

Chapter 12

Mentoring for Work Based Learning: The Role of Technology

Emma O'Brien

University of Limerick, Ireland

Ileana Hamburg

Westfälische Hochschule Gelsenkirchen, Germany

ABSTRACT

Technology, particularly in the past decade, has significantly changed the way people communicate, interact, share information and learn. It offers a place independent of time and location to reach expertise and individuals that would have been impossible to otherwise attain. On a personal level, through the use of Web 2.0, individuals freely exchange knowledge and information. However at a professional level, particularly within companies, individuals are slower to use these tools to learn, share and acquire knowledge, by integrating these technologies with a mentoring programme it can encourage their use in the free exchange of information and knowledge. Although mentoring has been widely used throughout history it does not come without its limitations. This chapter explores the use of mentoring in the context of informal learning within organisations. It examines use of Web 2.0 tools to support mentoring in companies and its ability to overcome some of the weaknesses in traditional approaches to mentoring. Furthermore the chapter explores the use of problem based learning in aligning learning outcomes in a mentoring programme and the use of technology to support this. The chapter gives an overview of three research projects which have been conducted into the use of technology mediated mentoring for informal learning within companies.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5832-5.ch012

INTRODUCTION

The use of mentoring as a method of learning dates back to ancient Greek times. To this day it is still used at an informal and formal level within human resources development processes. Technology particularly the use of Web 2.0 and social media tools have magnified people's network and connections and made it feasible to access people and information relatively easily thus facilitating successful mentoring processes. Online there are hundreds of informal networks in which people support each other through technical, lifestyle, domestic and commercial problems. In a formal context learning is now being delivered through a blend of online and face to face activities. Communities of practice (CoPs), which are a type of social community, provide mentoring support to students through their learning experience and based on a voluntary participation. Within companies social networking has been largely used for marketing purposes. Web 2.0 has been used for communication and business activities but not at its complete potential for learning. Despite their success in the public domain, within companies these technologies have not widely been used to mentor and support employees.

In terms of knowledge, mentoring is used to transfer and support tacit knowledge and best practices between 'experts' and 'novices'. Web 2.0 has been widely used in companies to document tacit knowledge and make this knowledge explicit in databases, intranets, and experts available via 'yellow pages'. Email and online applications such as the above are used to transfer tacit knowledge however technology is not used to support mentoring.

This chapter will discuss informal and formal mentoring applied within the public domain. It will examine mentoring as an informal learning tool and the shortcomings of the methods currently used in companies, it will look at the use of technology in overcoming these problems. It will also examine the use of mentoring in problem

based learning and make recommendations for the use of both Web 2.0 and social media tools for mentoring in companies. In addition it will give some examples of the application of these tools in this context.

Learning in Companies

Training in companies has been proven to have a positive effect on firm performance (Kram, 1985; Ashton & Felstead, 1995; Holzer et al., 1993; Barron et al., 1999; Conti, 2004; Konrad & Mangell, 2000) Depending on the company size, the industry it is situated and company ownership there are varying levels of participation in formal training. Informal learning accounts for 75% of individuals and companies learning processes (Hall & Hamburg, 2009).

Despite this informal learning is still seen as the 'poor relation' to formal training practices. Perhaps this is because formal training is structured thus the individual and the company are aware that it has taken place and feel it can be measured.

Informal learning

refers to situations in which some combination of the process, location, purpose, and content of instruction are determined by the worker, who may or may not be conscious that an instructional event occurred. Furthermore, the extent to which the worker determines the process, location, purpose, and content of instruction, and is aware that instruction occurred, can vary widely among situations that are labelled as "informal learning." (Carliner, 2013, p. 5)

However formal learning is not always the most beneficial method. Stone (2010) highlighted that "Informal training is preferred by smaller employers because it can be tailored to their needs and conducted at suitable times." Furthermore Euaert et al. (2000) highlighted that informal training is more relevant when developing professional skills

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