

The Perks of Informal Learning Networks

Professional development opportunities abound when you join an ILN.

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Informal learning networks can be valuable for L&D professionals to advance their careers, support work transitions, improve performance, and develop additional skills. ILNs are unstructured and voluntary communities of people interested in learning and growing through others within or beyond their organizations. These networks provide access to connections and expertise that may be unavailable in an organization's formal structures. The currency in an ILN is members' social and professional capital, rather than a mandate from management, a charter, or another externally imposed structure.

Individuals commonly use an ILN to address a business need, and it can be a precursor to more formalized communities of practice. For example, ILNs can meet needs such as a crisis response, a budget deficiency, or a lack of skilled talent. In each of those situations, the group-based relationships can help address critical tasks in a more agile manner by minimizing bureaucracy.

Strengths

Shared interests and a passion to learn are ILN members' connective tissue. People are attracted to such groups because of a common bond. Unlike a community of practice whose members are practitioners in the same field, ILNs have no qualifying requirements, credentials, formal education, or professional roles. Members typically span industries, organizations, professional experience, education levels, and personal backgrounds.

ILNs can coalesce around a specific project or task and then dissipate until another need arises, or they can maintain longevity through ongoing periodic interaction. The networks are highly flexible and can evolve based on their members' needs. In other words, there's no set structure or agenda; everything is adaptable. Such flexibility creates opportunities to augment a structured learning process in the way members learn best.

Another strength is that minimal investment is required to start or run the group. ILNs can use existing free communication means or low-cost, commercial off-the-shelf options such as internet chat platforms or apps. That promotes quick startup, low barriers to entry, and easy onboarding of new members. Likewise, it accelerates the learning part of the network, rather than focusing on the time and money often required to stand up formal teams or adopt complex platforms or processes.

ILNs work well with adult learning behavior by using multidirectional communication, creating spaces for a combination of push and pull information flow. Members can share resources

4

Tips for Keeping Your ILN Active

1

Create a purposeful structure (such as regular meetups) so engagement expectations and opportunities are clear for members.

2

Use a prototyping mentality—test an idea, and if it isn't working, move on to something different.

or knowledge relevant to the network at any time and ask for information or resources whenever it is most useful to them. Open communication options provide direct access to experts and resources outside formalized structures or hierarchies.

Finally, these networks provide access to a diversity of perspectives. Inclusion of members regardless of organizational membership or structure provides a low-friction and participatory way for people of varied experiences (in life and work) and skills to voluntarily collaborate. With that interaction comes additional opportunities for innovation and problem solving, connection to other networks and development opportunities, and expanded perspective and empathy.

Ways to find or start a network

As you become more aware and comfortable with how these networks operate and can benefit you, opportunities will likely start presenting themselves. Consider which of these three primary entry points best fits your needs and context.

Entry point 1: Existing communities or cohorts. Forming or joining an ILN is often easier when it grows within groups you belong to already. People in a community or cohort either know each other or know they share something in common, which provides helpful social capital to build a learning network. When people in an existing community want to form an ILN, the time and effort to get it up and running can be minor.

Once a learning network has started, tapping into the larger community's

3

Recruit new members into the group and introduce them up front so they feel welcome.

4

Invite all members to contribute in ways that work for their needs, circumstances, and abilities.

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shared identity, history, or interests can help maintain momentum and provide a potential source for new members. Think creatively about what communities you belong to—successful ILNs can come out of classmates in school (such as the members of a particular academic program), civic or faith-based organizations, and professional associations.

While completing a graduate program at Northwestern University, Chad Eaves and his program cohort of 20 people formed a group in WhatsApp that has remained active after graduation for members to communicate and collaborate. During one of his work projects, Eaves was considering several options for internal-external communication channels with a client and needed some fresh perspectives. He activated his grad school cohort with a query that resulted in suggestions and guidance based on their shared education and individual professional experiences, which helped him land on a solution.

Entry point 2: Specific events or experiences. A shared activity—such as attendance at a conference or work-

Use the Appropriate Network to Fit the Need

All networks are not the same. Some are official and others are informal. Regardless of a network's formality, their structures fit into one of two general shapes, as Julie Battilana and Tiziana Casciaro discuss in their *Harvard Business Review* article "The Network Secrets of Great Change Agents": cohesive and bridging.

In cohesive networks, a deeper level exists between members. That fosters higher levels of trust and confidence in people. Decisions and actions can occur more quickly with the increased level of familiarity between members.

Bridging networks typically span broader collections of people who are not as familiar with one another. What the network type lacks in intimacy, it makes up for in access to people with information, knowledge, and connections that are lacking in a cohesive network. There is also a higher likelihood of more objectivity and less groupthink among people with weaker personal ties.

The strength and advantages of these network types vary depending on the scenario. Your network's shape will be largely defined by its purpose and the people in it. While informal learning networks tend toward a bridging model, if the network's reason for being is of a sensitive nature, a cohesive one may be more appropriate.

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shop, participation in a community service event, or a new-hire orientation group—can serve as a catalyst of a new learning network. An ILN could also be formed by a shared experience such as long-time colleagues who experience a reduction in force together. While ILNs born out of one-off events or experiences can require more time and energy to form and build trust, they can be just as fruitful as networks rising from existing cohorts.

Learning networks established from events or experiences can benefit from more diversity of identity, background, and ways of thinking than networks formed out of preexisting groups. Forming an ILN through shared experiences may lead to more turnover in membership but can result in a more deeply connected and higher-quality network.

What could that type of network look like? The three of us met through an ILN that developed from a 2020 Association for Talent Development virtual conference. We joined a larger WhatsApp group of L&D professionals and from there, Jessie Elisberg started a smaller group of study buddies who met on a regular basis via Zoom for several months to discuss specific learning topics and session takeaways.

The smaller group eventually turned into an ongoing virtual book club focused on L&D-related articles and reports and subsequently led us to writing this article. The larger group continues to be active, with members sharing updates and resources and requesting advice and support, and it will undoubtedly lead to other collaborations and spin-offs.

Entry point 3: An existing platform.

With the abundance of solutions available, including social media platforms and collaboration apps, it's possible to find other learning-oriented people online. That option can create a learning network of a larger cohort of people with similar interests, including experts and thought leaders, though it can require more time to build trust. Platform options to explore include Facebook, LinkedIn, Clubhouse, and Discord.

Career enhancement

L&D professionals need to meet their own professional development to ensure they are best equipped to help others meet theirs.

Seeking growth outlets such as ILNs can help you stay current on emerging and popular trends in the industry and deepen expertise. You can benefit from increased awareness of solutions you can then bring into the workplace, as well as career advancement opportunities.

Managing expectations helps you get the most out of any experience, and learning networks are no different. As such, it is important to define what you can (and should) do as a member. Understand what you need from a group and keep that top of mind.

Whether joining an existing group or starting a new one, be prepared to offer value first. That will increase the likelihood that others will help you, and it sets a precedent that you are not only there to take from the group. Be comfortable that an ILN is just that: informal. It's not work nor a job but a voluntary membership. Network plans and deadlines can become fluid, particularly as individual members face heavier workloads or work or life transitions.

Although ILNs are informal, you should maintain a degree of professionalism in your interactions. Burning bridges and criticizing people (or the group) may feel gratifying if there's a disagreement, but you may need that group someday—and you never know who you may be working with, or for, in the future.

If you aren't already using this tool to support your professional development, where are the potential ILNs within your reach?

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