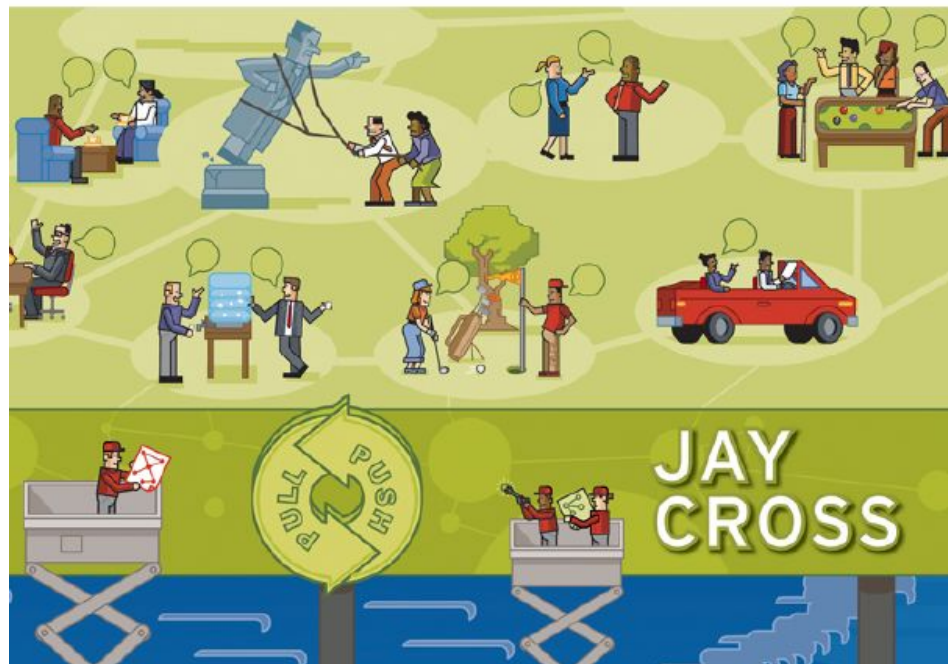


# informal learning

Rediscovering the Natural Pathways That Inspire  
**INNOVATION** and **PERFORMANCE**



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## PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK about knowledge workers, twenty-first-century business, and informal learning. I first heard the term informal Learning from the late Peter Henschel, then director of the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL), who told me:

People are learning all the time, in varied settings and often most effectively in the context of work itself. "Training" — formal learning of all kinds — channels some important learning but doesn't carry the heaviest load. The workhorse of the knowledge economy has been, and continues to be, informal learning.

For thirty years, I'd been designing, cost-justifying, and marketing formal training programs. Now this distinguished-sounding fellow was telling me that people learned more by accident. Back in California, Peter and I met at IRL to talk further about informal learning, communities of practice, anthropological research, and learning as engagement. I reflected on how I had acquired my professional skills: watching master performers, trial and error, bull sessions with friends, faking it, reading magazines, and, above all, just talking with others. Conversation was a more effective teacher than school.

Peter was right. Most teaming about how to do a job is informal. If your organization is not addressing informal learning, it's leaving a tremendous amount of learning to chance. Is that okay? Not any longer. This is a knowledge economy.

This online version of Informal Learning differs from the original. Most illustrations are in color. Many items are hyperlinked. I've fixed typos and errors where I find them. And of course this is free.

You can [buy the book on Amazon](#). At this time, the price is \$34.40.

*Imagine a world where everyone was constantly learning, a world where what you wondered was more interesting than what you knew, and curiosity counted for more than certain knowledge.*

## THE CLUETRAIN MANIFESTO

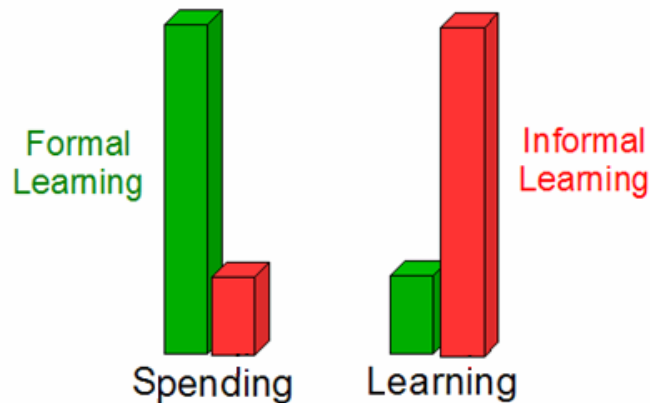
*Informal learning, that's what we call the learning that takes place out of school.*

DON NORMAN

*Informal, adjective: casual, familiar, easy, congenial, simple, unpretentious.*

Most corporations invest their training budget where it will have the least impact, as shown below.

## The Spending/Outcomes Paradox



In July 2002, a three-day event entitled [Creating a Learning Culture](#) rekindled my interest in informal learning. Convened by [Marcia Conner](#) at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business in Charlottesville, it was clear from the start that this was not going to be the typical graduate school colloquium. Marcia told us we were the experts, so no one was going to be teaching at us from the front of the room. We were seeking discovery, not answers. Here are a few of the comments from the fifty assembled gurus and rebels:

"Institutions suck the life out of people. I want to be fully alive, not just going through the motions."

"Our DNA makes people so much alike. We should build on our similarities, not our differences."

"You don't stop work to learn. Learning is the work."

"People like change; it's exciting. People don't want to *be* changed."

The Darden event encouraged me to think even further out of the box, and in 2003 I wrote a white paper entitled [Informal Learning, the Other 80 Percent](#), which described IRL's findings and added Marcia's and others' suggestions on what to do

should an organization choose not to leave learning to chance. The following is excerpted from that white paper:

Learning is not what you think it is.

Most of what we learn, we learn from other people—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, playmates, cousins, Little Leaguers, Scouts, school chums, roommates, teammates, classmates, study groups, coaches, bosses, mentors, colleagues, gossips, co-workers, neighbors, and, eventually, our children. Sometimes we even learn from our teachers.

Informal learning is effective because it is personal. The individual calls the shots. The learner is responsible. It's real. How different from formal learning, which is imposed by someone else. How many learners believe the subject matter of classes and workshops is "the right stuff"? How many feel the corporation really has their best interests at heart? Given today's job mobility, workers who delegate responsibility for learning to their employers become perpetual novices [p. 1].

Many people agreed with what I was saying but were at a loss as to what to do about it. A publisher approached me, and in early 2005 I began digging deeper into the concept of informal learning. I've since read eighty books, interviewed more than a hundred people, and visited heaven knows how many Web sites. I've concluded that we are on a journey from an industrial world ruled by certainty, precision, and logic to a natural world characterized by unity, unpredictability, and complexity.

The industrial age has run out of steam. A quick scan reveals unhappy workers, overcrowded cities, polluted skies, volatile economics, crumbling values, the eradication of leisure, and general malaise that too much is going on. These are the death throes of a model that has outlived its usefulness. It is time to close this chapter and head for new territory.

Join me in exploring how informal learning can boost your organization's performance and enable your workers to lead more fulfilling lives.

Jay Cross  
Berkeley, California  
August 2007