

# INFORMAL LEARNING AS A STIMULATOR TO ENHANCE EMPLOYEE COMPETENCY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Informal learning is vital in order to enhance and develop employee competency. Formal learning may be useful for specific learning and decision making in organizational context. However, how far formal learning can help to improve employee competency levels based on the exposure and limited time engagement in the learning activities for job related task. This paper argued that informal learning should take place when there is a loop in promoting formal learning based on job requirement. This paper also argued, why informal learning is significant in order to close the gap between formal learning due to limited time engagement and exposure. Time factor and exposure are the indicators that will influence learning and competency outcome. Informal learning is imperative for productivity, employee competencies and organizational performance. This study proposed that there is a possible connection between informal learning and employee competency. Employee competency in this study are divided into technological competency, technical competency and non-technical competency. This paper also presented the proposed conceptual framework for future research based on theoretical triangulation from a previous seminal study in the international, Asian and local context.*

**Keywords:** Informal learning for employee, Competency Issue.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

21<sup>st</sup> century is the age of technology where every single person should have the necessary competency in order to survive in this era. There are many types of learning that help employee to learn based on their preference and ability to learn. Informal learning is defined as intentionally and unstructured learning that occurs [1]. Informal learning is vital when formal learning could not take place as a result of limited time exposure and limited materials for workplace learning. Learning is one of the main indicators that could stimulate employee competency. Many studies have a limited coverage and understanding how underpinning reason, such as informal learning can play as the main "Actor" in shaping employee competency. This conceptual paper discussed and argued in detail how informal learning is significant for developing employee competency. Employee competency in this context is divided into 3 domains, which are technological competency, technical competency and non-technical competency.

## 2. ISSUE IN INFORMAL LEARNING IN STIMULATING EMPLOYEE COMPETENCY

Many studies address the need of informal learning in order to improve and promote workplace learning [2]. Informal learning not only helps to promote and increase workplace learning it also helps to shape employee competency based on the demand of today's market in order to increase productivity and performance for organization and individual. The issue start when informal learning is only used to fill the gap for formal learning. The basic understanding of learning process should integrate towards the necessity of informal learning. Many studies overlooked the beginning of the learning process, time engagement and exposure for mock training. These criteria are significant for employee as a learner to learn and mentor to guide and develop mutual understanding towards the subject that they intend to improve. Many at times informal learning will take place in order to improve the desired competencies of employee. There are elements in formal learning that cannot be quantified where informal learning will take place to shape employee competency such

as: - formal learning cannot provide a long period of time engagement for employee to learn and the concept of formal learning may not be able to adapt without proper guidance and practice by the instructor or trainer, and sometime the practice may be obsolete. This could lead to poor understanding, and worst it could affect or jeopardize competency development process. Assessing the right learning method when shaping employee competency is imperative in order to inculcate the right competency facets in this 21<sup>st</sup> century based on today's trend and demand from the market [3]. As far as competency is concerned informal learning should base on system assessment based on technological, technical and non-technical competency [4]. These are the necessary element for each of the employee to survive in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are sub elements in employee competency that need to be considered such as the engagement of technological device daily, nature of work, field of the industry and forces from global market. Practitioners are stuck in the real dilemmas when it goes to linking the types of learning and training, in order to shape or build employee competency. The argument here is how the system does and employee learning abilities is being assessed? System assessment and preliminary individual learning abilities assessment may be misleading or using irrelevant measurement system that is used to assess employee learning abilities. This process is important before the management or practitioners decide to propose informal learning for shaping employee competency. Informal learning is also able to educate employee and to understand on how personal and emotional are linked together towards non-technical competency. These elements cannot be quantified in formal learning because the indicators are very subjective and dynamic which are based on the perception and situation.

## EMPIRICAL GAP

There are many studies done in the context of informal learning and competency. This paper argued the empirical findings based on the study done in the context of informal learning. Informal learning at workplace provide significant

impact on the practice of competency management and development in organization. However, many empirical findings in the context of informal learning as indicators to shape employee competency are unable to describe the necessary competency for the job.

There are many inconsistent findings, and this is due to poor system and environment assessment and individual assessment [4]. The gap here is how individual informal learning trigger the desired competency based on the need, how organization identify the need for desire competency and does the finding from the study provide a related model that could explain the process of informal learning in order to build competency. Organization may provide informal learning program such as mentoring program, but this program only help to build non-technical skills [5].

The findings might be misleading and can cause haywire and develop the unnecessary competency area. The findings may provide negative causality if only covers a single domain in competency. Previous studies provide inconsistent finding based on different need and analysis conducted. Local research provides different finding compared to international and Asian research. Inconsistent finding may lead to conflict of opinion, model development and discussion on the findings among the scholar who lead seminal research in their respective country. Contradiction between international study and local study is due to dynamic industrial need, cultural, perception and technological change. In order to close this gap, practitioners ought to assess current environment related to organization needs, job requirement, management style and demand from global market [3].

**METHODOLOGICAL GAP**

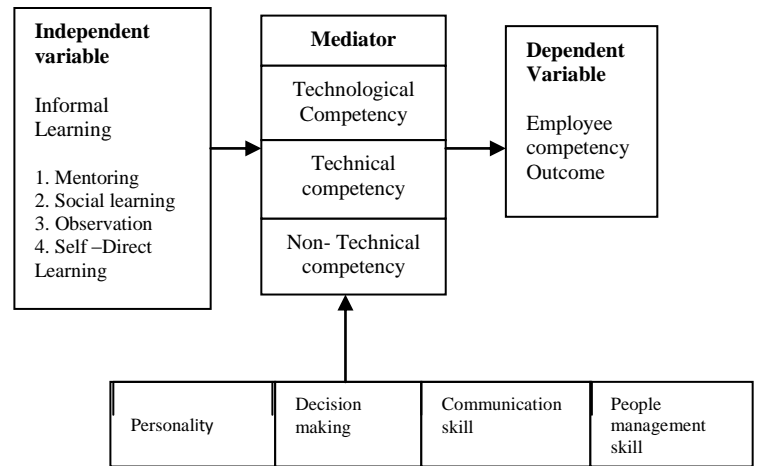
There are many research focusing on a single method of data collection and only focus on one department or single organization only. The first methodological gap in this study is focusing on single research method which only adapt quantitative approach and only arrived at a conclusion based on numerical data by investigating the relationship between independent variables and a dependent variable. By adapting only one method, it is difficult to study and understand the phenomenon of competency profiling. Creswell and Clark (2007) proposed that mixed method approach is necessary for reasons of validating and strengthening qualitative and quantitative data that outweigh the weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative methods. It is seen as more complete and comprehensive rather than using only qualitative or quantitative approach alone [6]. Both approaches give a different picture as it provides more evidence. However, some study provides very specific aim and objective which could reflex the adaptation of methodology in their study. Some studies only focus on one department, which could be biased in term of representation of the study. The need of this study is to close the methodological gap based on method, data collection and population. Previous study may be conducted based on the need of organization.

**5. THEORITICAL GAP**

There are huge gaps based from the previous research on employee competency, previous research only brings in theory

based on internal factors that contribute toward employee competency take for instance the model or theory development which only provide a common system for assessing individual learning and competency problem and opportunities as well as individual competency as the indicator toward employee competency. This paper proposed that informal learning should cover both theoretical and model from the perspective which covers technological, technical and non-technical competency that correlate. Research done by Cheng, Yang and Peng (2011) proposed a reasonable model to look at the impacts of perceived individual and social learning support on employee which is only focusing on human factors and covering external factors. Some studies may overlook external indicators that could reflect employee competency such as a technological advance. Based from research done by Omer, (2012) competencies are divided into business knowledge, change management and technological competencies which is significant for the study to include competency model or theory based on external factors. Employee competency not only come from internal factors, it is also driven by external factors that may lead toward employee competency. As a result of this theoretical gap, current study proposed to cover both elements in order to close theoretical gap.

**6. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**



**Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual framework**

Conceptual framework in Figure 1 provides a proposed framework for future research to expand the study. Informal learning consisted of 4 types: mentoring, social learning, and observation self- directed-learning. Informal learning act as indicator, or in this context act as independent variable. Mentoring is vital in order for individual to learn from their senior or expert in the field and align with the desired competency that organization wish to develop. Based on the study done in the international context, it was shown that mentoring program as informal learning showed a strong positive psychological relationship that could help to improve individual personality and desired skills [7].

Social learning on the other hand is vital for enhancing learning skills based on surrounding in order to

improve communication skills mainly for exposure to be more extrovert and develop soft skill [8]. Social learning is one of the indicators that help to hone learning skills from the people around them. It could act as “social influence”. However, this indicator may be misused or misleading if it is not being used at the right place and need. Observation is a type of informal learning that does not require any intervention or present of the trainer. Observation requires the employee to focus by observing the behavior and related skills of the target individual or group when performing work. Usually, the target is individual or group who are expert in the field work. The purpose of observation is for knowledge acquisition for a short period of time. This will give a non -expert employee to adapt and understand how the work is done by the expert [9]. This could help employees to develop competency strategy at the beginning of their career. Self-directed learning is important in this proposed conceptual framework due to exposure of high independence of the employees learning acquisition. This is also significant for employees to develop self-motivation and interest towards knowledge acquisition, work and adaptation of workplace environment [10].

The indicators of informal learning are imperative due to the involvement of 3 sub facets in employee competency namely technological change, technical competency, and non-technical competency. This relationship provides a greater outcome in order to shape employee competency. Employee competency that consisted of three sub facets namely technological change, technical competency, and non-technical competency act as a mediator. Technological competency is vital in order to assess or evaluate employee skills, knowledge and abilities when using technological tools to perform work. This is important for every organization and industry due to technological changes and demand from the market. Traditional way of doing job no longer can support the dynamic change of business needs. Many organizations design their product that suit the market need. This condition force organization to produce high quality products and require high quality manpower that can master technological device or tools to perform the work. Technical competency is vital for employee to show their talent in mastering the necessary technical expertise such as technical skill, technical knowledge and technical ability. This sub facet could help employee to evaluate and understand their current technical competency. Technical competency is a technical error handling based on the real situation where employee will get the chance to use his or her skill to solve technical error. Non-technical competency in this context are personality, decision making skills, communication skills and people management skills. Non- technical is vital for employee to align the right aptitude and soft skills toward the desired competency.

This conceptual framework could help scholar, practitioner and organization to understand the underpinning factors in informal learning as stimulator to enhance or develop employee competency. From this framework it is proposed that the researcher study the negative and positive outcomes of competency levels. The reason why negative and positive outcome should be investigated in the future study is due to informal learning could lead to positive or negative outcome if the development stage involve with assessment and other

internal and external factors that may affect social learning influence.

## 7. RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDY AND CONCLUSION

Future studies should provide a system and workplace assessment before assessing the right learning technique for competency development. In addition, future study should be conducted using mixed method or quasi- experimental study in order to study the issue of employee competency development in detail.

In conclusion, employee competency development should cover, both from two types of learning, namely formal and informal learning. This is significant in order to understand and evaluate employee learning ability and link it with competency development.

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