

A light bulb where you need it The Heart of Work and Learning

A policeman finds a drunk on his hands and knees under a street light.

“What are you doing?”

“Searching for my car keys.”

“I don't see them buddy.”

“Of course not, I dropped them over there by my car.”

“Then why are you looking over here?”

“The light is better.”

It's old. It's not very funny. So...why do you try to show someone how to do their job under a street light **when their keys are over there, in the dark by their car?**

Why do we spend millions training in classrooms, when what we care about is activity at work? Why do we build models to simplify our view of work and structure of a company and then move in, living in a model that is a thin shadow, yet base our decisions on those views?

It's because the light is better under the street light!

Now THAT'S a stupid way to make decisions!

How do you learn? Think about it for a minute.

When you need to build a chart in excel, or do a mail merge, or find the number for maintenance...do you go to a training course? Do you look in the manual? Do you even look in the help file?

I'd be willing to bet the answer is no. Most folks ask someone. That's the where - where learning happens.

And when was the last time, when you were chatting with that fount of knowledge who you WOULD turn to *if* you needed to build a chart, and you actually asked them how to build a chart, do a merge, figure out how many angels can dance on a pin or whatever you have needed to know over the past six months?

Never, right?

You ask them when the problem is right in front of you. *At the moment of need.*

That's the when.

That is when and where we learn - at the interface of a person and a problem.

We learn when we are sitting in front of a problem.

That is when we learn most effectively and most efficiently - at the point of need.

Carl Wieck, the wonderful organizational psychologist calls this process **Sensemaking**. We have a problem that interrupts our usual flow of information and work and we try to make sense out of the quandary.

One of the ideas of Sensemaking is that **convenient is better than best**. In other words, I would rather have a half-assed solution that gets the job done now than a wonderfully crafted method that requires me to look in a book, attend a class, or even ask a second person. Can we say... a bird in the hand...?

These unofficial networks are a way that a majority of learning, information, and innovation is passed within an organization.

Think about it. How do you learn or pass new methods? The most common, certainly the most effective and efficient is to wander down the hall and talk to someone you know. Brown and Duguid call these non-canonical groups.

I was working on recommendations for a knowledge portal for a group within the Navy who were responsible for maintaining electronic components for an aircraft. The initial idea was to put lots of static information online (stick the user manual online so they could have the latest versions available worldwide quickly at a greatly reduced cost). Sounds like a good idea. However, no one was using the thing. Hmmm.

I suggested I go and talk with target users.

They thought that was an amusing way to proceed, but allowed me to proceed with my fantasy. I asked the chiefs of the repair shops **what they did when they got stuck for information.**

“I pull out my Rolodex.” was the answer.

Each one knew dozens of people throughout the world who had worked on these components and they knew they could find an answer that was more useful and **grounded in practice** by **talking to one of their colleagues** than by trying to find the official answer, which might not be useful or correct.

I also discovered that a huge problem was looming. Because these communications were unofficial (non-canonical in Brown and Duguid's terms), the **information exchanged was “housed” only in the individuals** taking part in the conversation.

The contacts were in the Rolodex, but the definition of who those people were and the ability to call them and find that information was privy to each chief.

The problem was that 4 of 7 chiefs were slated to retire within a short period of time. **Since that information existed under the official radar, it would disappear, leaving no way for the next person to find that information.**

That kind of unofficial learning was in jeopardy. No one had the means to replicate the stored knowledge or to create a situation where others could learn that information.

Without understanding or respecting where and when learning happens and ideas and innovations spring to life, there is very little chance of supporting the process.

Conversely, if we **stop looking for our keys under the**

light posts and take the time to look for them **even in the dark, difficult places where they actually are,** then we have a much better chance of finding them.