LIVING THINGS ARE *NEVER FINISHED*

Interview with **Jay Cross**
by Jos Arets and Vivian Heijnen

Jay Cross is the pioneer of informal learning. Thanks in large part to the impact of his book Informal learning (2006) and the rise of social media, informal learning has become an important consideration for the HRD profession. Jay developed the concept of "working smarter" to promote the potential of informal learning in the workplace. According to Cross, the world has become so complex that professionals and organizations have to work more intelligently simply to survive. Working is learning and learning is working. The following is a report of an informal interview we conducted with Jay in San Jose, California.

Informal learning is actually old wine in new bottles. Calling you the pioneer of informal learning may sound interesting, but informal learning wasn't thought up by you, was it?

No, of course not! Informal learning has been around since the dawn of humanity. My book on informal learning simply points out the exaggerated importance organizations attach to formal learning. Formal learning inside organizations tends to be dysfunctional, uneconomical, bad for business, and not much fun.

Let's go back to 2006. Your book on informal learning gave you a global reputation in our discipline. The book praises the value of informal learning in organizations. But even today, critics are still asking questions about the difference between formal and informal learning.

People learn by working. About 80% of what we learn is learned informally. It's not planned before-hand, not structured, has no beginning or end, and there's no curriculum.

I often compare formal learning to riding a bus. The route is predetermined, and the driver only stops at the bus stops, regardless of the needs of the passengers. Informal learning is more like riding a bicycle. The cyclist determines the destination and how to get there, depending upon his or her own needs. And let's be honest, if you can determine the destination and the route yourself, you're going to be more motivated than if someone else determines them for you. That's the difference between extrinsic

motivation (push), which is often the case in formal learning, and intrinsic motivation (pull), which is the primary driver behind informal learning. But let me add that, in practice, it's always a combination of formal and informal learning.

So formal learning also has value?

Of course! Non-professionals and beginners in particular need formal learning to achieve sufficient competence to be able to work. It's more effective to learn mathematics in a formal class than over a cup of coffee at work.

Once you acquire the formal knowledge, you have a foundation to build on. From there you fill in the gaps in your knowledge. That is precisely what makes informal learning so valuable. For an experienced worker, formal training provides too much knowledge or too little, too early or too late (training is usually not provided when you actually need it in practice), and it is not sufficiently in tune with how most professionals actually work. As it turns out, imparting implicit knowledge to others is very difficult to do in the classroom. In reality, it's the tricks of the trade that enable professionals to work more intelligently and effectively in the workplace. That is the secret behind the value of informal learning… Just in time, just in place, just enough and just for you!

Are there other benefits of informal learning?

The benefit of informal learning is simply that it works. How else do we learn how to walk, talk, kiss,

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or be productive in society? There's a great deal of research showing that informal learning methods are cheaper and more effective. People prefer to look for and find information themselves. They use a variety of tools to do this, such as e-learning, reading, social learning, and of course carrying out their own work. People learn how to do their work by asking colleagues, by taking part in discussions, by trial-and-error, by phoning the help desk, or by working with a knowledgeable colleague and watching how it's done. As I see it, that's the natural way we learn things: we learn from others whenever it becomes necessary to carry out a specific task.

It's no longer possible to see where learning stops and work begins. Working is learning, and learning is working. And as a result, learning is always linked to and relevant to the business.

In the HRD discipline, there is still a great deal of discussion going on about the ratio informal/informal learning. Is the 80-20 ratio realistic, and what do you think of the criticism expressed in that regard?

Exclusive dinner event in Tulser offices Maastricht last December.

PULL LEARNING IS MORE COST EFFECTIVE THAN PUSH. IT DOESN'T REQUIRE AS MUCH IN THE WAY OF CONTROL MECHANISMS, STRUCTURE AND OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE.

 I want to emphasize once again that learning always has both a formal and an informal component. It's a matter of one plus the other. The discussion centers on the ratios.

The 80-20 ratio is often mentioned: 80% of what we learn takes place informally and 20% formally. But these are average percentages. Some studies use 70% as a point of departure and others even 90%. These percentages are based on the various definitions of the concept of informal learning. But

the context is also important. You don't learn to how to ride a bicycle from a textbook; you don't learn trigonometry without one.

The important point is not some precise percentage; rather, it's that most of the competencies people use at work are learned informally via discussions with colleagues, self-study, and coaching by managers. A much smaller proportion comes from formal training programs such as workshops and seminars.
In this regard, I would like to note that most of the

studies that came up with the 80% to 90% informal were carried out before the rise of social media. Nowadays, when social networking and social learning have become widespread, one would expect the ratio of formal to informal learning to actually be tilted much more towards informal learning.
Again, trying to nail down precise percentages does not, in my opinion, address the core issue here. Informal learning is clearly responsible for a much larger portion of what people learn in organizations than formal learning. That is the key message. The

percentage varies with the situation, the type of knowledge to be learned and the opportunities for learning while working. But that in no way detracts from the message that informal learning is indispensable if one wants to make a serious effort to support the learning process in organizations.

We can confirm this picture in the Netherlands. A study by the research agencies CINOP and ROA shows that it is more likely for the impact of formal learning activities to be overestimated rather than underestimated. As it turns out, it is difficult to determine an average ratio of informal to formal learning. Is that the reason for the recent blog, in which you write about the 70-20-10 model?

The Center for Creative Leadership came up with the so-called the 70-20-10 model. Instead of informal/ formal accounting for 80%/20% of results, they're saying 90%/10%.
The breakdown is that 70% of knowledge is acquired via experience related to the work floor, daily situations, tasks and problem solving. An additional 20% is acquired by working with colleagues and observing. The remaining 10% is the result of formal training. This model is prescriptive in nature and is useful for designing learning envfrom enviornments.

You have repeatedly expressed criticism of the budgets available for learning in organizations. What do you mean?

This is in line with what I refer to as the spending/ results paradox in organizations: about 80% of the budget is made available for formal learning

most formal training organizations are modeled after schools

compared to 20% for informal learning. However, the results achieved show the opposite. 80% of the learning results in organizations are due to informal learning. It's as if organizations are racing to invest their money where it will do the least good.
This comes about because most formal training organizations are modeled after schools. Everyone in school is treated as if they are novices. Hence, formal learning predominates.
Organizations with work to do are not schools. Most of their people are experienced. Hence, most of their learning will be informal. The spending/ results paradox comes about because formal training organizations tend to neglect experienced learners. It's crazy, but they leave the learning of their top producers to chance.

Jay discussing informal learning with TULSER clients and prospects in Maastricht last December.

After informal learning, your next book deals with "working smarter". Is there a link between working smarter and informal learning, or is this a separate and independent phenomenon?

Informal learning is what got me thinking about working smarter. The concepts are deeply interrelated.

The 24/7/365 dominance of social media makes it possible to integrate working and learning in real time in order to harness collective intelligence.

Organizations can draw upon this collective intelligence to adapt to the accelerated pace of changes. The aim of working smarter is to enable organizations to leverage the power of their people. Natural processes encourage the production and sharing of implicit and explicit knowledge in organizations via social media; in other words, informal learning.

How does working smarter actually play out in the real world? Are there concrete opportunities for doing so, or is this primarily a vision of the future?

Working smarter is the key to sustainable and ongoing improvements in organizations, especially at the present time when knowledge-based work and productivity are crucial for enabling organizations to survive.

In order to support working smarter, I developed an infrastructure referred to as "workscape". This is not a separate functionality but rather a new

way of organizing work. A workscape is that part of an organization in which learning and developing are a continuous process and not separate and independent events. This can be realized by utilizing the principles of informal learning via social media and networks.

A workscape makes it possible to fully integrate learning with working into a process as opposed to a series of separate and unconnected events. As I see it, a workscape offers opportunities for learning via working and for transforming this process from push to pull, from programs to a platform, from static to dynamic and from knowing things to working smarter. Via Internet technology, people at work are connected to each other on a 24/7 basis. They work on acquiring explicit and implicit knowledge and on using social media not only to teach and learn from each other but also to work together more effectively.

Workscaping helps professionals work more efficiently and enjoy their work more. Workscapes are not part of training programs. On the contrary, they make many training activities superfluous. However, the organization must actively support workscapes to that end. This cannot be accomplished merely by making a budget available for informal learning. More than that is needed: in particular, a learning-based culture in which people can work together on the basis of mutual trust and learning is seen as an opportunity to grow further – for the people and the organization.

In publications and talks, you are often negative about training and consider it to be superfluous. Is that not a bit too extreme?

Yes, my statements on these issues can appear extreme. That's because I'm fighting against a deeply embedded bias in favor of formal learning. Most of us were indoctrinated in schools that value obedience over thinking for oneself, deny that learning is social, and take a factory approach to learning. Getting people to break free from this orthodoxy isn't easy. I'll occasionally overstate my case in my attempts to get skeptics to adopt a more balanced view.

I'm confident that some people will read this interview and report only one finding: Jay admits he's an extremist. I hope they'll reflect on what we've talked about before taking up the attack.

Many of the assumptions about informal learning and working smarter can be summarized in the transition from push (formal learning or instruction from management) to pull (informal learning and being able to decide for yourself what the best way is to ensure that the work leads to results). Is providing motivation for something primarily a question of making sure that push disappears into the background and is replaced by pull?

In the Industrial Age, instructions came from the manager. Employees were not paid to think but to do what they were told. In the Information Age, professionals were encouraged in particular to think inside the box via predefined procedures and

rules. They carried out tasks top-down via the **push** strategy.

We've entered an era of conceptual work. In this new world, **push** is combined with **pull** to create a dynamic flow of power, authority, know-how, and trust. Decision-making is delegated to professionals. It's power to the people! – an apt metaphor for informal learning and workscapes.
All around us, networks are overlaying hierarchies. Everything is in flux, since people and entities are becoming increasingly linked to each other. Control is an illusion. Managing progress in these networks requires a fundamentally different form of management – no longer bottom-up meeting top-down, with room for self-management. This is today's reality.

This is an on-going, never-ending shift in work and learning. Harkening back to the first line here, this transition is alive. Life goes on. It's never finished.

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Conversation is the most powerful learning technology ever invented. Conversations carry news, create meaning, foster cooperation, and spark innovation. Encouraging open, honest conversation through work space design, setting ground rules for conversing productively, and baking conversation into the corporate culture spread intellectual capital, improve cooperation, and strengthen personal relationships.
Jay Cross

CV Jay Cross

Mission:
Helping people improve their performance in the workplace and the way they feel about life.

Education:
Princeton University/Harvard Business School

Publications:
- Implementing eLearning (2002)
- Informal Learning, Rediscovering the Natural Pathways that Inspire Performance and Innovation (2006)
- Working Smarter Fieldbook, (2010)
- More than 100 articles on e-learning, change, networking, value, ROI, work processes

Other:
- Chairman of the Internet Time Alliance
- "Johnny Appleseed" of informal learning
- Clients: Cisco, IBM, HP, Intel, Citibank etc.

Social media:
- **www.jaycross.com**
- blog: **internettime.com**
- twitter: **jaycross**

The Internet Time Alliance helps organizations work smarter because simply doing things better no longer guarantees prosperity or even survival. The six members of Internet Time Alliance have more than two centuries of experience improving team and individual performance. They develop strategies to help people learn, work, and innovate in Internet time. They foster collaboration through social learning helping clients draw strength from the competence, ingenuity, and autonomy of their people. Internet Time Alliance works with TULSER to help improve performance and develop next practices.

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