

## HRD Viewpoints: Book Review

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# *Informal Learning in Organizations: How to Create a Continuous Learning Culture* *Robin Hoyle*

**Kogan Page, 2015**  
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There are different responses to the statistics and arguments which tell us that most training and development is wasted effort. One is to ignore and carry on with doing what has been done for decades. Another is to heed the advice of the likes of ROI ‘gurus’, such as Jack Philips, and pay more attention to the process of evaluation so as to find out what is working and what less so. Yet another is to question, fundamentally, organization’s stubborn preference for formal, classroom based, training and development. This is the position adopted by Robin Hoyle but he is quick to point out that his central thesis is that “we need good formal learning and effective informal learning”. Indeed he goes a step further arguing that “effective formal trainers encourage, harness and enable informal learning to happen”.

Based on a series of interviews with managers involved in what Hoyle calls the middle ground of informal learning — those who integrate learner directed activity alongside more formal approaches — the book addresses where and how organizations can seek to manage and support informal learning and thereby maximise the opportunities it provides and draw more of the benefits it offers. So, Hoyle attempts to analyse some of the ways in which informal learning happens and draws a critical perspective “seeking to identify the optimum conditions for informal learning within a myriad different workplace challenges”. A strength of the book is that Hoyle situates his analysis within the realities of workplace learning, helping the reader to reflect upon their own experience.

The book is divided into three sections: firstly an overview to make sense of informal learning at work; secondly a critique of the rise of technology as a driver and enabler of informal learning and thirdly, a section devoted to tips and hints about integrating learning and work. It is section 2 which ensures this text makes a real contribution to the growing literature on informal learning. Hoyle is not afraid to confront the rhetoric of the technology led learning revolution. “We are so far away from addressing the various barriers to enable effective engagement with online content that we must start from some fairly basis principles ...”. Through well informed case studies — and which are not restricted to section 2 — Hoyle teases out the need to focus our considerations on better application of our understanding of social learning, engagement and collaboration. He draws on the MOOC phenomena, for example to explore the potential — so far largely ignored — to address collaborative technology (blogs, wikis, learning communities, communities of practice) and concludes “there is significant work to do if these technologies are to become mainstream in organizational learning”.

The question of whether informal learning can be strategic is a question addressed in the book's final section. Emphasis is placed on firstly ensuring learning can become a normal part of daily work and secondly, developing 'fit for purpose' ways of knowing and understanding that our formal and informal training and development efforts equip the organization for change. The strategic link to informal learning becomes somewhat implicit rather than overtly explored. Nonetheless it is encouraging to hear the author critically questioning the obsession with measurement. Of much greater value to facilitating an organizational sense of confidence in dealing with change are the individual stories of what learning is, "when it happens and how it delivers benefits" and where informal learning may be the critical component.

Robin Hoyles's book deserves its place as one of the first reviews in the new journal. It tackles a critical issue in HRD practice and does so with well informed research and a keen eye for what makes an accessible read for the HRD practitioner. It will be of value to any HRD professional wherever they are based and whatever their particular focus of HRD practice.