learning approach, but a significant shift from organization-created to self-created content, again, a shift to Quadrant 4. The results are depicted in Figure 2.

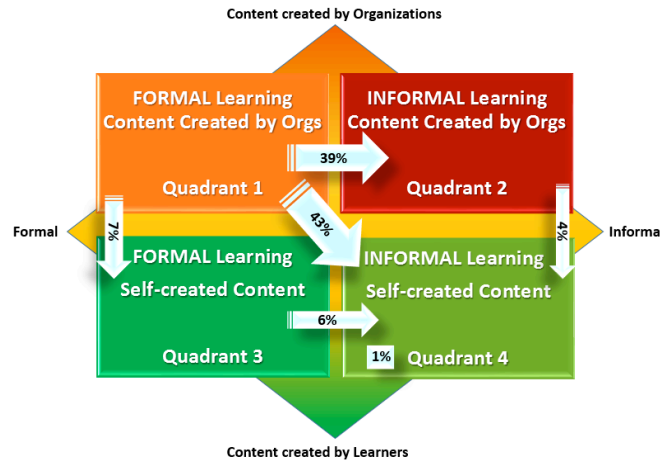


Figure 2  
Shifts in the Learning Approach Model

Based on these findings the ability to be ‘informal learners’ on their own learning path and driven by self-generated content seems to be currently one of the most leading-edge advances in the eyes of corporate learning leaders. But how to build up the bridge and get their people there? How can informal learning and learner-generated content creation be supported and controlled?

### 3 ‘Enabler’ Competencies

As supported by other recent research studies, CLOs think that although informal learning and development of competencies continue to be ranked among the top activities to have the most impact, ‘there is not much thought leadership on it in the industry’ and ‘they could use additional help to implement informal learning’ [14]. There is a need to investigate those competencies which enable learners to be guides on their own learning path and allow learning leaders to facilitate this process.

#### 3.1 Competence (as we know it)

Competence in Polanyi’s sense implies the ability of know-how within a certain domain and the ability not only to submit to the rules but also by reflection influence the rules of the domain or the tradition. Competence is thus not a property but a relation between individual actors and a social system of rules [15].

An individual is thus not competent per se; rather it is the individual within a role and a context who is competent or not. In order to change the rules a competent individual needs a social or interpersonal communicative knowledge in addition to know-how. It is

the expertise of mastering the rules of a profession so well that they no longer need to be obeyed. A characteristic of expertise compared to know-how and skill is that the actor has power over his own knowledge, i.e. over the rule system which decides quality standards. Only when an individual has this kind of power is the system in the position to learn from the experience of the individual [15]. Thus only when an individual has this kind of competency level is the system (corporate environment) in the position to learn from the self-created learning content of the individual.

A number of studies have shown that the way people acquire professional knowledge is through a blend of methods. 10% of learning occurs in the traditional, formal way and 90% occurs in the informal, so-called contextual way. From the 90% informal/contextual portion, 20% is learning from coaching, mentoring and feedback and 70% is learning through mashup content (combined content from multiple resources) and on-the-job experience [16].

### 3.2 A Lead Practice

In order to leverage the higher levels of informal learning: learning through mashup content (including user-generated content) and on-the-job experience, the competency level of the learner should reach the upper, so-called ‘fully competent’ range, depicted in Figure 3 [17].



Figure 3  
Rethinking the 10/20/70 Model and the necessary competencies

At Caterpillar University, which is one of the world’s leading corporate learning institutions, formal and informal learning has been redefined by a competency-based understanding. Thus the University went from a traditional learning organization with formal training programs to a highly flexible, leaner, more ‘connected’ learning organization that facilitates and supports agile corporate learning.



### 3.3 The Real ‘Enablers’

What do these levels of competencies mean today and what kinds of new competency areas do they comprise?

An individual’s competence is the knowledge, skills, abilities or personality characteristics that directly influence one’s performance [19]. As a value, competence means properly or sufficiently qualified, capable and efficient. In a business setting, it means you have actionable knowledge, you have what it takes to do a specific job or to meet the expectations, as such this can be defined as the level of prerequisite competence. Medium competence would require more experience, a high level of subject matter expertise and being able to learn from coaching and feedback. The full competence integrates the various types of previously mentioned competencies plus higher levels of informal/contextual learning, i.e. learning from self-created and -guided content, learning from on-the-job experience, digital learning tools, technology-enabled platforms, etc. This is the competency level upon which I would like to further elaborate.

Drawing from the results of a previous ‘Corporate Universities and Ac@demies Summit - Recontextualization Insight Survey’ [20], I would like to emphasize a few findings which are relevant from the current paper’s point of view: 70,6% of the respondents agreed with the main thesis on the prevalence of digital learning driven-business, 67,6% agreed with the importance of knowledge platforms and 38,2% were able to put and to validate the development of competencies in a new context. This percentage for the ability to recontextualize competence development was the most encouraging result from that study. Recent research shows that a couple of main competency areas has already been identified [21] (Shelton-Hunt, 2012) which are relevant for individuals who want to get closer to the full competence level and leverage the newest learning approach of their organization.

- Concepts, primarily meaning ideas which are unique to the digital era or that take on new interpretation in the digital era i.e. communities of practice, multi-channel communication, digital community, social learning, gamification, user-generated content or virtual reality, etc.
- Tools which are specific enabling technologies or applications of technology i.e. discussion forums, infographics, mobile apps and location based services, portals, tag clouds, web analytics and social media metrics, etc.
- Platforms or environments in which multiple Web 2.0 technologies are leveraged for specific purposes i.e. public information networks like Twitter, public social media sites like YouTube or Wikipedia, public social networking sites like Facebook, Google+ or LinkedIn and private social networks, intranets, social business applications, etc.
- Specific skills, abilities which are new or gain a new meaning in this global and digital environment, specific means of leveraging multiple Web 2.0 technologies

like crowdsourcing, digital collaboration, document co-creation, microblogging and status updates, searching and tagging, photo/video production, editing and sharing, etc.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was firstly to examine whether a special group of corporate learning leaders perceive a shift in learning and content creation. Secondly, its purpose was to investigate what competency level is required in the shift towards informal learning and self-created content. There is a necessity for new competency sets from individuals who would like to guide their own learning path and influence the rules as well as from learning leaders who would like to get the most out of their learning and development activities.

The bridge between ‘know how’ and ‘know when’ in a corporate context is paved with experience, subject matter expertise, global mindset and ‘enabler competencies’. Learning leaders and other organizational leaders must recognize that it is in their own best interest to make bridging the new ‘know how’ and ‘know when’ gap a strategic priority. Overall, these findings suggest that the level of competencies in that sense could be a valuable predictor of how viable informal/contextual types of learning will be. As was expected, a higher level of competencies in the global and digital era enables individuals to leverage these new types of learning, underlining the importance of competence development systems in corporate education.

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