



## Individual differences and informal learning in the workplace



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### ABSTRACT

Informal learning is important in today's dynamic and competitive business environment. However, research on informal learning is limited and largely anecdotal. Based on theory and research on training and development and positive psychology, this study examined the influence of individual differences including the Big Five personality dimensions, generalized self-efficacy, and zest on informal learning. One hundred eighty managers from an organization that owns and operates casual theme restaurants completed online measures of individual differences and informal learning approximately one year apart. The results demonstrated that each of the individual differences had a significant relationship with informal learning. However, zest was the only significant predictor of informal learning when all of the individual differences were considered together. The implications of the results for research and practice are discussed.

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Informal learning is learner initiated, occurs on as-needed basis, is motivated by intent to develop, involves action and reflection, and does not occur in a formal classroom setting (Bear et al., 2008; Tannenbaum, Beard, McNall, & Salas, 2010). It is estimated that informal learning accounts for up to seventy-five percent of learning that occurs within organizations (Bear et al., 2008). Informal learning provides opportunities for high fidelity practice and learner interaction which are often limited in formal training programs. For organizations, informal learning is an important means by which employees continually update their knowledge and skill sets to adapt to changing situations, adopt new technologies, and provide high quality services to internal and external customers. From the employees' perspective, informal learning is critical for success in today's boundaryless careers which require taking personal initiative to add to one's skill set by going above and beyond formal training provided by the employer (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006).

Informal learning research has tended to focus on theory and model development and descriptive studies despite calls to examine its antecedents and consequences (e.g., Tannenbaum et al., 2010). The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the antecedents of informal learning by examining its relationship with individual differences. Researchers in training, development, and education typically distinguish between studies that focus on the learning process of how individuals learn from those that focus on the outcomes of learning. This study represents the former by assessing the relationship between individual differences and informal learning behavior.

Specifically, this study examined the influence of the Big Five personality dimensions, generalized self-efficacy (GSE), and zest on managers' informal learning. Previous research has examined the Big Five personality dimensions and GSE as antecedents of motivation to learn, learning performance in training, and involvement in development activities (Chen, Gully, Whiteman, & Kilcullen, 2000; Maurer, Lippstreu, & Judge, 2008): however, their relationship to informal learning is unknown. Establishing their relationship to informal learning is important for understanding who is capable of proactively adapting their knowledge and skills in today's rapidly changing workplace (Penney & Witt, 2011) and is useful for identifying predictors to select employees who would be "informal learners". Examining the relationship between the Big Five, GSE, zest, and informal learning broadens our

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understanding of what types of workplace behaviors are predicted by these individual differences. Investigating the zest–informal learning relationship contributes to our understanding of positive psychology in a learning context, which has recent little research attention. Finally, this study assesses a broader range of individual differences than are typically examined in learning contexts, such as the Big Five only (e.g., Major, Turner, & Fletcher, 2006), contributing to our understanding of the relative strength of these predictors.

## 1. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The theoretical foundation for informal learning is based on the work of Marsick, Volpe, and Watkins (1999) and Watkins and Marsick (1990, 1992). They characterized informal learning as a process initiated by an intent to learn, followed by experience and action, feedback seeking, and reflection. Intent to learn refers to recognition of the need to acquire knowledge to successfully perform. Based on their intent to learn, individuals engage in activities to acquire knowledge or skills through experience and action or experiment to determine rules, principles, and strategies for effective performance (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). Experience and action results in the individual directly receiving feedback from the task or engaging in seeking feedback from others (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Feedback stimulates reflection which requires individuals to consider what experience and action was successful, what they would do differently, and what strategies they would use to meet a similar learning need in the future (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Sonnentag & Kleine, 2000). Informal learning is related to other learning constructs such as continuous learning, workplace learning, deliberate practice, and self-development (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; London & Smither, 1999; Orvis & Leffler, 2011; Raelin, 1997). Informal learning is distinct from these constructs because it is discretionary, includes cognitive and behavioral components, and does not include participation in formal training and development programs.

Descriptive studies of informal learning in different occupations have found that it includes cognitive activities and behaviors that are self-focused and other-focused (Doornbos, Simons, & Denessen, 2008; Lohman, 2005; Lohman & Wolf, 2001). These activities and behaviors can be categorized into three dimensions: learning from oneself, learning from others, and learning from non-interpersonal sources. Learning from oneself includes spending time reflecting how to improve one's performance and experimenting with new ways of performing. Learning from others includes interacting with peers and superiors to solicit feedback on ideas and devise strategies for performance improvement. Learning from non-interpersonal sources includes reading trade publications and searching the internet for useful resources and information.

Informal learning is largely under individual control, and as such, some individuals may be more apt to engage in informal learning based on their personal characteristics. Individual differences are important antecedents of motivation to learn, which have been demonstrated to influence participation in both formal training and voluntary development activities (Colquitt, LePine, & Noe, 2000). Theoretically, individual differences may have stronger relationships with informal learning compared to formal training and development activities for two primary reasons. First, informal learning primarily depends on the learner's choice and motivation to interact with others, reflect on their experiences, and seek information. Informal learning is thought to be largely dependent on employee motivation, similar to organizational citizenship behaviors which are more discretionary than core job responsibilities (Organ, Podsakoff, & Mackenzie, 2006). Second, informal learning may not always occur when needed. Individuals may choose to focus on what they perceive to be more pressing work demands or personal issues as opposed to engaging in actions and reflection needed for learning to occur. As such, motivation and individual differences may be especially important to facilitate the informal learning process.

### 1.1. The Big Five

The Big Five personality dimensions (agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, and openness to experience) have emerged as the dominant framework for examining the role of personality in work attitudes and behavior (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hertz & Donovan, 2000). Agreeableness reflects the extent to which individuals are polite, flexible, tolerant, trusting, and cooperative (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Conscientiousness refers to the extent to which an individual is self-disciplined, responsible, organized, dutiful, dependable, and behave in a manner that meets others' expectations. Such individuals have a high need for achievement, set difficult work goals, and are highly motivated to attain them (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993). Emotional stability refers to the extent to which individuals are secure, calm, confident, and feel in control of their surroundings (McCrae & Costa, 1985). Extraversion refers to the extent to which individuals are sociable, gregarious, assertive, ambitious, and active (Gough, 1987). Finally, openness to experience reflects to whether individuals are broadminded, creative, curious, and cultured (Barrick & Mount, 1991).

Previous research has demonstrated that conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, and openness to experience have important influences in learning contexts. Conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness to experience have been reported to relate positively to motivation to learn, training proficiency, self-perceptions of learning ability, participation in active learning and self-development activities (Bakker, Demerouti, & ten Brummelhuis, 2012; Barrick & Mount, 1991; Colquitt et al., 2000; Major et al., 2006; Orvis & Leffler, 2011). Emotional stability is a precursor of anxiety, which is negatively related to a variety of learning outcomes, including affective reactions to training and knowledge and skill acquisition (Chen et al., 2000; Colquitt et al., 2000). Agreeableness has received the least research attention in studies conducted in learning contexts. The few studies that have been conducted have shown that agreeableness is unrelated to training proficiency and participation in formal development activities

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