

Informal Learning Opportunities in the Workplace – a practical approach with Small and Micro firms in traditional Manufacturing and Hospitality sectors.

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Contents to be developed in a presentation

Theme #1

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1. Introduction.

This paper seeks to explore how informal learning can be recognised, validated and accredited within small enterprises. It is based on the experiences to date within the Leonardo Da Vinci project, Informal Learning Opportunities in the Workplace, INFLOW.

The developments provide input into considerations regarding the development of learning communities and communities of practice and how technology can facilitate processes of informal recognition and validation. This specifically relates to Theme #1 for the ilearning Forum 2007 around eStrategies and learning organisations and presents an approach that focuses on smaller enterprises in the real business world rather than Corporates and Universities.

2. Challenges associated with the recognition, validation and accreditation of informal learning in the workplace

Much research to date on informal learning and the creation of communities of practice has focused on sophisticated knowledge companies, many in the technology sector. This was initially very clearly demonstrated in the research carried out by The MRS Consultancy Ltd in 2000 as part of the Prometheus project where a lot of informal e-learning taking place within companies such as Nokia, Siemens resulted in the creation of quite sophisticated communities of practice utilising technological tools to enhance collaboration and sharing of knowledge.

There appears to have been very little research into the **implementation** of recognition and validation processes focusing on informal learning conducted **with non-technological, traditional pre-knowledge society enterprises** employing smaller numbers of employees, for example in the service industries. It is true that there has been research conducted into the informal learning processes taking place in the workplace. The CEDEFOP sectoral studies¹ into informal learning taking place within car-repair and printing enterprises is one of the few studies not using solely professionals / higher managerial grades within the sample frame.

In order to achieve the aim of encouraging these informal learning processes, a number of challenges are to be faced.

¹ CEDEFOP Work and learning in micro-enterprises in the printing industry 1998

Some of these are summarised below.

How to

- capture learning that is often not recognised within these enterprises by either employers or employees
- validate this learning without losing its informality
- demonstrate the business benefits to employers
- demonstrate the concept of communities of practice to ordinary enterprises
- ensure employees benefit and can identify these benefits

3. Background to the Inflow project

The Inflow partnership is made up of the organisations from six Member States representing a range of CEDEFOP cultures. (Annex1)

This project seeks to:

- Develop a model(s) for the identification of informal learning taking place within SMEs , making it more visible and recording the evidence of this informal learning e.g. in an electronic portfolio or other e-records
- Develop methodology to produce reliability and validity for the accreditation of the achievements
- Pilot the methodologies and test the transferability of the model between 6 Member States and 2 sectors.
- Initiate a dialogue to develop appropriate integrated accreditation in the member states

The project has therefore looked at how to establish systems for the recognition of informal knowledge, it has addressed the issues of identifying, assessing and validating informal learning and, in working through European partners, it is testing the transferability of the model between Member States by piloting the methodologies with the Engineering Sector in France, Germany and Sweden and between production and service sectors by piloting in the Hotel and Hospitality sector in Spain, France and the UK. The project is

piloting the e-portfolio as the system for recognition of non-formal knowledge/informal learning and the potential creation of communities of practice.

4. Desk Research findings²

The Business Culture

Critical factors for the development of informal learning within workplaces appear to be the:

- **internal business environment** - enabling *employee autonomy*, (giving a degree of freedom to employees in the workplace so that informal learning may occur), *supportive management*, an *organisational structure* that is capable of maximising informal learning opportunities
- **social context** - positive work relationships and opportunities for communication at work are critical factors in the development of informal workplace learning
- **support** available to informal learners– e.g. coaching, one-to-one shadowing, mentoring etc)
- **equality of opportunity** – to ensure all areas of the workforce are treated equally in terms of access to the opportunity for learning informally and for that learning to be recognised

Business Benefits.

Potential **impact and value to the business** depends upon informally-acquired skills and knowledge (like formal acquisition) relating to specific work-based skills gaps and business requirements. Informal learning acquisition encourages learners in the practical application of their skills.

Workplaces can create **communities of practice** in which knowledge, aptitude, ability, attitudes and behaviour can all amalgamate to provide necessary skills for the specific foci of different workspaces – and what are necessary skills alters within the different work contexts.

² www.inflow.eu.com

5. Development of a Model

Overview

From Desk research undertaken, a model has been developed that contains a review of the issues and critical success factors key in the roll-out of such a model to SMEs. The model also contains a **Framework** that focuses on both the macro-level and also the micro-level of analysis within SMEs.

The **macro-level** examines the potential impact and value to the business of informal learning and has utilised the four critical success factors identified from the desk research, (see above.) In order to ensure a business-focused approach, four themes have also been identified:

- strategic-decision making
- operational structures
- implementation and review
- evaluation of business benefits.

Criteria have been developed in the context of both the themes and the critical success factors in order to examine the conditions within the business that encourage the development of informal learning. These form the starting point for discussions within businesses as part of the quality assurance process.

At the **micro-level**, it is necessary to focus on the factors affecting employee informal learning in the workplace. This informal learning make a positive impact on business performance and the framework draws the attention of employers to this essential role. In addition, its recognition by employees can be an essential stepping stone in embedding concepts of lifelong learning across a broad spectrum of individuals and across different EQF levels.

Quality Assurance Framework

Validation and accreditation methodologies have been developed from this Framework together with a quality assurance framework to ensure rigour in any awards made to either enterprises and / or individuals. These are based on the criteria. Each criterion has a set of learning outcomes, indicators and suggested evidence to support achievement.

Use of technology

Technology has been utilised in terms of developing a work-based e-portfolio that has multiple functionality in terms of:

- Recording of an individual's informal learning
- External assessment of that learning for an award
- Sharing of that learning as part of a community of practice within an organisation.

6. Summary

It is important to recognise the potential contribution of such an approach both to increased competitiveness of smaller enterprises across the European Union and also to Lifelong Learning agenda.

The approach has sought to engage enterprises using a business benefits approach and to capture informal learning in a rigorous way but without creating a heavily bureaucratic and formal approach. The use of technology in this process assists in this approach as well as presenting individuals with a transferable record of their skills and knowledge acquired informally in the workplace.

Feedback from representatives across all Member States will be particularly interesting and informative bearing in mind our cultural differences and is very welcome.

Annex 1.

Leonardo Da Vinci Informal Learning Opportunities in the workplace project partners.

Name of Partner	Country of Origin
The MRS Consultancy Ltd.	UK
RKW Rationalisierungs-undInnovationszentrum der Deutschen Wiirtschafte.V.	DE
Balea de Desarrollo y Formación	ES
EIFEL	FR
Greta du Velay	FR
TAF- Continuing Education Development Foundation	LV
Swedish TelePedagogic Knowledge Centre	SE
The Engineering Employers Federation (EEF)	UK
My KnowledgeMap	UK
Edexcel replaced by ASET	UK
Doncaster College representing Doncaster Education City	UK