

# INFORMAL LEARNING

*Rediscovering the Natural Pathways  
That Inspire Innovation and Performance*

**Jay Cross**

**Pfeiffer**  
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John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



## Praise for *Informal Learning*

“Outstanding! Finally, a book that walks its own talk. Jay Cross forces us to look at informal learning in a new way—the right way—helping casual observers and seasoned practitioners understand how people truly learn. I’ve waited a lifetime for this book.”  
—Marcia L. Conner, author, *Learn More Now* and *Creating a Learning Culture*, managing director, Ageless Learner

“When you look back at your most powerful and deep learning, it’s informal. It’s in context. It has meaning. And it’s guided by realities that rarely get addressed in formal training programs. Accepting this thinking is fundamental to designing learning and performance experiences realistically. Acting on it is necessary for success.”  
—Gloria Gery, author, *Electronic Performance Support Systems*

“Jay Cross understands learning like no one else. In *Informal Learning*, he taps a fabulous array of real-life examples to provide practical insights for individuals and organizations to learn and succeed in the knowledge economy.”  
—Ross Dawson, author and chairman, Future Exploration Network

“*Informal learning* is something a lot of people are talking about, but [that] no one quite seems . . . to get a grasp of. Jay Cross is putting the pieces of the puzzle together in his new book, whose direct and conversational style is perfect for the topic. Now you may object that a book is too formal a way to [teach] about informal learning. And Jay may even agree. When he lists the major sources of our learning, he mentions everyone from your sister to your boss, but he does not mention books. Well, don’t believe him. Reading this one will prove that there is life yet for splendid learning in good old books.”  
—Etienne Wenger, CP Square

“Jay Cross is a brilliant writer, synthesizer of ideas, and advocate for optimizing the development of human capital. Organizational development professionals, human resource directors, people managers, those concerned with ‘the social life of information,’ read this book. It will cause you to think and act!”  
—Edward L. Davis, author, *Lessons for Tomorrow: Bringing America’s Schools Back from the Brink*

“Life is all about learning, and learning to learn is the most valuable investment an organization can make. If you are eager to learn how organizations can truly boost the potential of their high-performance individuals, *Informal Learning* is the first readable, nontechnical visual map to the fascinating journey of getting better at learning more.”  
—Robin Good, chief editor, Robin Good Online Publishing Network

“You’ll learn more reading this book than sitting in lectures. Jay will make you think and worry. Those are good things, in my view.”  
—Allison Rossett, San Diego State University

“As usual, Jay has his finger on the pulse of trends in corporate learning. He combines a thorough and engaging review of the rationale and manifestations of informal learning with a compelling perspective on its value. This book is a must read for anyone in the learning field today.”  
—Brenda Sugrue, director of research, ASTD

“The world has been waiting for this book. Learning will never be the same again.”  
—Jane Knight, e-Learning Centre and Learning Light

“Jay Cross is one of the pioneers in the field, one of the first to understand how the Internet changes learning in the workplace. This book shows you how to improve learning in the workplace by working with, not against, new technologies and does so in an engaging and informative manner. A must for any corporate trainer’s bookshelf.”  
—Stephen Downes, National Research Council of Canada

“Corporations are just beginning to warm up to what Jay Cross has known for a long time: The water cooler is the new corporate university, and idle chatter—the productive kind—should be encouraged, not stamped out. Read this book if you want to understand how the learning most people think of as unimportant and unproductive is probably the most powerful learning of all—and how to amplify that.”

—Jerry Michalski, Sociate

“Jay Cross distills years of experience and timeless wisdom into simple principles for what really works. He gracefully blows away the cobwebs of popular myths and misconceptions so that we can see the truly effective and astonishingly easy ways we can best support collaboration and learning.”

—Verna Allee, founder, ValueNet Works, author, *The Future of Knowledge*

“Learning happens on the job, in the break rooms and around the water cooler. As life and business get faster and more complex, informal learning is the only option. How can you design learning structures and environments that support informal learning? Ask Jay. He got e-learning before anyone else. Now he gets informal learning. He just plain ‘gets it.’ And now that he’s written a book, you can get it too.”

—Dave Gray, CEO, XPLANE

“During the many chats and exchanges I have had with Jay, I’ve always felt I learned a lot from his insights, wisdom, and wit. Therefore it seems almost a contradiction in terms that Jay is putting all his thoughts and observations on informal learning into a book, the container par excellence of formal learning as we know it. In between the informal chats with Jay, this book will do great for me now, until our next meeting!”

—Rebecca Stromeier, managing director, ICWE, Online Educa

“Jay’s book demonstrates that informal learning is linked to innovations in business management, employee motivation, communities of practice, and productivity. If you have been a hermit for the past few years, reading this book will quickly bring you up-to-date and push your thinking ahead to the coming decades.”

—Curtis J. Bonk, professor, Indiana University, and president, SurveyShare, Inc.

“Learning cannot be left to chance! The skill sets required by the new business environment of the twenty-first century can no longer be served by the traditional training methods of the twentieth century. How we even think about learning must change. Jay Cross is right on target. Every learning and business executive should read this important book. It will raise your consciousness about informal learning as the most important component of an enterprise learning environment.”

—Frank J. Anderson, Jr., president and chief learning officer, Defense Acquisition University

“We’re moving into an age where informal learning is recognized for what it is—our greatest service provider! You want to know how we’re going to get there. This book by emergent learning guru Jay Cross is here to help you.”

—Peter Issackson, Intersmart, Paris

“In *Informal Learning*, Jay Cross presents, with dramatic clarity

- How and why people can learn at a lightning-fast pace, even in what seem to be the stodgiest organizations or environments
- How entire organizations can be transformed overnight
- How enterprises that understand learning, social networking, and the full potential of the Internet can position themselves to anticipate changes, leap on opportunities, and enjoy extreme success
- How to create conditions that nurture creative, responsive individuals who keep the organization flexible, dynamic, and thriving.”

—Susan Smith Nash, <http://www.beyondutopia.com>, Leadership and the eLearning Organization



# About This Book

## Why is this topic important?

Workers learn more in the coffee room than in the classroom. They discover how to do their jobs through informal learning: talking, observing others, trial and error, and simply working with people in the know. Formal learning—classes and workshops—is the source of only 10 to 20 percent of what people learn at work. Corporations overinvest in formal training programs while neglecting natural, simpler informal processes. This book describes how visualization, impromptu conferences, organizational network analysis, conversation space, and communities of purpose fuel innovation and agility. In short, informal learning is generally more effective and less expensive than its formal counterpart.

## What can you achieve with this book?

After reading this book, you should be able to:

- Recognize informal learning when you see it
- Apply informal learning practices in your organization
- Co-create a culture that nurtures natural learning
- Replace training events with learning environments
- Seed communities of practice for bottom-up knowledge dissemination
- Make your organization more agile, resilient, spirited, and open
- Focus on performance

## How is this book organized?

This book is divided into four major parts. "Concepts" examines the incredible acceleration of time, a working definition of informal learning, how informal learning benefits organizations, and why learning ecosystems will crowd out training programs. "Learners" focuses on the individual and the skills and attitudes that make for a successful informal learner. "Cases" are stories of informal learning in action in a variety of companies. "Just Do It" advises how to bring informal learning into your organization. Additional material includes the "In a Nutshell" as Appendix A (because repetition improves learning), two other appendixes, a glossary, and a list of related resources. A Web site for the book, <http://informL.com>, contains supplemental material, updates, and links to community.



## About Pfeiffer

Pfeiffer serves the professional development and hands-on resource needs of training and human resource practitioners and gives them products to do their jobs better. We deliver proven ideas and solutions from experts in HR development and HR management, and we offer effective and customizable tools to improve workplace performance. From novice to seasoned professional, Pfeiffer is the source you can trust to make yourself and your organization more successful.



**Essential Knowledge** Pfeiffer produces insightful, practical, and comprehensive materials on topics that matter the most to training and HR professionals. Our Essential Knowledge resources translate the expertise of seasoned professionals into practical, how-to guidance on critical workplace issues and problems. These resources are supported by case studies, worksheets, and job aids and are frequently supplemented with CD-ROMs, Web sites, and other means of making the content easier to read, understand, and use.



**Essential Tools** Pfeiffer's Essential Tools resources save time and expense by offering proven, ready-to-use materials—including exercises, activities, games, instruments, and assessments—for use during a training or team-learning event. These resources are frequently offered in looseleaf or CD-ROM format to facilitate copying and customization of the material.

Pfeiffer also recognizes the remarkable power of new technologies in expanding the reach and effectiveness of training. While e-hype has often created whizbang solutions in search of a problem, we are dedicated to bringing convenience and enhancements to proven training solutions. All our e-tools comply with rigorous functionality standards. The most appropriate technology wrapped around essential content yields the perfect solution for today's on-the-go trainers and human resource professionals.



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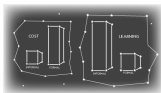
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# PREFACE

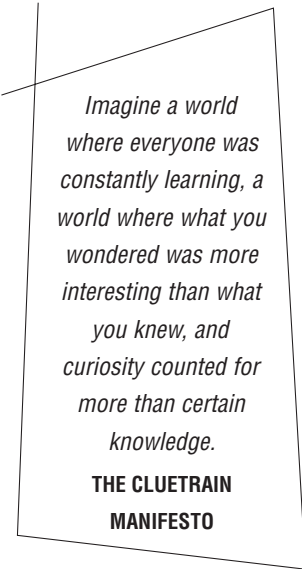
**THIS IS A BOOK** about knowledge workers, twenty-first-century business, and informal learning. I first heard the term *informal learning* from the late Peter Henschel, then director of the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL), who told me:

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 learning 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.

Most corporations invest their training budget where it will have the least impact, as shown in Figure P.1:



*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**