Umbrella Summary

Informal Learning Behaviors

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What are informal learning behaviors?

Informal learning behaviors (ILBs) are self-directed, intentional activities to acquire knowledge and skill outside of formal learning environments (Cerasoli, Alliger, Donsbach, Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Orvis, 2017). Informal learning is distinct from learning that is externally imposed or required, involves structured content or processes, or occurs accidentally (Cerasoli et al., 2017). It is the day-to-day, on-the-job learning that occurs in the workplace. ILBs include things like observing, asking questions, seeking information, and practicing (Cerasoli et al., 2017).

A highly related behavior is seeking feedback, which is sometimes described as a form of informal learning but has not been consistently integrated into the research on informal learning. Feedback-seeking behaviors (FSBs) are individual efforts to actively gather evaluative information about one's own behavior (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). FSBs are generally understood to fall in two categories. When employees directly ask for feedback, it is called *feedback inquiry*, whereas a more indirect method of observing and inferring feedback information from the environment is referred to as *feedback monitoring* (Ashford & Cummings, 1983).

There are a variety of measures used to assess ILBs and FSBs; in neither case is there a single instrument that has risen to the top as the most trusted or popular. Some measures of ILBs consider different sources of information, such as self, others (e.g., peers or supervisors), and materials or resources (e.g., professional magazines and journals; Lohman, 2005; Tews, Michel, & Noe, 2016). Respondents are asked to report how frequently they engage in certain learning behaviors, such as observing others or searching the internet. Other measures consider the method of learning, such as reflection, vicarious experiences, and experimentation (Decius, Schaper, & Seifert, 2019; Wolfson, Tannenbaum, Mathieu, & Maynard, 2018). Example behaviors include debriefing an on-the-job experience, asking questions of an expert, or seeking and experiencing new assignments (Wolfson et al., 2018).

Most research on FSBs measures FSBs overall, with one or more items such as "I often ask my supervisor how well he or she thinks I am performing" (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). Some measures include subscales to separately assess feedback inquiry and feedback monitoring. Feedback inquiry questions are often similar to the one above, and feedback monitoring questions ask things like, "How often do you compare your coworkers' performance to your own?" (Williams & Johnson, 2000).

Why are ILBs important?

Some amount of informal learning is probably inevitable in any job and necessary for many jobs. Even for jobs that involve significant formal learning, there will still be individual and situational needs for informal learning, especially if expectations change frequently. Employees need to be able to take the lead, at least to a certain extent, in initiating and effectuating that informal learning. More specifically, ILBs are important because they are moderately associated with positive attitudes (e.g., engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment), knowledge and skill acquisition, and performance (Cerasoli et al., 2017). Overall FSBs are moderately associated with job satisfaction and not associated with performance, though feedback inquiry in particular is modestly connected with performance (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, Sackett, 2013). Instead, FSBs are strongly connected with relationship building and moderately associated with networking and adjusting to a new job and organizational culture (Anseel et al., 2013).

What contributes to ILBs?

Meta-analytic research on ILBs thus far has focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with ILBs, not on strategies for increasing them or on examining whether increasing them affects outcomes like learning, performance, or turnover. However, there are many factors that are associated with ILBs (and FSBs) that are seen as potential influences. These factors fall into two categories: individual and situational.

The strongest individual factors associated with ILBs are personality (e.g., conscientiousness, openness to experience) and motivation to learn (Cerasoli et al., 2017). For FSBs, the strongest connections are with feedback-specific attitudes (e.g., desire for feedback, perceived value of feedback; Anseel et al., 2013). Beyond those, FSBs are more likely among those that believe in their ability to perform their work and who are motivated to demonstrate those abilities (i.e., have a performance goal orientation; Anseel et al., 2013). Those who are motivated by the opportunity to learn and develop new skills are also likely to engage in FSBs, but to a lesser extent (Anseel et al., 2013). Thus, FSBs may be exhibited for purposes other than just learning. Finally, FSBs are more likely among younger and newer employees (Anseel et al., 2013).

The strongest situational factors associated with ILBs are having sufficient resources, autonomy, and support (e.g., from supervisors or the organization) to engage in ILBs (Cerasoli et al., 2017). FSBs are more likely among those who receive feedback, either positive or negative, and those who have a leader or supervisor with whom they have a good working relationship or who shows individualized consideration for employees and provides intellectual stimulation (Anseel et al., 2013).

In summary, factors that are associated with either or both ILBs and FSBs are needing support (e.g., due to inexperience); having positive attitudes and tendencies toward learning, performing, and feedback; and having tangible or interpersonal supports in the organization.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► ILBs are moderately associated with positive attitudes (e.g., engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment), knowledge and skill acquisition, and performance.

► Overall FSBs are moderately associated with job satisfaction and not associated with performance, though feedback inquiry in particular is modestly connected with performance.

► FSBs are strongly connected with relationship building and moderately associated with networking and adjusting to a new job and organizational culture.

► There are no meta-analyses assessing the connection between ILBs or FSBs and turnover.

► Research is needed to develop and test strategies to increase ILBs/FSBs and to test whether increasing ILBs/FSBs improves outcomes like learning, performance, or turnover.

► The strongest individual factors associated with ILBs are personality and motivation to learn.

► FSBs are more likely among those that have positive feedback-related attitudes, believe in their ability to perform their work, and are motivated to demonstrate those abilities. Thus, FSBs may be exhibited for purposes other than just learning.

► Younger or more inexperienced employees tend to seek feedback more often than their older and more tenured peers.

► Employees who have more resources, autonomy, and support (e.g., from supervisors or the organization) are more likely to engage in ILBs.

► FSBs are more likely among those who receive feedback, either positive or negative, and those who have a leader or supervisor with whom they have a good working relationship or who shows individualized consideration for employees and provides intellectual stimulation.

► There are a variety of measures used to assess ILBs and FSBs, but there are no specific instruments that are the most trusted or popular.

References

Anseel, F., Beatty, A. S., Shen, W., Lievens, F., & Sackett, P. R. (2015). How are we doing after 30 years? A meta-analytic review of the antecedents and outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior. *Journal of Management, 41*, 318–348.

Ashford, S. J., & Cummings, L. L. (1983). Feedback as an individual resource: Personal strategies of creating information. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 32*, 370–398.

Cerasoli, C. P., Alliger, G. M., Donsbach, J. S., Mathieu, J. E., Tannenbaum, S. I., & Orvis, K. A. (2017). Antecedents and outcomes of informal learning behaviors: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 33*, 203–230.

Decius, J., Schaper, N., & Seifert, A. (2018.). Informal workplace learning: Development and validation of a measure. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 30*, 495–535.

Lohman, M. C. (2005). A survey of factors influencing the engagement of two professional groups in informal workplace learning activities. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 16*, 501–527.

Steelman, L. A., Levy, P. E., & Snell, A. F. (2004). The feedback environment scale FES: Construct definition, measurement and validation. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 64*, 165–184.

Tews, M. J., Michel, J. W. & Noe, R. A. (2017). Does fun promote learning? The relationship between fun in the workplace and informal learning. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 98*, 46–55.

Williams, J. R., & Johnson, M. A. (2000). Self-supervisor agreement: The influence of feedback seeking on the relationship between self and supervisor ratings of performance. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 30*, 275–292.

Wolfson, M. A., Tannenbaum, S. I., Mathieu, J. E., & Maynard, M. T. (2018). A cross-level investigation of informal field-based learning and performance improvements. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 103*, 14–36.

Author(s)

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Robert Blagg, PhD, University of California, Los Angeles

Suggested Citation

Paul, M., & Blagg, R. (2020, July 29). *Umbrella summary: Informal learning behaviors*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/informal-learning-behaviors

For general information about Umbrella Summaries, visit https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella-summaries-faq

QIC·WD QUALITY IMPROVEMENT CENTER FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT