Defining and Encouraging Informal Learning and Development in the BC Ministry of Education

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Executive Summary

This study focuses on informal learning as a tool for career development. Informal learning involves the spontaneous transfer of skills and knowledge during work time through such activities as mentoring relationships or temporary job assignments (Hughes & Campbell, 2009). These activities do not necessarily have a direct monetary cost. In times of fiscal restraint, organizations may turn to informal learning options to develop employees as opposed to structured formal learning programmes that might involve course work or training. The British Columbia Ministry of Education is such an organization. The objective of this research is to explore how this provincial ministry can develop informal learning opportunities to foster a capacity to develop from within, building on mentoring and innovative job restructuring activities.

Using an inductive approach, supervisors’ interpretations of informal learning provide the foundation for the research. These management personnel can offer insights into their own as well as their employees’ career development. They also are in a position to influence organizational change and help others cope with change (Isabella, 1990). Information is gathered from supervisors through interviews and a questionnaire that focus on three key concepts of: informal learning in general; mentoring and peer relationships; and temporary job restructuring activities. Questions elicit respondents’ experiences with informal learning activities that facilitate or inhibit career development along with their suggestions for developing various informal learning options in the ministry.

At the time of the data-gathering in April to May 2010, 84 persons in the Ministry of Education were listed with supervisory responsibilities at different levels of the management hierarchy. The research occurred in two phases to maximize the number of potential respondents from this population: 21 randomly-sampled informants participated in an interview and 19 of the remaining supervisors completed the questionnaire. Altogether, respondents represent a comprehensive sample of ministry management personnel.

Findings from the interviews and questionnaires are analyzed and categorized into seven broad themes representing supervisors’ comments. The first five focus mainly on the process and the final two dwell in the content or type of learning activity. All provide equally important advice about what to do and avoid when planning for and undertaking informal learning opportunities. These overarching themes are:

1. Learning Opportunities Provided
2. Thoughtful Planning and Process
3. Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling
4. Positive Relationship Dynamics
5. Learning Tied to Application
6. Mentoring  
7. Temporary Job Restructuring

There are significant commonalities between the findings in the literature and the responses. For the most part, the informal learning experiences of supervisory personnel in the ministry have positively impacted their career development. If the Ministry of Education sees informal learning as a valuable tool but the activity needs impetus to move forward, the organization may be able to learn from the experiences of its managerial staff.

Recommendations in the report stem from respondents’ suggestions for structuring and encouraging informal learning as a career development instrument for all employees of the ministry. As well as a means for career development in times of fiscal restraint and otherwise, informal learning might also help the ministry to become a learning organization in today’s competitive labour market:

Concept I: Informal learning in general.  
- Expound the benefits of informal learning with management personnel.  
- Educate all staff on informal learning, promoting it as an effective means for professional development.  
- Use the Employee Performance Development Plan as a strategic planning tool for informal learning.  
- Provide an array of informal learning options for all.  
- Examine existing ministry structures that may pose barriers to informal learning.

Concept II: Mentoring and peer relationships.  
- Provide information to all staff about the potential benefits of mentoring and peer relationships.  
- Create a mentoring programme with clear guidelines and information.  
- Encourage linkages between mentoring relationships and other informal learning activities.

Concept III: Temporary job restructuring.  
- Create structures to promote and enable temporary job restructuring activities.  
- Ensure employees and supervisors understand the need for planning and fair, consistent protocols to guide temporary job restructuring activities.  
- Ensure temporary job restructuring opportunities are balanced with core work and sufficient staffing.
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INTRODUCTION

Career development can stem from different learning means. Often, professional development is thought of as something one can accomplish only through organized formal training programmes, workshops, or courses that require a dedicated budget. Regardless of this partial view, informal learning opportunities through on-the-job interactions are becoming more common. Skills and knowledge can be transferred spontaneously by means of informal learning activities, such as mentoring relationships or temporary job assignments that do not necessarily have a direct monetary cost. Furthermore, such pursuits may provide a more enduring learning experience.

In conjunction with formal training opportunities, informal learning options may be encompassed into an ongoing plan for employee development and organizational sustainability. Organizations sometimes go through periods of fiscal restraint when the financial means to pursue formal learning programmes are scarce, thus necessarily turning to informal learning activity as a primary means to develop staff. Among other ministries across the provincial public service in British Columbia, the Ministry of Education is such an organization.

Given the potential value and utility of informal learning opportunities, the objective of this research is to explore how the BC Ministry of Education can develop informal learning activity thus fostering a capacity to develop from within, building on mentoring and innovative job restructuring activities. From the Deputy Minister to team leaders in work units, supervisors in the Ministry of Education come from a variety of backgrounds with different degrees of experience. These are individuals whose learning and career choices have led them to various leadership roles and who also are in a position to influence the career development of their staff. Moreover, recent ministry and central public service activities have aimed to build the capacity of supervisory staff through learning programmes so they have the tools necessary for consistent leadership practices and to promote a positive organizational culture (BC Ministry of Education, 2010a). Supervisors’ views on informal learning therefore provide the focus for this report.

Information is gathered from the ministry’s management personnel through the administration of interviews and a questionnaire. The interviews seek to obtain information on the positive and not so positive impacts of informal learning techniques utilized by management along with ways to develop various informal learning options in the workplace. The questionnaire is designed to elicit further views on implementation of different informal learning activities as a means to support employee development.

Following a review of the literature, a conceptual framework is presented to guide the research. The report explains the methodology used to collect information on informal learning activity in the Ministry of Education and discusses the findings from interviews and questionnaires administered to ministry supervisors. Subsequent to overall
conclusions, the report offers recommendations for structuring and encouraging informal learning as a career development tool for ministry staff.

Background

The Ministry of Education is one of twenty provincial ministries in the province of British Columbia (Province of BC, 2010). This ministry is responsible for the Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system, as well as early learning, literacy, and public libraries. Functions related to these responsibilities are divided among seven departments or “Divisions”: the Resource Management Division that provides and monitors funding for the school system; the Partnerships and Planning Division overseeing strategic initiatives and programming; the Liaison Division that builds connections among education partners in BC; the Student Achievement Division focusing on improving student learning and achievement; the Knowledge Management Division in charge of e-learning, evaluation, data, business initiatives, and management of information technology; the Governance and Accountability Division responsible for governance, curriculum, and education standards; and the Deputy Minister’s Office concentrating on operations related to the Deputy Minister (BC Ministry of Education, 2010b).

Although a significant share of the provincial budget in BC is allocated to education, much of this funding is transferred by the Ministry of Education to local Boards of Education. Hence, Education is a relatively small ministry with approximately 300 employees that are housed in four separate buildings in the City of Victoria. Staff in this ministry tends to transfer less frequently across government compared with the mobility in other provincial organizations.1 Among current ministry staff are 46 designated education specialists and many management personnel from backgrounds in the field of education.2 With more than 80 supervisory personnel employed in this ministry, a ratio of approximately 3.5 workers to each supervisor creates a steep hierarchy relative to the rest of public service organizations in BC (BC Ministry of Education, 2010a).

This ministry’s most recent plan to address work-related issues and to advance its workforce, entitled Building Our Future Together: Ministry of Education Workforce Plan 2010-11, recognizes connections between human resource practices and success in business. Accordingly, much of the plan’s focus is on building internal capacity and improving competitiveness. Among other strategies related to human resources, the plan recognizes the need to review the ministry’s complex hierarchy and to address the ongoing learning requirements of employees alongside the overarching needs of the business (BC Ministry of Education, 2010a). Some approaches to learning involve informal, on-the-job opportunities, such as mentoring and on-site group training. The plan considers the ministry’s recent scores on the BC Public Service Work Environment Survey.

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1 According to Ministry of Education CARE Team staff (the personnel focused on management of human resources in the Ministry of Education).
2 Ibid.
(WES);\(^3\) notably, employees in the Ministry of Education are more satisfied with supervisory-level management and compared to the rest of the public service are more engaged overall. At the same time, these public servants are less satisfied with professional development opportunities in spite of an increase in training courses. The workforce plan thus emphasizes the need to provide meaningful, relevant, and applicable learning opportunities (Ibid.).

The ministry workforce plan remarks upon the challenges associated with the recent global economic downturn and reductions in the workforce. A climate of fiscal restraint in provincial public service organizations in BC, including the Ministry of Education, has precipitated the elimination of some management positions in this ministry coupled with reductions in public service training and development budgets. Rather than facing layoffs, Education’s staffing has been reduced through attrition that is mainly due to retirements and resignations. Simultaneously, this ministry must carry on and “respond to new initiatives, expand current programs, and address critical gaps that are left as people leave the organization” (Ibid, p. 13).

When it comes to staff development, the Ministry of Education currently cannot rely on conventional human resource management methods, such as enrolling existing employees in formal training courses and seeking new recruits. The ministry must sustain itself internally through maximizing individual expertise, transferring knowledge of departing employees, and advancing existing employees into leadership positions.

To complement formal training programmes and when professional development budgets are reduced, informal learning provides a promising means for transfer of knowledge and skills as well as overall development of careers. Given this period of belt-tightening, ministry leadership has encouraged the establishment of an internal mentoring programme and the utilization of various temporary job restructuring activities to make the most of human resources and tap underutilized skill sets.

This research is intended to provide information and recommendations for cultivating and sustaining informal learning activity that is effective and will enable the organization to develop employees from within. Furthermore, the report may provide insights for other provincial ministries across government that are facing similar challenges in human resource management.

\(^3\) The Work Environment Survey (WES) is an annual survey that is administered to all employees of the BC public service. It gauges public servant engagement and satisfaction with such factors as supervisory management, pay and benefits, and teamwork within the work unit.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature establishes a foundation for the questions asked of supervisory and management personnel in the Ministry of Education. It first examines informal learning in general and then moves to specific career development opportunities through mentoring relationships and various temporary work assignments. The literature also reveals differences between formal and informal learning opportunities.

Informal Learning

In 2009, the Conference Board of Canada published the Learning and Development Outlook – Learning in Tough Times report. Based on a survey of 218 public and private organizations representing the manufacturing, financial, social services, retail, technology, construction, and transportation sectors, the report provides information on the state of training, learning, and development in Canada for the 2008 fiscal year (Hughes & Campbell, 2009). Showcased within are the skills shortages in today’s workplaces caused by a knowledge-based economy, economic globalization, and an aging workforce that also is becoming increasingly diverse (Ibid.).

The Conference Board report explains that historically, organizations tend to invest in formal training and development activities to upgrade workers’ skills and knowledge. Such formal training might involve off-the-job classroom or online course work, workshops and seminars, or co-op and internship experiences (Ibid.; Rowold & Kauffeld, 2009). However, the recent global economic recession has caused decreases in training and development budgets. In the past 15 years, the investment in formal training and development has declined by over 40 percent. Concurrently, activities cultivating informal learning opportunities have increased. In 2008, informal learning activity represented 56 percent of employee learning in organizations across various sectors (Hughes & Campbell, 2009).

Career-related informal learning is described by London and Smither (1999a) as a self-initiated and discretionary pattern of ongoing career development activity. Skills and knowledge are developed informally and during work time through such activities as mentoring or coaching, cross-functional work teams, communities of practice and learning networks, online social networking, peer relationships, or temporary work assignments. Such learning and development is characterized as informal because it occurs as a spontaneous part of work processes, structures, and relationships rather than through official, dedicated, educational forums.

Additional research reveals that formal learning is insufficient to support employee growth and to keep pace with growing development needs (Eddy, Tannenbaum, Lorenzet, & Smith-Jentsch, 2005). The movement toward informal learning supports a continuous learning philosophy where the line between work and development blurs and learning occurs daily and throughout the course of a career (Ibid.). As job markets become more
competitive, organizations increasingly are being asked to facilitate the continuous learning of their workers (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003).

While it is difficult for organizations to track the full extent of their employees’ informal learning activity, informal learning “can contribute to productivity and innovation” (Hughes & Campbell, 2009, p. 5) in the workplace. Organizations supporting and fostering strong learning environments may enjoy stronger organizational performance (Eddy et al., 2005; Tannenbaum, 1997). Individuals engaged in the learning process can benefit from greater career flexibility, increased self-esteem, and improved work performance (Eddy et al., 2005). Informal learning opportunities are a vital part of ongoing learning in the workplace (Tannenbaum, 1997).

Employees who engage in informal learning tend to be proactive, undertake self development, self-monitor, and adjust their goals accordingly (London & Smither, 1999b). They set goals, ask for and use feedback, and are more active in seeking learning opportunities. Informal learning also may be enhanced through proactive sharing of knowledge and reflective communication in the group learning process (London & Sessa, 2007). Professional staff tends to engage in informal, continuous learning more so than employees lower in the organizational hierarchy; thus, it is important to provide targeted learning options and communicate to junior staff the importance of learning (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997).

Supervisors play an important role because they can enhance or hinder continuous learning in the workplace (Tannenbaum, 1997), depending on their level of support for learning (Eddy et al., 2005). Workers in learning organizations are empowered and guided by encouraging supervisors who can facilitate the informal learning process through coaching and by providing effective feedback, challenging tasks, and opportunities for development (Tannenbaum, 1997). Supervisors must view mistakes as potentially valuable learning experiences and therefore be willing to assign some opportunities involving risk, thus promoting learning and innovation (Eddy et al., 2005).

Human resource managers can support informal learning activity and the learning process by assisting participants to create learning plans and by following up on the results of the activity (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Overall, leaders in organizations can help supervisors to encourage and convey the importance of informal learning culture by providing them with tools and techniques and by ensuring activities, time, guidance, challenging assignments, and opportunities are provided for all (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997; Rowold & Kauffeld, 2009).

Eddy et al. (2005) discuss additional factors that foster informal, continuous learning, including support from co-workers, opportunities to develop and apply learning, as well as tools, staffing, and time so employees are encouraged to undertake learning activities. Awareness of the big organizational picture is necessary so that individual developmental goals can connect to core branch work and align with what the organization is attempting
to accomplish (ibid.). Ultimately, employees and managers alike should have high expectations and be held accountable for development through performance measurement, reward, timely feedback, and information about organizational changes and expectations (Tannenbaum, 1997). Accountability reinforces the importance of learning in successful development (Eddy et al., 2005).

As opposed to formal training and development, “the cost-effectiveness, immediacy, and relevancy of informal learning may make it a more attractive option for TLD\(^4\) than an increase in spending on formal learning would be” (Hughes & Campbell, 2009, p. ii). Rowold and Kauffeld (2009) find that informal, continuous learning activity has a more positive impact on work-related knowledge, skills, and abilities than formal training and development pursuits. Whereas formal training need not be the main source of learning in organizations (Tannenbaum, 1997), it is important to note that the Conference Board report emphasizes formal training and development should not be eliminated.

Although Canada’s economy is weathering today’s societal and fiscal pressures better than other industrialized countries, Canadian organizations can capitalize on informal learning activity that is balanced with investment in formal learning to maximize employee skill development (Rowold & Kauffeld, 2009). In the words of Hughes and Campbell (2009), the authors of the Conference Board of Canada report, “The key is for Canadian organizations to find the right mix of formal learning investments and informal learning practices” (p. 5). Thus, these establishments can face societal and economic changes and remain competitive in today’s markets (Hughes & Campbell, 2009; Mayo, 2000). This competitiveness can bolster staff retention, productivity, customer satisfaction, and profitability. Schwind, Das, and Wagar (2007) go so far as to declare that preparing employees to take on key responsibilities is vital to an organization’s survival.

Further exploration of the literature reveals the potential contributions of specific informal learning pursuits – that is, mentoring relationships and temporary job assignments – to an organization’s plans for staff development and sustainability.

**Mentoring and Peer Relationships**

*Mentoring.*

A great deal of the literature on informal learning focuses on mentoring relationships. In lieu of formal training programmes that may be more effective for conveying technical and academic information, much valuable informal learning can occur through mentoring relationships that provide a vehicle for reflection and personal learning (Lankau & Skandura, 2002). Some mentoring relationships are created through formal mentoring

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\(^4\) TLD is an acronym for “training, learning, and development”, introduced on page i and used throughout the Conference Board of Canada report: Hughes, P. D. & Campbell, A. (2009). *Learning and development outlook – Learning in tough times.* Ottawa, ON: Conference Board of Canada.
programmes while others are informal, growing naturally from existing working relationships and in response to rapidly changing work environments.

Mentors may be referred to as coaches, guides, role models, or advisers (Cunningham & Eberle, 1993). Senge (1990) describes leaders in learning organizations as those who can offer helpful insights into the realities of the organizations in the roles of coaches, guides, or facilitators. In terms of specific mentoring functions, a mentor is a role model who provides advice, guidance, and feedback on another’s career development and job performance (Cunningham & Eberle, 1993; Lankau & Skandura, 2002). Mentors may sponsor individual employees, facilitating their visibility in the organization and offering challenging work assignments to enhance learning, increase competence, and prepare individuals for advancement. They may also help with psychosocial or interpersonal and relationship skills through modelling and counselling (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Mentors tend to have particular qualities that enable positive mentoring relationships, such as interpersonal and supervisory skills, organizational knowledge, patience, charisma, and willingness to focus on another’s career growth and expose workers to new experiences. They understand the importance of managing mentoring relationships to enhance employee learning (Lankau & Skandura, 2002). Mentors themselves can gain respect and support from colleagues and enjoy satisfaction in knowing they are helping individuals to grow in their careers (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Protégés are those who are mentored, learning through on-the-job interactions. Effective protégés tend to be introspective as well as people- and goal-oriented with a desire to learn (Lankau & Skandura, 2002). A positive mentoring relationship requires mutual respect and a foundation of trust between the mentor and protégé, along with focus, commitment, and flexibility from both parties (Ibid.).

Protégés who view their mentors as positive role models can purposefully observe mentors’ behaviours and emulate their practices to influence informal learning and development (Lankau & Skandura, 2002). Purposeful observation can be a useful means for informal learning and involves focused observation of the ways in which leaders and role models act and react to work-related situations. This also may occur outside of mentoring relationships in situations where employees concentrate on the behaviours of effective individuals at work. Murphy and Ensher (2001) state such observation of effective role models is positively linked to career satisfaction. This emphasizes the need for mentors to model effective behaviours for the benefit of their protégés’ development (Lankau & Scandura, 2002).

Setting of goals is important in mentoring relationships (Welsh & Wanberg, 2009). Godshalk and Sosik (2003) assert that establishing learning goals promotes motivation for participants and helps to focus the nature and function of the mentorship. Specific learning goals prompt protégés to pursue challenging assignments and maximize the promise for learning and career growth. Such goals also might help to improve their
connections in the organization (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Moreover, well-matched mentors and protégés – in other words, mentors who can meet the specific learning needs of the protégé – aid in maximizing the learning experience for the protégé and thus the overall success of the mentoring relationship (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003).

Advantages of mentoring can be career-related (gains from learning, sponsorship, exposure to others in the organization, challenging assignments) or associated with psychosocial support (enhanced competence, identity, effectiveness) (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby & Lockwood, 2005; Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). Mentors themselves also may benefit from “learning, developing a personal relationship, personal gratification, and enhanced managerial skills” (Eby & Lockwood, 2005, p. 441).

Studies indicate a positive relationship between having a mentor and the protégé’s job and career satisfaction as well as career development and promotions for the protégé (Allen et al., 2004; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Murphy & Ensher, 2001). Improvement occurs particularly if the mentoring relationship concentrates on vocational support (rather than just a psychosocial focus) along with defined and focused learning goals (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003; Murphy & Ensher, 2001). Moreover, many successful managers credit mentors as an important aspect of their career development (Cunningham, in press).

Welsh and Wanberg (2009) declare that mentoring is an effective means for developing and retaining talented personnel; however, they caution that some employees experiencing work-related difficulty and therefore most in need a mentoring relationship may not be involved in one. For this reason, it is important to encourage mentoring opportunities for all. What is more, supervisors may wish to be on the alert for particular employees who might benefit from mentoring. Human resource managers can influence these circumstances as well (Ibid.).

Problems in mentoring occur when the mentor and protégé are mismatched, there are difficulties in scheduling mentoring meetings, the relationship is neglected, or geographic distances interfere with the relationship (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Such circumstances may be avoided or improved with “clearer communication of program objectives, better matching, targeted participation in the program, and better program monitoring” (Ibid., p. 441).

Overall, as Lankau and Scandura (2002) affirm, mentors are a beneficial commodity in learning organizations. Support for ongoing, informal learning and development of employees in organizations where opportunities for interaction are provided encourages individuals to be proactive in their learning and can result in successful mentoring relationships (Eddy et al., 2005).
Informal mentoring compared to formal mentoring.

The main difference between informal and formal mentoring is the manner in which the relationship is formed (Chao & Gardner, 1992). Informal mentorships occur spontaneously in the workplace and are based on existing connections and interactions. Informal mentors tend to choose protégés to whom they can relate. In contrast, formal mentoring relationships occur through “programs that are managed and sanctioned by the organization” (Ibid., p. 620) and use a third-party matching process making it more difficult to form a trusting relationship (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Consequently, a longer period might be required for the participants in a formal mentorship to get to know each other.

The research reveals further differences between informal and formal mentoring activities; particularly, studies indicate greater benefits and fewer problems in informal as compared to formal mentoring relationships (Chao & Gardner, 1992; Eby & Lockwood, 2005). The research of Eby and Lockwood (2005) shows that formal mentors may be less motivated than informal mentors because they often have engaged in the formal mentoring programme due to company requirements or because they wish to gain recognition or visibility in the organization. Further, formal mentors often just offer advice and assistance in career planning. In contrast, informal mentors tend to actively engage in the relationships to promote protégés’ visibility and help them grow and develop in their careers. Informal mentorships are inclined to foster a more profound interpersonal relationship (Ibid.).

As for the protégés in formal mentoring programmes, some may feel obligated to take part to satisfy special initiatives or succumb to pressure from someone else wishing them to participate (Chao & Gardner, 1992; Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Compared to their counterparts in informal mentorships, protégés undertaking formal mentoring are likely to describe their mentors as neglectful or self-absorbed and lacking in job-related and interpersonal skills (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Chao and Gardner (1992) state that protégés in informal relationships “reported more career-related support from their mentors and higher salaries than protégés in formal mentorships” (p. 619).

Given that informal mentoring relationships are initiated voluntarily and thus by motivated individuals who likely are high performers, this might explain the greater success of informal mentorships as compared to formal programmes (Chao & Gardner, 1992). Those organizations wishing to develop a formal mentoring programme should be mindful of the need for a positive climate encouraging mentorships based on interest rather than obligation or intimidation (Ibid.). Formal programmes should undertake careful, deliberate matching of mentors and protégés (Ibid.) to promote a positive relationship and so protégés are mentored in areas specific to their learning needs. In addition to this matching process, mentors and protégés surveyed in Eby and Lockwood’s study (2005) recommend clearer communication of objectives, improved monitoring and follow-up, role clarification and better matching of participants, opportunities to share
experiences, and the use of orientation programmes as factors to improve formal mentoring programmes.

**Peer relationships.**

In many organizations today, downsizing and flattening of managerial structures increases demands on the time of remaining management personnel leading to fewer experienced managers available to mentor employees (Eddy et al., 2005). As a result, organizations look to other avenues for mentoring relationships. Given that mentoring need not involve the traditional dynamic of a boss mentoring a subordinate and because critical peers (colleagues offering constructive criticism) likely are more available, mentoring relationships occur between peers (Ibid.; Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Peer relationships can serve some of the same functions as more traditional mentorships, with the potential to support career development (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Informal learning can result from on-the-job interactions in which one discusses work-related ideas and issues with knowledgeable and experienced colleagues (Rowold & Kauffeld, 2009). Trusted peers can provide valuable support to their colleagues, offer feedback on performance and interpersonal skills, and make suggestions for improvement (Eddy et al., 2005). Some individuals may find peer relationships more appealing because it is easier to communicate with and seek support from a peer with whom they have more in common, as opposed to a superior in a mentoring relationship (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Kram and Isabella (1985) refer to a unique aspect of peer relationships in contrast with traditional mentorships; namely, there is a degree of “mutuality” (p. 118) in a two-way exchange whereby each individual in the peer relationship may be both the provider and receiver of mentoring support. Peer relationships therefore might last longer than mentorships, sometimes for many years, contributing to the participants’ ongoing development of competence, responsibility, and learning throughout the different stages of their careers (Ibid.). There also is a measure of empathy that may not be part of a typical mentoring relationship.

Just as a positive work environment for learning supports mentorships, peer relationships are facilitated in organizations that promote continuous, informal learning where openness to new ideas and innovation exists (Ibid.). Peers are encouraged to help each other in such supportive work environments. Accordingly, peer relationships are more open, supportive, and productive. Learning is maximized because the relationships are more effective (Ibid.).

In some cases, peer mentoring relationships develop between groups or networks of colleagues. Groups can learn to use collective resources to foster knowledge and skill and to carry out their work more effectively through team coaching and mentoring (Hackman & Wageman, 2005; London & Sessa, 2007). Learning can be enhanced through group
coaching that “...results in a foundation of trust, a constructive resolution of conflicts, greater commitment, and increased accountability” (London & Sessa, 2007, p. 660).

Effective peer mentoring benefits both employees and the organization (Kram & Isabella, 1985). For instance, individuals might enjoy enhanced interpersonal and work-related competencies. When workers support each other and deal with more of the daily concerns on their own, supervisors may spend less time on smaller issues thus having more time for bigger picture problems. The organization itself gains from overall learning (Ibid.).

Both mentoring and peer relationships have advantages and there will be times throughout the course of a career where one type of relationship is more effective than another, depending on individual learning needs. Kram and Isabella (1985) suggest that mentors may be most important in the early years of a career, while peer relationships can be valuable at all stages, “modified and shaped by the age and career concerns of both individuals” (p. 116).

**Temporary Job Restructuring**

In addition to capitalizing on the knowledge, skills, and expertise of mentors and colleagues, ongoing informal learning can be supported by temporary restructuring of work. Using the language of Hughes and Campbell (2009) in the Conference Board report, such experiences may be referred to as “experiential learning” (p. 4). For the purposes of the present report on informal learning in the BC Ministry of Education, these particular activities are identified herein as “temporary job restructuring activities”.

In temporary job restructuring, employees are encouraged to undertake on-the-job learning opportunities that go beyond their main work responsibilities. This involves a range of possible activities, from working on short-term special assignments in addition to one’s main job to a full-time transfer to a different position for a finite period. No matter which end of this spectrum, these assignments provide occasions for staff to take on new challenges.

At the short-term end of the spectrum, individuals can tackle special projects or stretch assignments that are chosen to apply and extend their existing skills while providing opportunities to enhance expertise. Such assignments may be carried out in their existing work unit or department and usually in addition to core work responsibilities. A shorter time commitment could involve an arrangement known as matrix organization. In a matrix structure, individuals are based in one department but also participate in cross-organizational projects where they can contribute existing expertise, utilize skills untapped in the home department, and develop new competencies. In this arrangement, the employee reports to supervisors in both the functional (home) and cross-functional departments (Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, McGrath, & St. Clair, 2007). The approach is
used in the discipline of project management and is sometimes referred to as matrix management (Schwind et al., 2007).

Longer-term learning ventures can arise from voluntary job rotations, cross-training, or team responsibilities. Job rotations involve the trading of work positions between individuals who are employed in different work units but in the same field of work. Cross training is similar to job rotation and refers to the training of one employee to do another’s work (Cunningham, in press). Also in the same realm as job rotation and cross training, team responsibilities entail training a number of employees to undertake the same type of assignments so they can fill in for one another when needed (Ibid.) Rowold and Kauffeld (2009) cite methods such as job rotation as a means to cultivate informal learning.

At the far end of the spectrum of temporary job restructuring activities are temporary assignments. Temporary assignments require more time and a greater commitment on behalf of workers and their supervisors. In these circumstances, individuals assume a different, usually full-time job position for a set period of time. The base position is vacated and the supervisor in the home branch must backfill the position in the interim; alternatively, remaining staff must take on the unattended responsibilities while their colleague is absent. Some individuals may well capitalize on temporary assignments to showcase their talents and as a career-starter, while others might wish to take on new challenges as a learning opportunity for advancement (Cunningham, in press).

The key advantage of temporary job restructuring activities is challenge. Tannenbaum (1997) found that employees are motivated by challenging tasks that provide opportunities to learn. Such challenging job assignments can help individuals to improve work-related competencies for future career development (Rowold & Kauffeld, 2009). Stretching their responsibilities helps prepare workers to move into expanded roles, such as leadership positions (Hughes & Campbell, 2009). Furthermore, organizations that provide such learning options produce staff members who are more satisfied with their overall career development (Tannenbaum, 1997).

Another constructive aspect of undertaking restructured job assignments is the opportunity to apply untapped or newly-learned skills. Application of learning by means of challenging assignments further enhances employee motivation (Ibid.). Rowold and Kauffeld (2009) also assert the importance of opportunities to transfer learning through motivating projects that contribute to organizational goals.

Along with other career-related learning opportunities, organizations can restructure jobs temporarily to maximize existing human resources and develop back-up expertise. This increases the capacity of organizations to face staff reductions in times of economic downturn. Moreover, these pursuits contribute to the growth of an organization by developing future leaders from within.
The framework guiding the research that explores ministry supervisors’ views on informal learning is discussed in the next section. This framework is grounded in the concepts explored in the above literature review.

**FRAMEWORK GUIDING THE RESEARCH**

The BC Ministry of Education is much like other organizations that are turning to informal learning for employee development due to the challenges of shrinking training budgets in times of fiscal restraint. The literature review provides background and a foundation for the specific concepts addressed in the interviews and questionnaires.

The results of the interviews inform the study regarding the positive and not so positive forces that enhance or restrain informal learning as a development instrument. As well, the questionnaires provide a sense of the frequency of different types of informal learning activities and suggestions for encouraging such activity. Both the interviews and questionnaires offer insight into how the organization can develop these opportunities to contribute to succession planning in the ministry.

**Applying Interpretation and Inductive Reasoning**

Isabella’s (1990) study of how managers view and address organizational change reveals that individuals’ interpretation of events helps them to understand the associated circumstances. Studies focused on interpretation rely on the assumptions that a) organizational members base their future actions on their record of past experiences; b) individuals share their frame of reference with others in their group; c) managers’ collective views are important in influencing organizational change; and d) individuals make interpretations based on what has already occurred (Ibid.). This current exploration of informal learning in the Ministry of Education is guided by the assumption that we can learn from managers’ experiences with and their interpretations of informal learning activity.

This study uses an inductive approach, asking supervisory personnel in the ministry about their positive and less than positive experiences with various informal learning activities. These experiences may facilitate, enhance, hinder, or restrain their overall career development. Examining the relationships can help us to see what might be inhibiting development so we can learn, affect necessary changes, and move forward (Cunningham, unpublished document). The inductive process helps questioning to remain open and allows respondents to expand on their ideas and provide additional examples as they see fit. Moreover, supervisors’ interpretations of their experiences form the basis for their ideas to support and develop informal learning activity in the ministry.
The interviews and questions presented to key informants in the research are led by three general concepts subsequently defined.

**Framework Concepts**

In the case of informal learning in the BC Ministry of Education, the literature review and the informal learning activity currently taking place in this organization guide the three factors (concepts) providing a context for this analysis. Given the proactive nature of informal learning, questions first asked respondents to comment on their overall informal learning experiences and the associated impacts on career development. Questions then focused on mentor and peer relationships as well as temporary job restructuring activities.

Accordingly, the three concepts forming the basis of the framework for informal learning and presented to the interviewees are as follows:

1. Informal learning in general;
2. Mentoring and peer relationships; and
3. Temporary job restructuring activities.

For each of the three concepts, questions led informants to describe different examples of informal learning activity that facilitated or restrained their overall learning and career development. Based on their interpretation of experiences, they then shared suggestions on how to develop and move forward informal learning options.

The study elicits perspectives on these three concepts from the ministry’s management staff. These particular individuals are in a position to provide wide-ranging views of learning for career development based on their own work-related learning experiences and advancement into leadership positions, as well as their responsibility in supervising and developing employees. Moreover, Isabella’s (1990) look at managers and organizational change reveals their pivotal role in influencing and helping others in the organization to contend with change.

**METHODS**

**Research Design**

When the data were gathered in April and May 2010, the population of employees listed with supervisory responsibilities in the ministry was 84 persons. This research occurred in two phases to maximize the number of potential respondents from this population. Within the framework guiding the research, interviews and a questionnaire were designed to obtain supervisors’ perspectives on informal learning:
1. Interviews – By way of an invitation sent via email, a pre-generated random sample from the population of 84 ministry supervisors was invited to participate in an individual, face-to-face interview scheduled for 45 minutes. During the individual interviews, participants’ answers to each question were written as completely as possible.

2. Questionnaire – The remaining persons in the population of 84 managers were sent an email request to complete a questionnaire. Less detailed than the interviews, some questions were scalar and some anecdotal. The questionnaire was both administered and to be returned via email, but paper copies were accepted. It was anticipated that the questionnaire would take approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete, depending on the experiences of the respondent.

The two-stage questioning process led to an exploration of individual experiences and identification of the positive and not so positive circumstances that might influence different aspects of informal learning. This helped to gain an understanding of the circumstances surrounding this type of development in the ministry and what might facilitate or impede opportunities for learning. Respondents’ views on improving informal learning options that may enhance career development in the ministry form the basis for the recommendations of this paper.

**Sampling**

Respondents all are employed in a management or supervisory capacity in the Ministry of Education. A random sample of twenty individuals was generated from the complete population of 84 supervisors (team leaders, managers, directors, executive directors, superintendents, assistant deputy ministers, and deputy minister). These persons are considered supervisors in the ministry because at least one staff person reports to them.

Random sampling was used with the aim of creating an unbiased sample and hopes of generating a representative cross-section from each of the ministry’s divisions that would also include persons with a variety of experiences and from different levels of management. The sample size of twenty was deemed sufficient to represent fairly all supervisors and to provide enough information for this study while avoiding repetition in responses.

The twenty potential interviewees were invited via email to participate. Some invitees were unresponsive, declined to participate, or no longer were working in a supervisory capacity; therefore, to ensure the desired sample of twenty participants, additional supervisors next on the list in the random sample were invited. By sending extra invitations to guarantee a sufficient sample, twenty-one persons (n = 21) ultimately consented to participate; in other words, twenty-five percent of the population. Forty-five minute long, face-to-face interviews were scheduled with those agreeing to take part.
After all interviews were arranged, each of the remaining supervisory personnel not asked to participate in an interview were invited via email to respond a questionnaire. Of these 54 possible respondents, nineteen (n = 19) returned completed surveys. A specific sample size was not essential because the data from the questionnaires was meant to complement the already adequate interview sample.

**Respondents.**

Interview respondents are comprised of team leaders (those with a small number of staff directly reporting for projects, but without responsibility related to human resource management) included in the government employees labour union and non-union managers, directors, executive directors, superintendents, and assistant deputy ministers. Those responding to the questionnaire also represent this range of management responsibility. Team leaders, managers, and directors provide mainly work unit and branch perspectives and the remaining informants, views from the senior management and executive level.

All 40 respondents combined represent six of the ministry’s seven divisions, the remaining division being quite small. Their responsibilities vary, including policy and programming; legislation; funding and financial management; information technology; inter- and intra-ministry connections and planning; ministry operations; data, information and reporting; assessment and achievement; strategic projects; field services and connections; and functions serving public and/or independent schools. The spectrum of experience ranges from some in the early stage of their careers to others nearing retirement.

**Instruments**

The interviews focus on obtaining positive and not so positive impacts of informal learning techniques utilized by management (experiences that can enhance and restrain career development) and ways to develop various informal learning experiences in the ministry. Divided into four sections, the interviews include questions designed around the three key concepts of informal learning, mentoring and peer relationships, and temporary job restructuring. The first three sections focus explicitly on these concepts and the fourth section offers respondents an opportunity to comment on any other aspect of informal learning not previously addressed. Each section presents the following three questions (see Appendix 5 for the complete interview document and questions):

1. Can you describe an example of this type of activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

2. Can you describe an example of this type of activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?
What ideas do you think would work in developing this in your area?
• Can you give me an example of how this might be done?

This questionnaire is devised to elicit information on existing implementation of informal learning activity. Also concentrating on the three key concepts and separated into four parts, questions for each part proceed as follows (see Appendix 6 for the complete questionnaire):

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Almost Never Very Seldom Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently Always

____________ I have undertaken informal learning activities, either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

If you have undertaken these activities, then a) please provide an example of the informal learning activities you have found most useful in your learning and development in this organization and b) briefly describe how we might encourage similar opportunities for this to occur.

Analysis

A qualitative analysis of the interview responses and the questionnaires’ anecdotal comments was undertaken, along with a quantitative analysis of the questionnaire’s scalar questions.

For the qualitative examination, interview and questionnaire comments were reviewed individually and systematically to determine the topic or area of focus in the content and then each was labelled accordingly. For example, a response identifying a peer relationship as a positive informal learning experience was designated as a peer relationship. After labelling all individual comments, related comments were grouped together into specific common themes directly representing the responses. Unique responses were noted and considered.

In the final stage of the qualitative analysis, broad, overarching themes emerged from the numerous specific themes. For example, considerable feedback focused on the necessity of proactive participants to support and advance informal learning. During this part of the review it became apparent that some sub-themes were interconnected and could be categorized under more than one broad theme. This was noted, for instance, in comments about the importance of providing learning opportunities and embedding the practice in the culture of the ministry. This specific theme could be subsumed under either the broad theme of “Learning Opportunities Provided” or “Responsible, Active Learning and
Modelling”. In these cases, the specific comment that formed the sub-theme was examined carefully to determine its crux and then grouped into the corresponding broad theme.

The information from the broad themes forms the basis of the discussion and recommendations in the paper. These themes and their response counts are found in the “Findings” section that follows (see Table 1 and also see Appendix 7 for more detailed response counts). Many respondents provided more than one example for each question; therefore, themes count multiple responses from individual respondents.

Unique responses are categorized as “Other”. Those questions to which respondents provided no example or response are designated as “No Example”.

As for the quantitative data, the ratings for the questionnaire’s scalar questions were sorted and counted to determine frequency of responses.

**FINDINGS**

**Themes**

The findings present the themes that emerged from all responses to interview questions and comments from questionnaires. They reveal respondents’ experiences with informal learning and development and the positive and negative forces influencing each concept in the informal learning framework, as well as the circumstances under which informal learning is best encouraged. Appendix 8 provides detailed counts of the responses from the interviews and Appendix 9 shows complete counts of the responses to the questionnaire’s qualitative questions.

Table 1 below lists seven broad themes based on the more specific themes from the first level of analysis. A complete glossary of definitions for each of the 44 specific sub-themes is found in Appendix 11. Their descriptions spring directly from all the comments provided by every respondent. Appendix 12 presents several examples of quoted comments that form the basis for each theme.

The seven broad, overarching themes representing the key findings and sub-themes are:

1. Learning Opportunities Provided
2. Thoughtful Planning and Process
3. Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling
4. Positive Relationship Dynamics
5. Learning Tied to Application
6. Mentoring
7. Temporary Job Restructuring
Table 1: Broad themes from responses to interviews and questionnaires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Themes Derived from Specific Themes</th>
<th>Specific Themes from Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning Opportunities Provided</td>
<td>• Acting Management Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 33</td>
<td>• Internal Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 17</td>
<td>• Online Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 50</td>
<td>• Opportunities for All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Temporary Job Restructuring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activities Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Thoughtful Planning and Process</td>
<td>• Defined Parameters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 30</td>
<td>• Management Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 14</td>
<td>• Mandatory Mentoring for New</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 44</td>
<td>Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poorly-Matched Employees and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Stress on Remaining Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unfocused Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use Skills Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Well-Matched Work with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Responsible, Active Learning and</td>
<td>• Decision Makers Need to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling</td>
<td>Understand the Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 96</td>
<td>• Embedded in Ministry Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 24</td>
<td>• Learning Networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 120</td>
<td>• Learning Shared with Colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Poor Role Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Proactive Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Purposeful Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support from Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Work Environment to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage Informal Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Positive Relationship Dynamics</td>
<td>• Clear Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 33</td>
<td>• Involving Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 1</td>
<td>• Lack of Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 34</td>
<td>• Mutual Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positive Connections Between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Learning Tied to Application</td>
<td>• Balancing Learning with Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 61</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 10</td>
<td>• Employees Not Wishing to Return</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 71</td>
<td>from Temporary Assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• EPDP Linkages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mentoring</td>
<td>• Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 51</td>
<td>• Formal Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 23</td>
<td>• Informal Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 74</td>
<td>• Peer Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Temporary Job Restructuring</td>
<td>• Cross Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 32</td>
<td>• Matrix Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 34</td>
<td>• Stretch Assignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 66</td>
<td>• Temporary Assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>• No Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Responses = 44</td>
<td>Interview Responses = 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 6</td>
<td>Questionnaire Responses = 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses = 50</td>
<td>Total Responses = 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Interview respondents (n = 21). Questionnaire respondents (n = 19). Total responses to all qualitative questions from all respondents equal 588 (see detailed counts in Appendix 7).
Learning opportunities provided.

Various comments from both interviews and questionnaires provide supervisors’ perspectives on the importance of opportunities to learn informally. This includes the positive impacts of opportunities to engage in informal learning in their own careers and those of their employees as well as the necessity to provide a variety of learning options that enable work-related development for workers. Mentoring does not appear in this list because it is already a widely-practised activity in the ministry and comments about its merits and utility are described in a dedicated broad theme later in this section of the paper.

Following are the specific sub-themes and areas of opportunity that shape this broad theme, along with their descriptions derived from all the associated responses:

- **Acting Management Opportunities**
  Acting management opportunities are presented when an incumbent manager vacates their position for a short term enabling an employee to temporarily fill the position. Acting managers are in a position to explore something different, showcase their abilities, develop new skills and competencies, and try out a management position to see if they like and are able to do the work. If the position becomes posted, successful acting managers might have a greater chance at winning the competition for the position. Organizations benefit because different employees know each other’s jobs, creating more overlap in human resources to support succession planning.

- **Internal Professional Development**
  Formal training and development opportunities are offered in-house so many employees can benefit and dialogue among staff can be initiated.

- **Online Opportunities**
  Informal learning may occur through online options such as webinars, web conferencing, and discussion forums, especially when information is shared with branch colleagues.

- **Opportunities for All**
  All employees interested in informal learning should have opportunities to undertake such activities, not just those who are hand-picked or have extra time in their work days.

- **Research**
  Research might involve dedicated work or personal time to study and stay current about relevant issues in publications, such as books, articles, online publications,
and journals. One can learn without waiting for formal training programmes and thus prepare one’s self for possible future opportunities.

- **Temporary Job Restructuring Activities Provided**
  Learning opportunities are presented by providing temporary job restructuring activities, such as temporary assignments, stretch assignments, special projects, job rotations, and assignments through matrix organization.

Specific comments that illustrate this theme of providing a variety of accessible informal learning options for all staff are:

Acting as branch director... was a wonderful learning experience. If there were some way for managers to experience a temporary assignment as a director, even for a short while, it can be beneficial to all members of a work unit. It provides a good experience in discovering firsthand the scope and limitations of those in authority. It also gives the employee a big picture view that may be lacking in their day-to-day work life.

An attitude that on-the-job informal learning is valuable, everyone can be involved (not just those on the management fast track) – not just the hand-picked – the whole organization.

Everyone’s work processes impact others; therefore, we need interactions to see the bigger picture. This helps to mitigate duplication of effort, for example, put pieces together on SharePoint – potential for savings regarding improved efficiency – working together – embedded in the culture of the organization – avoid duplication across the ministry.

Within this theme about opportunities is a general notion that all members of staff should have access to informal learning options. Other sub-themes herein represent comments on specific examples of informal learning that may take place in the organization. Of all associated comments, the greatest number is related to providing acting management opportunities and opportunities for all employees. The engagement in specific pursuits might depend on individuals’ learning goals and the stage of their career in which they find themselves.

**Thoughtful planning and process.**

Responses forming this next broad theme are comparatively balanced among the specific sub-themes and between interviews and questionnaires. The theme emerges largely from comments that describe ill-planned informal learning activity – for instance, with lack of focus or structure or with poorly-matched employees and assignments – as inhibiting overall learning and development. Conversely, thoughtfully designed and carried out
informal learning opportunities can encourage activity, thus helping to develop learning potential.

Specific sub-themes and their comment-based definitions offer suggestions for planning and implementing learning options as well as detrimental circumstances that can be avoided through careful planning:

- **Defined Parameters**
  Temporary job restructuring activities must have defined parameters, such as appropriate timing, a defined end, and a balanced work load for the home branch. Without specific parameters, employees who move from temporary assignment to temporary assignment, for example, may lose their base position or be viewed as uncommitted to their work.

- **Management Training**
  Informal learning activities may be more successful and occur more regularly with formal training and guidelines for managers that delineate necessary expectations and parameters as well as ways to support learning activities.

- **Mandatory Mentoring for New Roles**
  All the new roles should include the support of an experienced informal mentor given the learning rewards for those in the early stages of career development.

- **Poorly-Matched Employees and Assignments**
  Some employees are offered challenging learning opportunities but ultimately do not have the necessary competencies or capability to fulfill the requirements. If an employee’s skills or abilities are ill-suited to the task, they may be unsuccessful.

- **Stress on Remaining Employees**
  Employees undertaking informal learning activity might cause increased workload and stress for their colleagues, resulting in hard feelings and eroded branch cohesiveness.

- **Structure**
  Informal learning is supported when temporary job restructuring activities are designed with structures such as accountability for employee progress, appropriate time allotments, regular scheduling, and defined scope. Structures must be in place to ensure opportunities are provided, to raise awareness of opportunities, and to meet the needs of participants.

- **Unfocused Mentoring**
  Unfocused mentoring has no scope, plan, parameters, or goals. Unfocused mentoring may be of little benefit to career development, resulting in a poor
learning experience and a negative impact on the relationship between the mentor and protégé.

- **Use Skills Database**
  Utilize the existing ministry skills and opportunities database to support informal learning; specifically, employees should register their own skills on the database while supervisors use this tool to post internal work opportunities.

- **Well-Matched Work with Employees**
  Supervisors can work with employees to glean their skills and potential for development and then help them to find opportunities for learning. It is important not to set up employees to fail. Some learning opportunities, such as short-term assignments, are best matched with individuals who are capable of the work. The ministry’s skills and opportunities database can be used as a tool for matching employees with appropriate work.

Respondents’ comments representing the different aspects of this broad topic include:

  - Formal mentoring programme – I signed up but we had no rationale or structure, no scope or intention; therefore, it resulted in no benefit to my career. I was new to government so didn’t know what to ask or how to structure it.

  - Matrix management works if the branch is project-based, but we are not, so the timing must be right; no lengthy terms.

  - When people leave to undertake other opportunities and the remaining work is redistributed unequally – this increases stress and workload.

All the associated sub-themes for “Thoughtful Planning and Process” articulate the clear advice from supervisors about the necessary factors and steps to consider in planning for informal learning activity. Everything from the timing, scope, and participant suitability to short- and long-term planning should be contemplated.

**Responsible, active learning and modelling.**

This is the most dominant theme among all responses. Moreover, this theme is much more prevalent among interviewees as compared to the questionnaire respondents. For example, interviewees discussed negative role models and lack of engagement as inhibiting learning, while involvement in learning networks plays a positive role. Collective responses describe the necessity for all participants to pursue learning actively and responsibly to support and maximize career development.

This of all seven broad themes includes the most suggestions for supporting and developing informal learning activity. In particular, the greatest number of responses falls
under the specific sub-themes describing supportive supervisors, proactive employees, and learning networks as necessary factors. Complete sub-themes and their definitions based on respondents’ comments are as follows:

- **Decision Makers Need to Understand the Work**
  If the core work of branches is not understood by the organization’s decision makers, decisions can have a negative impact on that work. There is cause for concern when managers and human resource staff are disconnected from one another resulting in decisions that negatively affect informal learning opportunities.

- **Embedded in Ministry Culture**
  Informal learning is facilitated when embedded as a natural part of the organization’s culture, where employees are supported to take on activities and development is mapped into career and organizational planning. The organization needs to value different types of learning. Learning activities, such as mentoring and temporary job restructuring activities, need to be encouraged and employed as a natural part of the organizational structure. If a cultural shift is required, it would be helpful to develop a common set of guidelines across branches or ministries so concepts and opportunities are recognized universally.

- **Learning Networks**
  Connections are formed among colleagues within or across branches in the ministry, across government ministries or professional associations, or even inter-provincially and internationally to have meaningful, focused discussions on current topics and learn from participants’ shared expertise and diverse perspectives. These communities of practice may meet at regular intervals either formally or informally, depending on the group logistics. These networks may also form through online technologies, such as chat rooms and Wikis.

- **Learning Shared with Colleagues**
  Sharing informal learning experiences with colleagues in one’s home branch contributes to maximization of the learning in cases when all branch employees have not been able to participate. This shared learning can impact positively on the branch.

- **Poor Role Models**
  Poor role models are those leaders or supervisors who demonstrate poor behaviours and management practice. One actually can use observation of poor role models as a learning tool by discerning what not to do from their behaviours. Individuals with lengthy seniority do not necessarily make good mentors if they are poor role models.
• **Proactive Employees**
Informal learning is maximized when driven by engaged, proactive employees who take charge of their own learning and are motivated toward career growth. Such self-directed employees focus on goals for development and connect learning activities to their annual employee development plans. They direct their learning toward meeting development needs and adding value to their work. Proactive employees may need to summon courage to take risks, undertake challenges, and be open to criticism for the sake of development and advancement.

• **Purposeful Observation**
Purposeful observation involves watching how role models (such as experienced individuals or effective leaders) strategize, think, approach situations, and present themselves to discover successful practices and those that are not as successful. One can observe what to do and what not to do in specific situations, learning to emulate successful behaviours and approaches.

• **Support from Supervisor**
Informal learning must be facilitated with support from supervisors and management who are themselves committed to an informal learning culture, so that employees are empowered to undertake development opportunities and take risks. Supportive supervisors model the importance and benefit of informal learning, encourage staff to develop learning relationships, and help employees to develop a learning plan that includes development goals. In addition, informal learning requires the full support of executive and their understanding of the need for learning options balanced with core work and the bigger organizational picture.

• **Work Environment to Encourage Informal Learning**
The work environment must provide time, space, support, and a variety of opportunities to enable informal learning in an organization that values learning. In a supportive environment, informal learning can become a natural part of the work, rather than adding strain to workload and resources, with a focus on the core work of branches as well as larger organizational objectives.

There is a wide array of illustrative comments from which to choose. Some of these comments related to the theme of active participation in learning at all levels of the organization – from employees to executive to the overall organizational culture – are:

Communities of practice: tap into those who ignite passion; for example, my connections with those in education in other countries – informal networks for informal learning and support – provide sense of inner strength when times are tough or challenging – critical friends (thinking partners) to talk about potential.

The very fact that the words are being used and that some opportunities are being established is great. This will nurture a culture where people will look to establish
these types of relationships with or without the more formalized opportunities. I also think that as supervisors we can support these types of relationships better. I think some training for managers on how to support, nurture, and coach employees would be valuable.

Executive needs to be cognisant of the impact of informal learning on managers and the branch level. Top down goals are the priority, but sometimes employee needs to carry out the work are not met – sometimes ‘say’ is taken out of the manager’s hands.

Bring staff to meetings as observers – learn how to handle themselves in situations – high stakes meetings; for example, Minister’s meetings where senior staff speaks – prep for future meetings where staff person speaks.

While we haven’t participated in this relatively new arrangement, I would (and have) encourage staff to consider it. Supervisors should be encouraged to participate (both allow their staff to go, and to post opportunities) – it’s really a win-win. Supervisors get some extra help and a chance to try out potential future employees, and employees get to try out other jobs, expand their skills, use some latent talents, and increase their exposure and reputation as a good worker. I would suggest bringing this to Managers’ Council to hash out and share ideas, perceptions, apprehensions, and potential benefits to break down the barriers to healthy participation in this type of programme.

This theme makes it clear that all individuals have a role to play in fostering informal learning. From the most junior staff member to the most senior executive, every employee must play an active, thoughtful role if informal learning activities are to be productive and contribute positively to individual and organizational development.

Positive relationship dynamics.

Although the fourth theme – positive dynamics between participants in learning activities – consists of the fewest responses, it is still worthy of note because it provides insight into what can make or break a learning relationship. Most responses in this theme come from the interviewees. These management personnel emphasize the need for trust, respect, and positive connections among participants in learning activities. In particular, communication is the most frequently-cited factor in enabling productive mentoring relationships. The five sub-themes and their descriptions arising from comments are:

- **Clear Communication**
  Informal learning must be facilitated by clear, open communication among all involved; namely, among participants in the activities, between supervisors (in matrix management activities), and between employees and supervisors in particular. Employees must clearly communicate their needs and wishes to pursue
informal learning opportunities and supervisors must communicate opportunities and expectations.

- **Involving Trust**
  Mentoring and peer relationships must involve trust because at times topics may be risky or require confidentiality. The mentor must have at heart the best interests of the protégé.

- **Lack of Trust**
  Mentoring and peer relationships will not be enriched or might be damaged without trust. Lack of trust erodes the opportunity for informal learning.

- **Mutual Respect**
  Participants in mentoring and peer relationships must be willing to build and nurture a positive relationship that involves mutual respect for each other’s opinions, ideas, and decisions. Without mutual respect, participants may not be fully engaged nor feel safe.

- **Positive Connections between Participants**
  Participants in mentoring and peer relationships must be well-matched and have a natural, positive working connection.

Specific comments demonstrate the need for open and clear communication at the beginning and throughout the course of learning-related activities. This broad theme is derived from such comments as:

Communication is very critical with everyone involved (between people involved in training (laterally) and with supervisors (vertically) – clear expectations, purpose and intention.

Communication between supervisors is needed in matrix organization.

Mutual respect and trust are prerequisites for informal learning and mentoring – not everyone has this; therefore, we sometimes need a formal mechanism (such as the EPDP) in cases where a relationship between employee and supervisor is not as likely to flourish.

People need to feel safe and respected, empowered and supported – need to feel like one can make a decision and be backed up (even if it’s not the best decision).

Positive relationship dynamics are dependent on all participants undertaking informal learning. The value of the learning is diminished when trust or communication breakdown; therefore, all involved have a responsibility to avoid this type of collapse.
Learning tied to application.

This broad theme of linking learning with application, too, was more prevalent in interviewee responses as opposed to the questionnaires. “Learning Tied to Application” connects with the second broad theme of “Thoughtful Planning and Process” because connecting learning to core work can become a focus of the planning and structuring process. Nevertheless, during the analysis of data the sub-themes herein were deemed sufficiently significant and dominant to warrant a dedicated broad theme.

Of the following specific sub-themes, focused mentoring, linkages to Employee Performance and Development Plans (EPDP), focused learning, and balancing learning with core work are most common among responses:

- **Balancing Learning with Core Work**
  Employees’ pursuit of informal learning should be balanced with their core work so there is a connection to the work of the branch, core work is completed, the learning may aid in solving immediate problems of the branch, and colleagues are not overloaded with extra work. Depending on the type of informal learning, it might need to occur during down times to ensure this balance.

- **Employees Not Wishing to Return from Temporary Assignments**
  Some employees undertaking temporary assignments might not wish to return to their base job position, resulting in hard feelings and lack of engagement back in their main role. While this is often beyond the control of supervisors, hard feelings may be mitigated by expanding the scope of responsibility or providing new challenges in the home position.

- **EPDP Linkages**
  Informal learning should be built into the Employee Performance and Development Plan (EPDP) to help prioritize and structure the development, set goals, formally recognize the activities, connect learning to the core work, build the employee’s competencies, and formalize the employee and supervisor commitment to the employee’s development. The EPDP can be used as a professional growth plan and tool to build on strengths and plan for focused career development.

- **Focused Learning**
  Focused learning is structured learning that involves planning, purpose, developmental goals and objectives, appropriate time allotment and defined end,

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5 An Employee Performance and Development Plan (EPDP) is an annual plan that helps the employee and his or her supervisor set work and career goals for the year, leading to a performance evaluation. This tool helps employees to work with their supervisors on planning the core work as well as focusing employee development and declaring intentions to progress.
value added to the core work, a mutual vision between supervisor and employee, and a good fit for the participant. Focused learning is meaningful learning.

- **Focused Mentoring**
  The mentoring relationship requires a focus to be productive. Focused mentoring is undertaken by delineating gaps in knowledge, concentrating on competencies, and defining purpose, goals and expectations for the mentoring relationship. It also may be necessary to determine a context for the relationship, such as mentoring through the completion of a specific project or initiative. Protégés should identify mentors with qualities, abilities and/or knowledge connected to their own career development goals.

- **Lack of Follow Through**
  Lack of follow through after informal learning activities devalues the potential learning experience, as when projects are completed through matrix organization assignments but leadership does not follow through with conclusions, results, or implementation of the project.

- **Unfocused Learning Activities**
  Unfocused learning activities are those activities undertaken without rationale or structure, such as learning goals or connection to career and work.

This theme is based in such specific comments as:

**EPDP** – puts a structure in place to enable conversations re: what staff wants to develop – formal structure forcing us to talk about development goals – encourages thought to support activities for development.

**Mentor** – define gaps and knowledge, focus on competencies – what can the mentor specifically provide (define why and expectations). Clearly articulate what one wants or is seeking from the mentor or peer relationship – can’t be broad. Clarify the problem or issue; create a starting point (for example, what about ‘communications’ do you want to know?) – make a plan.

**Need a balance between employee needs and priorities and benefitting the work of the employee and branch.**

**A definite end to a project – terms of reference must be really clear – start with an end in mind – developed and defined equal success and the ability to move on – how it integrates into day-to-day operations.**

**Counteract negativity when employees don’t want to return from temporary assignments by expanding their scope of responsibility when they return, or risk losing them – enable them to step up to the plate, if possible.**
The sub-themes here show that informal learning must not be undertaken haphazardly, but be grounded in an individual’s daily work and long-term planning. The EPDP is an excellent foundational tool that, if utilized effectively, should focus and facilitate learning activities and help to apply the learning promptly to an employee’s immediate responsibilities as well as longer-term aspirations. Such planning might help to ease a supervisor’s potential anxiety about informal learning becoming irrelevant or protracted.

**Mentoring.**

Mentoring as a broad theme is similarly frequent in comments from both interviewees and questionnaire respondents. Not surprisingly, comments about mentoring surface most from questions explicitly related to mentoring and peer relationships. Comments regarding not so positive impacts on learning focus on formal relationships and conversely, informal mentoring facilitates learning. The unproductive impacts stem largely from forced formal mentoring relationships without focus or positive connections between participants.

Within this theme, peer relationships dominate the responses about constructive informal learning experiences. In fact, these responses are greater in number than all the specific mentoring responses combined. Specific sub-themes revealed in the comments are:

- **Mentoring**
  Mentoring is a learning activity that involves a more experienced individual imparting advice or knowledge to a new employee or someone wishing to advance in the organization. Mentors also may advise protégés in resolving work-related issues. Mentors are knowledgeable, experienced, and skilled role models who may or may not be direct supervisors of their protégés. Some mentors may be more practised colleagues or leaders in other branches of the organization. Those who are direct supervisors are in a position to give their protégés room to learn in their daily work. The main goal of mentoring is for the protégé to learn from the mentor, thus improving their work or enhancing career development.

- **Formal Mentoring**
  Formal mentoring is a mentoring relationship undertaken by signing up for a formal programme or by request of one’s supervisor. Formal mentors might be trained to provide mentoring advice, as opposed to informal mentors. Such mentoring is sometimes characterized as “forced” because it occurs formally rather than through a natural, existing working relationship. Formal mentorships need time to establish trust and respect between participants.
Informal Mentoring
Informal mentoring is a mentoring relationship that develops from existing relationships in one’s own workplace rather than from a formal, central programme. The mentor and protégé are often known to and thus comfortable with each other.

Peer Relationships
Learning relationships develop between work colleagues who share their knowledge and experiences about work-related issues. Such relationships often are ongoing and present an opportunity to tap into and learn from existing expertise and diverse perspectives in the work unit or organization. One open to ideas can quickly benefit from years of experience or a new perspective on issues. The peers involved sometimes are referred to as “critical friends” because they are in a position to share honest, open, critical, fresh viewpoints on another peer’s work. Often, more experienced individuals can provide sound advice to newer colleagues on work- and career-related issues. Those involved grow in knowledge and skills.

Respondents’ individual comments that form the foundation of this mentoring theme are:

I was approached to be a mentor and I approached someone to mentor me. Tapping into existing relationships works better than formal government programmes. Informal mentoring continues even after the formal mentoring period is over. Positive relationships are built. Someone I know and am comfortable with.

Regular practice – consult with peers (other directors) – invaluable opportunities – make a point of this practice – development as an ongoing process. Learn from other people and from staff with expertise (for example, in project management or problem solving) – be open to ideas of those I work with and my staff – learn from those I interact with.

Formal mentoring/coaching – I was asked by my supervisor to take part in this activity. It was forced – no relationship as a foundation. Not a natural, existing relationship. It was designed for the coaches in the workshop to practise coaching. We can’t be forced to take on something extra that doesn’t fit.

Job where I worked for an ADM – he adopted me in an informal mentoring relationship – took me to meetings where I wouldn’t normally go – job shadow – witness to his decision-making process at executive-level meetings – got to know other executives, their perspectives, interactions, ways of dealing with things – see the big picture, understand broader business goals (for example, service plans, accountability).

Coaching – critical friends – informal mentorship – a group of people who share honest, critical perspectives of each other’s work, offer different ways of looking at things and give pointers and clear perspectives.
Mentoring emerges as an informal learning activity that “sticks”. A number of respondents recalled specific lessons learned from mentoring relationships that occurred years prior, early in their careers. At the same time, not all respondents agree on the value of different types of mentorships. Therefore, while there is not one particular type of mentoring relationship ideal for everyone, one can refer to the previous themes for advice on providing a variety of options and how best to structure (but not force) informal learning activities, including mentorships.

**Temporary job restructuring.**

The final broad theme relates to temporary restructuring of jobs. The associated comments occur much more frequently in questionnaire responses. Different forms of temporary job restructuring appear as an entirely positive force in interview responses and a recurrent theme from the questionnaires. Of the four specific sub-themes described below, matrix organization, stretch assignments, and temporary assignments dominate the experiences of respondents:

- **Cross Training**
  Employees within the same branch learn aspects of each other’s core work so there are back-ups in place to complete the work if unexpected events occur. This activity provides employees with opportunities to learn and grow in their work, understand the linkages between jobs, and build relationships.

- **Matrix Organization**
  Matrix organization entails employees undertaking part-time responsibilities beyond their immediate job requirements and work unit as a way to utilize existing skills, showcase untapped skills, and further develop competencies. Such learning opportunities necessitate supervisor support and employee commitment and engagement. If properly planned and with enough staff, colleagues in the home branch may have an opportunity to learn by taking on new challenges in the work that is temporarily suspended when their colleagues assume matrix responsibilities. Given current challenges in human resources, matrix opportunities may become a necessary part of the organizational culture to get the work done, with potential to increase efficiency by avoiding duplication. Such activities also provide occasions for employees to see the larger organizational picture and to network and develop new working relationships in the ministry and with the field.

- **Stretch Assignments**
  Individuals can take on projects, assignments, committee work, or responsibilities beyond their current job descriptions to stretch and develop new competencies in preparation for greater responsibilities. For example, one might identify leadership development in one’s employee development plan and then seek out leadership
opportunities (such as volunteering to chair a committee or lead a special project) to test one’s ability to undertake such tasks outside of one’s usual work parameters.

- *Temporary Assignments*
  Temporary assignments are opportunities to undertake a different full-time work position for a limited period of time. Participants can try new challenges (sometimes at a higher classification), become familiar with different work units, re-energize with new work, develop new knowledge and skills, and sometimes earn a higher salary. Work units can benefit from new skill sets and expertise of the temporary employee. Two drawbacks of these appointments are challenges for supervisors in temporarily back-filling the position of the employee on assignment and employees who do not wish to return to their home positions.

The above sub-themes originate from comments such as:

- My first management position was a temporary opportunity – a safe environment to explore if I liked the work and could to the work.

- Stretch assignments – great opportunity to develop a new skill set.

- I have a project management background. Matrix management is a natural part of the realm – the norm in that sector – helps to meet deliverables, determine what equals success – ability to stretch, not just a one-dimensional job, access to others, networking, multi-disciplinary – different strengths brought to the table – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

- Broadens perspective – staff gains insight into their own jobs – build relationships – cross-training can help staff to broaden their perspective.

- Temporary assignments – can be a successful way of advancing careers, often to try a higher level (my experience) – worked out very positively for me – staff comes to me wanting a TA and I encourage it (even though it leaves gaps in staff to fill).

- Ministry-wide activities – district review process – I was part of a team that visited schools, talked to school staff – organized across divisions – it was a fantastic learning opportunity. Now, maybe achievement contract reviews are an opportunity – open up ministry-wide organizational opportunities – need these to allow/facilitate staff to connect with the field – stay current – it’s energizing to connect with teachers, gain focus.

On-the-job, experiential learning opportunities emerge as a very effective means for career development in the experiences of ministry supervisors. Like other informal learning activities, respondents do caution that these opportunities need to be well-
planned and structured so the endeavours do not occur at the expense of other staff members.

Looking back at all seven themes on informal learning – opportunities provided, thoughtful planning, responsible learning, relationship dynamics, applied learning, mentoring, and temporary job restructuring – one can see that the first five focus mainly on the process and the final two dwell in the content or type of learning activity. All provide equally important lessons about what to do and avoid when planning for and pursuing informal learning. If informal learning is seen to have value but needs impetus to move forward, the Ministry of Education may be able to learn from the experiences of its managerial staff.

**Other Ideas Presented In the Findings**

Unique responses account for 8.5 percent of all comments from interviews and questionnaires. Classified as “Other”, these responses emerge principally from the interviews and largely from comments related to negative experiences as well as ways to encourage learning. While these comments are not encompassed straightforwardly in the seven broad themes, several of the unique responses are noteworthy as they add value to lessons learned about informal learning and suggestions to structure activities. Some of these include:

- **Experience is not necessarily equal to good mentorship.**

- **Risk-taking needs to be part of mentorship; in other words, the protégé can take risks and receive constructive feedback.**

- **Mentoring should not be confined to the immediate supervisor – can include other branches and ministries – immediate supervisor may be too close/conflict of interest/not objective/feel the need to problem solve.**

- **Imposed activities impact negatively – telling someone to do something – if we don’t allow for organic development or growth, then it’s just compliance.**

- **Succession planning – when good people are going to retire, set up a mentoring role for a year to help with developing staff (hire a replacement and assist them) – transfer the knowledge, skills, and networks. We know the wave of people is leaving (at all levels of staff) – transfer the knowledge, skills and abilities – mentorship at the retirement end – assist successors to get up to speed.**

A number of respondents provide no examples for some of the questions and thus these null responses are counted as “No Example” in the analysis. This type of response occurs frequently among all comments; however, “No Example” is significantly more prevalent in the questionnaires where it appears in over 25 percent of the responses.
The high number of null responses to qualitative questions in the questionnaires is due in part because 17.1 percent of ratings on the scalar questions (questions 1a, 2a, 3a, and 4a) indicate supervisors “Almost Never” take part in informal learning activity; as a result, respondents provide no examples or suggestions for the follow-up qualitative questions. Additionally, some non-responses may be attributed to the administration of the instrument via email rather than in person and therefore some informants do not provide comments even when they indicate they are involved in informal learning activity.

As for the “No Example” responses in interviews, the vast majority are offered as replies to the questions about informal learning activities that had a less than positive impact on career development. Some respondents qualify these answers with the explanation that they can offer no negative examples because of their largely positive informal learning experiences. Some such comments are:

- No negative impacts of informal learning – in my experience it’s more likely that formal learning exercises will be irrelevant, not good learning.
- No real negatives – peer relationships and mentoring tend to be positive experiences for me.
- No negative example – generally positive experiences – even if just to find out how to do something or not do something.

The questionnaire also asks supervisors to rate their frequency of involvement with informal learning activity, either for their own development or that of their employees. Specifically, Question 1 asks about informal learning in general, Question 2 about mentoring and peer relationships, Question 3 refers to temporary job restructuring requiring a part-time commitment, and Question 4 temporary job restructuring with a full-time commitment. Figure 1 shows the total frequency of activities and illustrates ministry supervisors’ overall level of involvement in informal learning activity.

Of the 19 supervisors responding to the questionnaire, 28.9 percent indicate they “Almost Never” to “Seldom” take part in activities, 25.0 percent note being involved “Occasionally”, and 42.1 percent are “Frequently” to “Almost Always” participating in various informal learning activities. Null responses (specifically, those responding with “0” or “No Response”) account for 4.0 percent of the total responses.

Overall, two-thirds of respondents specify occasional involvement to almost always being involved in informal learning. While this level of participation is not dramatic, it does show that a healthy majority of respondents is at least occasionally engaged in informal learning and over forty percent are frequently to almost always involved. These 19 supervisors represent 22.6 percent of the ministry’s management population at the time of the survey.
Figure 1: Informal learning questionnaire responses – Ratings on scalar questions.

Note: See Appendix 10 for Table 5 presenting the total responses to scalar questions on the questionnaire.

DISCUSSION

This study’s findings present perspectives on informal learning gleaned from 40 of 84 supervisors in the BC Ministry of Education. Responses reveal positive and negative experiences with different pursuits related to informal learning and ideas for how to structure and support such learning to advance career development.

As the research progresses from the literature review to the data analysis, it is interesting to note commonalities emerging between the findings in the literature and the responses. For example, much of the advice from ministry supervisors about provision of informal learning opportunities, thoughtful planning of activities, proactive participants and role models, positive relationships, applied learning, and the utility of mentoring and temporary job restructuring activities is reflected in the literature.
As discussed in the previous “Findings” section of this paper, many comments from supervisors are interrelated and therefore are grouped in seven broad themes to reflect these relationships. Following is a discussion of these themes that emerge from the analysis of the data. The first five broad themes focus on the structure and processes necessary to enable and encourage informal learning opportunities, while the final two provide the views of supervisors regarding the two specific types of informal learning about which they were asked to comment.

Themes

1. Learning Opportunities Provided

Interviewees and questionnaire respondents alike cite different ways to take part in informal learning, showcasing the merits of providing a variety of options. Employees cannot learn and grow in their careers without the opportunity to do so. As discussed throughout the Conference Board of Canada’s 2009 report on learning and development, informal learning has become an increasingly prevalent means for organizations to support career development.

There are many ways for organizations like the Ministry of Education to support informal learning through activities provided in-house and as part of the regular work day. Respondents cite acting management opportunities as a very valuable means for candidates to showcase their existing abilities while learning new competencies. This provisional backfilling of a vacated management position enables the acting manager to try a position on for size without committing long-term, while the organization can expand the capacity of internal staff so greater numbers of workers know more about other areas and responsibilities within the organization. A number of respondents explain that they moved into the management track through acting positions. Responses from interviews and questionnaires also indicate that offering a variety of learning options positively impacts learning and development; for example, engaging in research and professional reading, inviting speakers to the ministry for group presentations and discussions, and taking part in such online learning activities as web conferences.

Respondents emphasize the importance of ensuring employees have opportunities to engage in temporary job restructuring activities so they can learn and grow from new and challenging experiences. In providing different options to undertake informal learning, supervisors discuss the importance of making these activities accessible to all. This aspect is reflected in the literature given that those who might most benefit from support, such as individuals having difficulties or those lower in the organizational hierarchy who need to develop new competencies to advance, often do not engage in informal learning activity (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997; Welsh & Wanberg, 2009).
2. Thoughtful Planning and Process

Several related comments from respondents reveal that lack of planning and structure hindered their own experiences with informal learning. Many propose ways to develop and support constructive learning experiences. These proposals focus on preparation for and structuring of different activities.

When planning for informal learning through such activities as temporary job restructuring, respondents suggest employees should be well-matched with assignments. There can be a fine line between offering a challenge for growth and setting someone up to be unsuccessful. Along with drawing on supervisors’ knowledge of employees’ competencies to guide learning opportunities, the ministry’s Skills Inventory and Job Opportunities Database\(^6\) may be used as an instrument for this matching of individuals to the work.

Poorly defined structure and parameters can limit potential for development through informal learning. Respondents describe undertakings that minimized possible benefits or failed because the activities lost focus, carried on too long, had no objectives, or involved participants with conflicting expectations. Mentoring and temporary job restructuring endeavours in particular gain from defined time frame, scope, and schedule. Respondents indicate that consideration of the impact on workers’ home branches can help to avoid co-workers becoming burdened with their colleagues’ work and thus resentful. It also is useful to consider training or guidelines for management in defining and supporting learning activity. Tannenbaum (1997) takes this structure further, recommending accountability for development by measuring performance and providing feedback and rewards. This view is supported by Eddy et al. (2005) who assert that such accountability reinforces the importance of learning experiences as an instrument for development.

Respondents comment on the need to determine goals for the mentoring relationship, therefore providing a focus and a potentially better learning opportunity. This also appears in the literature review as an important factor (Welsh & Wanberg, 2009). Learning goals increase participant motivation and help to define the function of the relationship itself (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003).

When this discussion later moves to mentoring, there are some cautions about creating a too-rigid structure that discourages spontaneity and needed flexibility. Respondents point out that overly formal or restricted mentoring can diminish the positive dynamics and learning potential of these relationships.

\(^6\) The Skills Inventory and Job Opportunities database is an internal SharePoint Website open to all Ministry of Education staff where individual employees may register a brief profile of their skills and qualifications and supervisors and other staff can post short-term work opportunities and projects.
3. Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling

Responses from supervisors emphasize the need for proactive, thoughtful, and engaged participation to enable effective informal learning. This is the responsibility of all involved in the activities, from employees to supervisors and executives, thus positively impacting the overall organizational culture itself.

Respondents advise that employees should take charge of and engage in their own learning in order to develop their careers. They must not wait for someone to direct it on their behalf. This may require courage on their part to tackle challenges and at times, to take risks. Employees might be inclined to undertake more demanding work when empowered through supervisory support and encouragement for learning activities. This kind of support involves providing time and opportunities for growth along with effective feedback (Tannenbaum, 1997) and understanding of the necessary risks that ultimately can promote learning (Eddy et al., 2005).

Responses indicate that staff members may take it upon themselves to interact with ministry colleagues in learning networks or through inter-ministerial, inter-provincial, or professional associations. These communities of practice entail meaningful discussion on relevant topics and chances to learn from diverse perspectives. Employees also may observe how role models approach different work-related situations. One can learn from and apply successful behaviours. This learning from purposeful observation contributes to career satisfaction (Murphy & Ensher, 2001). On the part of potential role models and mentors themselves, they must model effective behaviours for the benefit of employee development (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Some respondents emphasize that long-term work experience is not necessarily a precursor to positive role modelling; therefore, observers must be watchful for both effective and ineffective behaviours and mentors must be selected prudently.

No matter the type of learning opportunity, workers can maximize learning for all by sharing newly-acquired knowledge with colleagues as a form of peer-to-peer training. This may come less easily to employees from backgrounds other than education; if this is so, their peers more at ease with shared learning may model or facilitate this learning process.

Ministry leadership might consider modelling to staff the importance of informal learning. Support for learning may be facilitated by a full understanding of the core work, its connection to larger organizational goals, and the benefits of informal learning options to complete this picture. The literature elaborates, explaining that executive can enable an informal learning culture by providing supervisors with the necessary tools, time, guidance, and opportunities to promote development (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997; Rowold & Kauffeld, 2009). If some decision makers are out of touch with the core work as suggested by a few respondents, this may be due in part to the ministry’s multiple hierarchical layers and thus could be mitigated by flattening of the organization.
Overall, proactivity on the part of all concerned can help to foster an encouraging work environment where informal learning is a natural, accepted, productive part of the organization’s work and is mapped into career planning. This learning then becomes embedded in the culture of the ministry.

4. Positive Relationship Dynamics

The need for positive relationship dynamics in learning activity emerges from respondents’ counsel on how best to support and develop informal learning. Clear, open communication facilitates learning and is needed on many levels throughout this activity. Initially, proactive employees can communicate their intention to pursue learning opportunities. During the planning stages of specific activities, all participants can articulate their expectations and so help to avoid misunderstanding or disappointment as the work progresses. Whether between colleagues or among employees interacting with supervisors, effective communication smooths the implementation of learning activity.

Mutual respect and trust are important factors in mentoring and peer relationships. Some topics may require confidentiality and the mentor must have at heart the best interests of the protégé. Relationships and learning potential can be damaged when trust is undermined by either party. Lankau and Skandura (2002) emphasize the need for a base of trust and mutual respect between mentoring participants.

Respondents explain that participants also must be compatible to encourage a positive working connection. Well-matched mentors and protégés (where the mentor can meet the learning needs of the protégé) help to enhance prospective learning for the protégé and the quality of the mentorship itself (Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). Additional research supports this notion, indicating that a positive relationship boosts job satisfaction and career development for protégés (Allen et al., 2004; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Murphy & Ensher, 2001).

5. Learning Tied to Application

While respondents agree career development is supported by informal learning experiences, many caution that the learning must be purposeful and connected to core work and organizational goals through formal planning for development. Unfocused activity with no planning, rationale, purpose, or developmental goals can devalue the potential learning experience because there is no grounding from which to work and there are no objectives for which to strive. Sometimes individuals undertake stretch assignments or projects and upon completion there is no follow through by the project leaders or management. In these cases, participants may feel their efforts are pointless.
Mentoring in particular is an informal learning activity that requires focus to be productive. Defined purpose, goals, scope, and expectations can cultivate meaningful learning experiences and positive relationships between participants.

Along with focus, respondents discuss the need to plan for a balance between core work responsibilities and learning activity. This requires connecting the two so learning is not undertaken at the expense of completing the core work. It is beneficial to take advantage of opportunities that might help to solve immediate problems of the branch and it is important to avoid overloading remaining colleagues with others’ vacated base responsibilities. Sometimes learning may best be planned to occur during less intense phases in the work cycle. When employees return from temporary assignments, supervisors may assign more challenging tasks or expanded responsibilities so these workers can apply their newly-learned competencies. With balance and application, participation in learning activity benefits both the employee and the organization.

Informal learning activity can simultaneously present developmental potential while complementing the core work. For example, branches may create learning opportunities through matrix management by eliciting the assistance of qualified staff from elsewhere in the ministry who may have some time to devote to a special project. These employees can learn from this experience and may gain from exposure to different branch functions. Greater awareness of different aspects of the organizational work helps individuals better understand the big picture and aligns and connects learning objectives and core branch work with larger organizational goals (Eddy et al., 2005).

Respondents cite the EPDP as a beneficial tool to help incorporate learning activity with an employee’s day-to-day responsibilities and projects. This applies to all employees in the ministry. The EPDP facilitates setting of goals and structures for core work, special projects, and learning opportunities during the annual work cycle, while formalizing employee and supervisor commitment to career development. EPDPs can build from year to year, thus serving as a professional growth plan for career development.

6. Mentoring

Mentoring is reported as a common and largely positive experience for both interviewees and questionnaire respondents. Some individuals had served as mentors, others as protégés, and some undertook both roles throughout the course of their careers. Peer relationships surface even more frequently as constructive learning opportunities. Respondents advise that in both mentoring and peer relationships, workers can learn from interactions with knowledgeable and experienced leaders or colleagues who share their often diverse expertise and provide constructive advice and work-related feedback. Protégés can learn from mentors while participants in a peer relationship may benefit from a reciprocal learning experience.
In discussing mentoring and peer relationships, supervisors emphasize the importance of a positive rapport between participants. Often, the most productive relationships develop informally and naturally from existing work associations. The ministry’s physical layout may encourage spontaneous peer-to-peer relationships because most non-management employees are grouped in pods together with their branch colleagues. Some respondents report less than positive experiences in formal mentoring programmes because of forced relationships with no foundation of trust from which to proceed; consequently, the relationships take longer to establish. The experiences of respondents in the Ministry of Education coincide with the findings in the literature on differences between informal and formal mentoring relationships (Chao & Gardner, 1992; Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Further, protégés engaged in informal mentoring relationships tend to feel more supported in their careers by their mentors (Chao & Gardner, 1992).

We learn from the research that formal mentoring programmes should not be avoided, despite their apparent negative impacts. Mentorships are valuable assets for a learning organization (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Programmes can be developed carefully and methodically alongside spontaneously-initiated informal mentorships. As the literature advises, issues with formal mentoring can be avoided by creating programmes with thoughtful and deliberate matching of participants, clear communication of objectives, and programme monitoring (Eby & Lockwood, 2005). Matching should consider the potential for positive rapport between participants and the ability of mentors to meet the learning needs of protégés (Chao & Gardner, 1992). Interactions based on common interest can be more positive than those imposed on participants (Ibid.). Employees who are having difficulty and thus could benefit from a mentorship might be more likely to take part when encouraged, rather than forced, to undertake this kind of learning activity. Ultimately, any carefully-planned mentoring programme should be developed for those interested in the learning opportunity and imposed neither on individuals nor the entire organization.

7. Temporary Job Restructuring

In the experience of ministry supervisors, temporary job restructuring as an informal learning opportunity facilitates career development. Whether through cross training, matrix management, stretch assignments or temporary assignments, the opportunity to undertake new assignments and apply and broaden skills provides an excellent occasion for learning and development. On-the-job, experiential learning helps employees to build new relationships, network, and gain an understanding of different branch, divisional, or government functions and therefore the larger organizational vision.

Respondents point out a myriad of possible restructuring activities from which to learn. One may choose to chair a committee, participate in a corporate-focused venture, lead a branch-based assignment, lend one’s services to another branch to help complete a short-term project, cross-train in an immediate colleague’s responsibilities, work part-time in
another division for a provisional period, or undertake a full-time temporary assignment in a different position. This is by no means an exhaustive list of job restructuring possibilities.

Respondents caution that any temporary restructuring of jobs requires support from supervisors and commitment from individual employees. Arrangements that create unaddressed shortages in the employee’s home branch can cause stress and resentment among remaining staff. Some workers undertaking new challenges are reluctant to return to their base positions. Given these circumstances, activities must be planned thoughtfully.

The fundamental utility of temporary job restructuring activities is twofold: a) these arrangements present ongoing opportunities for learning and development and b) during times of fiscal restraint the restructuring may serve as a provisional stopgap in managing human resources and to redistribute workloads until such time that new employees can be recruited to fill vacancies. Ultimately, organizations can gain from providing temporary job restructuring options that are embedded as a normal part of the work culture. Challenging new tasks and learning opportunities increase the motivation and job satisfaction of employees (Tannenbaum, 1997). Individuals utilize their untapped or newly-learned skills, thus maximizing current human resources. As career development is enhanced, more employees are prepared to take on expanded roles and leadership positions in the organization. This is advantageous particularly in today’s shrinking, competitive labour force where recruitment, retention, and sustainability are a challenge.

**Summary of the Themes**

As discussed, the seven broad themes emerging in this report on informal learning in the Ministry of Education are: Learning Opportunities Provided; Thoughtful Planning and Process; Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling; Positive Relationship Dynamics; Learning Tied to Application; Mentoring; and Temporary Job Restructuring.

The ministry’s supervisors have learned much from their informal learning enterprises that, to varying degrees, helped to shape their careers. Embedded in the seven themes is considerable advice about how to plan, structure, participate in, and apply informal learning activity and about the learning options to provide.

In the first theme, ministry supervisors discuss the importance of providing informal learning options and suggest different opportunities from which one can learn, including acting management positions, internal professional development, and temporary job restructuring activities. Moreover, respondents emphasize the importance of providing opportunities for all, not just a select few. The second broad theme focuses on the need to thoughtfully plan and implement learning activities – such as ensuring focus, structure, and employees well-matched with assignments – to maximize learning capacity. Third, when it comes to “Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling”, employees, supervisors,
and executives all have the responsibility to engage proactively and constructively in learning activity.

The fourth broad theme recommends that positive relationship dynamics in learning activity are best supported by open communication, trust, and mutual respect. In the fifth theme, management employees explain that learning should have an application; in other words, it should be purposeful and connected to core work and organizational priorities through formal planning for development. Unfocused activity with no planning, rationale, purpose, or developmental goals can lessen the prospective learning experience. As for “Mentoring”, this sixth broad theme demonstrates the benefits of conscientious mentoring and peer relationships; particularly, those involving a positive connection between participants. The seventh and final theme shows that a variety of temporary job restructuring options provide experiential, informal learning opportunities that can enhance career development.

No matter the informal learning activity – whether mentoring relationships, temporary job restructuring, or other types of informal learning – the ministry might well consider the positive and less than positive experiences of its supervisors in advancing such opportunities.

Additional Comments

This discussion concludes with some final, notable points.

A number of the “Other” responses are reflected in the literature, such as: risk-taking facilitates learning; mentors need not be confined to an immediate supervisor; and learning and development aid in succession planning. These and other unique responses from supervisors quoted in the “Findings” section of this paper and found in Appendix 12 augment the lessons learned about informal learning and hence deserve attention.

As explained in the findings, several interviewees could provide no examples to illustrate less than positive impacts of informal learning. These respondents report they almost always gain something from informal learning experiences, even to learn from mistakes and apply the knowledge to future situations. This is a key advantage of experiential learning where one can learn on the job. Moreover, formal training activity (such as course work) is characterized as “irrelevant” or less positive than informal learning opportunities.

The quantitative analysis reveals that two-thirds of questionnaire respondents are involved occasionally to almost always in informal learning activity. This healthy majority of involvement provides a solid foundation on which to promote and enhance informal learning options, both in quantity and quality.
Regardless of the views of many respondents herein on the value of informal learning and some comments about the ineffectiveness of formal training activities, public servants in the Ministry of Education and throughout the public service indicate on the 2010 Work Environment Survey that they are less satisfied with current opportunities for professional development (BC Ministry of Education, 2010c). This circumstance may be caused by differing views on learning between the supervisory and non-supervisory populations or the need for more informal learning options, or both. More likely, employees generally do not include the more prevalent informal learning in their definition of professional development. There may be a need for greater awareness of what constitutes learning. No matter the drivers of this diminished assessment of professional development activity, the situation merits further investigation. Additionally, notwithstanding the largely positive views of supervisors on the potential and utility of informal learning, management and human resources personnel may wish to bear in mind the value employees place on formal learning. This is where the Conference Board of Canada’s recommended balance between informal and formal learning comes into play.

There is one last note about an aspect of the interviewees not captured formally throughout the data gathering and thus does not appear in the formal findings of this study. During the interviews, it seemed that supervisors’ responses might be influenced by their area of responsibility. To be precise, it is possible that management personnel responsible for the ministry’s operational functions (as opposed to policy or educational programming) are more cautious about informal learning activities. If this is true, it may be attributed to the profile of their staff or because the work of their branches as compared to others might be more constrained by fixed annual cycles. Whatever the reason, this aspect of the potential for informal learning in the Ministry of Education may warrant further study.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Like many other organizations both public and private, the BC Ministry of Education is facing a period of fiscal restraint in a competitive labour market with a rapidly-shrinking workforce. The objective of this research has been to examine informal learning as an instrument for career development to complement (and if necessary in challenging economic times, largely replace) formal learning activities.

The study provides an inside look at informal learning experiences through the eyes of key employees in the BC Ministry of Education; namely, management personnel. Supervisors are in a position to share views on their own career growth and that of their employees and to help advance informal learning as a means for career development. The sample of respondents from this supervisory population represents a comprehensive cross-section
of employment backgrounds, experiences, management levels, and the ministry’s work divisions.

Management staff communicates great support for informal learning and cites abundant examples of opportunities that helped to advance their own careers and facilitate the development of their employees. Mentoring relationships and temporary job restructuring activities figure prominently in the learning experiences of respondents. While such pursuits are not always perfectly productive, respondents nevertheless learned from their less than positive experiences that also help to shape and focus career development. Overall, supervisors offer much practical advice on promoting, planning, implementing, and following up on effective informal learning activity.

Given the recessed economy, the need for ministries’ work to align with overall public service values and priorities of central government, and the Ministry of Education’s focus on maximizing human resources and increasing employee engagement, now may be an ideal time for this ministry to focus on informal learning to enhance core business priorities while developing employees. Lessons learned from management and supervisory personnel can help this establishment maximize informal learning opportunities. The notion of informal learning as an instrument for development embedded in the work culture can contribute to the ministry’s evolution into a competitive, 21st century learning organization. In the words of one supervisor: “Make it a priority. Create a culture of learning. I think we [in the ministry] are quite good at this.” We are, after all, the Ministry of Education.

During this exploration of informal learning in the Ministry of Education, ideas emerged about how to broaden understanding of informal learning and the reasons behind individual management perspectives on this topic. These ideas form the basis for possible future research topics.

Possible future research.

This particular study largely focuses on mentoring relationships and temporary job restructuring activities. Respondents briefly referred to their experiences with other types of informal learning activities, such as learning online and through social networking tools, along with the possibility of tapping into internal expertise to provide in-house professional development sessions. One could explore further the merits of these and other forms of informal learning activity.

Another possible research topic was raised in the literature review and touched on the profile of individuals who pursue informal learning opportunities. Birdi, Allan, and Warr (1997) suggest that persons with higher levels of education tend to be more proactive about informal learning to enhance career development. This could be explored as a possible driving factor for those in the ministry who tend to seek out prospects for learning and advancement. Moreover, this may be broadened by examining the potential
influence of individuals’ work responsibilities, role, and level in the organizational hierarchy on their willingness to engage in informal learning experiences for the benefit of their own or their employees’ careers.

Lastly, as mentioned in the “Discussion” section of this paper, the Ministry of Education’s results on the most recent Public Service Work Environment Survey raise the question about what the general working population considers to be professional development. Public servants who completed the WES earlier this year indicate they are dissatisfied with current opportunities for professional development, yet the respondents in this present study extol the benefits of informal learning (sometimes over formal learning activities). This begs a question about ministry employees’ definition of professional development and if it is limited to traditionally formal activities, such as training programmes and course work. If so, it would be informative to compare the value individuals place on formal as opposed to informal learning opportunities and explore whether or how the ratings of supervisory and non-supervisory staff differ.

As for the current study, recommendations associated with informal learning arise from this research.

Recommendations

Following are recommendations offered to the Ministry of Education for consideration when promoting, planning, and implementing informal learning activity. These suggestions spring from the comments and experiences of supervisory staff participating in the research who suggest ways to support the advancement of informal learning. Their recommendations align with knowledge gained from the review of the literature.

Concept I: Informal learning in general.

1. **Expound the benefits of informal learning with management personnel.**
   Given the promise of informal learning for career development associated with a supportive learning environment, executive may wish to expound the benefits of informal learning with management personnel and help these supervisors to support such opportunities. This could take place in regular managers’ council meetings and be accomplished with the assistance of human resources personnel as well as managers who already have had success with informal learning activity.

2. **Educate all staff on informal learning, promoting it as an effective means for professional development.**
   Some employees may not understand the value and effectiveness of informal learning because their concept of professional development is limited to involvement in formal training programmes offered externally through courses or workshops. Ministry leadership might consider educating all staff and promoting informal learning as an effective means for professional development. Some management personnel
who have successfully capitalized on informal learning to enhance their own career development may wish to share their positive experiences with staff.

3. **Use the Employee Performance Development Plan as a strategic planning tool for informal learning.**
   This research shows that careful planning is necessary to foster effective learning activity. The EPDP should be promoted as a strategic tool to engage employees and their supervisors in conversation, set career development goals, and ensure linkages to core work, all the while embedding focused informal learning as a means for short- and long-term development. This might be complemented by some training or guidelines for managers on how best to plan and structure learning activity.

4. **Provide an array of informal learning options for all.**
   Various learning opportunities offer distinct potential for different employees. Respondents therefore state the importance of encouraging and providing a range of options accessible to all staff in the ministry. At the same time, these options should be well-planned and focused in order to enhance informal learning. Human resources personnel may be in a position to coordinate an organizational plan for learning opportunities. As advised by the Conference Board of Canada, it is practical to balance informal learning activity with formal training opportunities to maximize the promise for career development and help organizations compete in the labour market.

5. **Examine existing ministry structures that may pose barriers to informal learning.**
   Informal learning necessitates communication along with effective and direct working relationships. This relatively small ministry is housed in four separate buildings, has a very steep hierarchical structure, and most of its executive personnel are located on one floor of the main ministry offices. These current structures may create physical barriers to informal learning, in that working relationships and mentorships might not be formed easily across multiple geographical locations and when potential role models are not as immediately accessible. These potential barriers to learning may be diminished through, for example, flattening the hierarchy or co-locating executives with their branches.

   **Concept II: Mentoring and peer relationships.**

   1. **Provide information to all staff about the potential benefits of mentoring and peer relationships.**
      Mentoring and peer relationships are proven informal learning endeavours. This might not be common knowledge; therefore, leadership may wish to inform all staff about the prospective benefits of both informal and formal mentoring and peer-to-peer relationships. At the same time, it would be beneficial to solicit the views of staff on their requirements for mentoring relationships. This could be coordinated by human resources personnel.
2. **Create a mentoring programme with clear guidelines and information.**
   Human resources personnel, with the help of practised and knowledgeable staff, might consider establishing a voluntary mentoring programme for interested parties that incorporates clear guidelines and information on how to structure mentoring. Organizers can learn from the experiences of respondents in this study to avoid impeding flexibility and spontaneity and imposing forced relationships.

3. **Encourage linkages between mentoring relationships and other informal learning activities.**
   To help make the most of opportunities, human resources, and learning potential, supervisors might consider promoting linkages (where possible) between mentoring and peer relationships and other informal learning activities, such as temporary job restructuring. For instance, an individual could undertake a matrix assignment in another branch where they would work with experienced colleagues who can serve as peer mentors.

   **Concept III: Temporary job restructuring.**

1. **Create structures to promote and enable temporary job restructuring activities.**
   The research shows that employees are engaged by challenge. They can learn a great deal from on-the-job experiences from which the learning endures. Respondents recommend the creation of structures that promote and enable stretch assignments, matrix opportunities, and temporary assignments. These structures could involve cross-training of employees with like skills to provide back-ups when colleagues are on short-term assignment, connecting supervisors through information and planning sessions that facilitate temporary restructuring of jobs, and formalizing the Skills Inventory and Job Opportunities Database as a centralized tool for all temporary job restructuring opportunities. Whether a worker joins a short-term committee or pursues a provisional assignment for a specific period, respondents are clear that supervisor support is important for these activities to succeed.

2. **Ensure employees and supervisors understand the need for planning and fair, consistent protocols to guide temporary job restructuring activities.**
   Respondents explain that temporary job restructuring options must be planned thoughtfully to avoid stressed supervisors and over-worked colleagues who remain in the home branch. Employees and all supervisors involved should consider the timing, scope, and schedule of assignments. Consistency across the organization can help to promote fair opportunities for all rather than exclusive chances for some.

3. **Ensure temporary job restructuring opportunities are balanced with core work and sufficient staffing.**
   Respondents cite concerns about employees undertaking temporary opportunities that result in the work unit’s remaining staff (including themselves) feeling overburdened and stressed by unattended work. This may be circumvented by
balancing temporary pursuits with the core work of the branch and with sufficient staffing. Temporary opportunities should be connected to core work and organizational goals through planning in EPDPs. In times when new staff cannot be hired to backfill vacated responsibilities, management personnel may wish to explore other avenues; for example, supervisors might consult with one another to see if staff in other work units can help out temporarily until recruitment is possible.


APPENDIX 1: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

Dear <Name of Ministry of Education Management Member>:

I am in the process of completing my Master’s degree in Public Administration at the University of Victoria. To fulfill my degree requirements, I am enrolled in ADMN 598, which is a course designed for students to complete a research project in consultation with a client for whom the project has value. I have chosen to examine employee development in the Ministry of Education. Specifically, given our shrinking internal human resources coupled with the current inability to recruit new employees, I will examine opportunities for informal learning to help the ministry sustain itself and develop employees from within. You have been randomly sampled to take part in my research.

I would like to take this opportunity to request your voluntary participation in this study by consenting to an interview that will focus on the concept of informal learning and development of employees. The interviews will be conducted individually will involve a 45 minute discussion between the two of us in your office at a mutually-agreeable time in the next three weeks. A copy of the interview questions is attached for your consideration and provides more detailed information about informal learning.

Please note that all responses and data will be treated in a confidential manner and participants will not be identified in the report. The data will be aggregated and specific examples will be cited anonymously in the report. Furthermore, your participation is completely voluntary and you can decide to withdraw from participation at any time. Should you decide to withdraw, any information collected from you will be destroyed and excluded from analysis in the report.

A Participant Consent Form (also attached) will be provided to all participants. This form is required by the University of Victoria and indicates that you are willing to participate on a voluntary basis and includes an explanation of how the information from the questionnaire and interviews will be used in the project. I will ask all participants to sign the consent form and I will collect it from you and make a copy for your records.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the project or about these documents. Please let me know if you would like to participate in the study that will involve:

- Informing me if you are willing to participate in the interview phase of the study. If you consent to the interview I will contact you to set up an appointment;
- Signing the attached consent form that I will collect from you; and
- Participating in the 45 minute interview that will take place over the next three weeks.

I am looking forward to undertaking this project and thank you in advance for considering to participate. I will follow up with you next week to confirm your interest in the study.

Sincerely,

Emilie Hillier
APPENDIX 2: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear <Name of Ministry of Education Management Member>:

I am in the process of completing my Master’s degree in Public Administration at the University of Victoria. To fulfill my degree requirements, I am enrolled in ADMN 598, which is a course designed for students to complete a research project in consultation with a client for whom the project has value. I have chosen to examine employee development in the Ministry of Education. Specifically, given our shrinking internal human resources coupled with the current inability to recruit new employees, I will examine opportunities for informal learning to help the ministry sustain itself and develop employees from within. I am asking all supervisors and team leaders in the ministry to participate.

I would like to take this opportunity to request your voluntary participation in this study that involves completing a questionnaire. The questionnaire focuses on the concept of informal learning and development of employees and should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. A copy of the questionnaire is attached and provides more detailed information about informal learning.

Please note that all responses and data will be treated in a confidential manner and participants will not be identified in the report. The data will be aggregated and specific examples will be cited anonymously in the report. Furthermore, your participation is completely voluntary and you can decide to withdraw from participation at any time. Should you decide to withdraw, any information collected from you will be destroyed and excluded from analysis in the report.

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I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the project or about these documents. Please let me know if you would like to participate in the study that will involve:

- Signing the attached consent form that I will collect from you;
- Completing the attached questionnaire that should take no more than 30 minutes of your time;
- Submitting the completed questionnaire and signed consent form to me by Wednesday, May 12 (two weeks from today).

Regarding submission of the completed questionnaire, I am happy to accept it electronically as an email attachment or as a printed paper copy with written responses. Please let me know if you would like me to pick up the completed questionnaire and signed consent form from your office.

I am looking forward to undertaking this project and thank you in advance for considering to participate. I will follow up with you next week to confirm your interest in the study.

Sincerely,

Emilie Hillier
APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – INTERVIEW

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Defining and Encouraging Continuous Learning and Development in the BC Ministry of Education*, to be conducted by Emilie Hillier.

As a graduate student at the University of Victoria, I, Emilie, am required to conduct a research project as part of the requirements for a Master’s degree in Public Administration. This research project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Bart Cunningham, Professor at the University of Victoria. If you have any questions, you may contact Emilie Hillier by telephone at (250) 356-7169 or by email at Emilie.Hillier@gov.bc.ca, or Dr. Cunningham by telephone at (250) 721-8059 or by email at bcunning@uvic.ca.

**Purpose and Objectives:** The purpose of this research is to determine how the BC Ministry of Education can develop informal learning opportunities to foster a capacity to develop from within, building on mentoring and innovative job restructuring activities.

**Importance of this Research:** Research of this type can provide information and recommendations for developing informal learning activities so that in times of fiscal restraint when recruitment is not possible, the organization may sustain itself by developing employees from within.

**Participants Selection:** You are being asked to participate in this study because of your supervisory capacity and the insights that you may provide on staff development. You and the other potential participants have been randomly sampled from the ministry’s supervisors and team leaders.

**What is involved:** If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will involve an interview that will delve more deeply into the concept of informal learning. This interview will be conducted individually with me (the researcher) and will take approximately 45 minutes (in your office if you wish). The interviews will focus on obtaining positive and negative impacts of informal learning techniques utilized by management and ways to develop various informal learning techniques in the workplace.

**Inconvenience:** The only inconvenience that will be caused by participation in this study will be the devotion of approximately 45 minutes of your work time to answer questions.

**Risks:** There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.
**Benefits:** You can be provided with a copy of the final research paper that may provide you with insights into continuous learning and the career development of your employees.

**Compensation:** There will be no compensation provided for participating in the research project.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study you may decide whether or not the information you have already given will or will not be used in the study.

**Anonymity:** In terms of protecting your anonymity, references to individuals will not be made in the research report.

**Confidentiality:** Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by locking hard copies of the questionnaire and interview responses in a locked filing cabinet and electronic information will be password protected for access by the researcher only.

**Dissemination of Results:** The results of this study will be shared with the Deputy Minister and will be available to other students or faculty of the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. Copies of the final report will be made available to all participants.

**Disposal of Data:** Data from this study will be disposed of by shredding hard copies and deletion of electronic files after the research report has been successfully accepted by the University of Victoria.

**Contacts:** In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

____________________________  ______________________  __________________
Name of Participant                      Signature                      Date

* A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
APPENDIX 4: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled *Defining and Encouraging Continuous Learning and Development in the BC Ministry of Education*, to be conducted by Emilie Hillier.

As a graduate student at the University of Victoria, I, Emilie, am required to conduct a research project as part of the requirements for a Master’s degree in Public Administration. This research project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Bart Cunningham, Professor at the University of Victoria. If you have any questions, you may contact Emilie Hillier by telephone at (250) 356-7169 or by email at Emilie.Hillier@gov.bc.ca, or Dr. Cunningham by telephone at (250) 721-8059 or by email at bcunning@uvic.ca.

**Purpose and Objectives:** The purpose of this research is to determine how the BC Ministry of Education can develop informal learning opportunities to foster a capacity to develop from within, building on mentoring and innovative job restructuring activities.

**Importance of this Research:** Research of this type can provide information and recommendations for developing informal learning activities so that in times of fiscal restraint when recruitment is not possible, the organization may sustain itself by developing employees from within.

**Participants Selection:** I am asking all supervisors and team leaders in the ministry to participate in this study because of the insights that you may provide on staff development.

**What is involved:** If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will involve completing a questionnaire that will delve more deeply into the concept of informal learning. This questionnaire should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. The questions will focus on obtaining positive and negative impacts of informal learning techniques utilized by management and ways to develop various informal learning techniques in the workplace.

**Inconvenience:** The only inconvenience that will be caused by participation in this study will be the devotion of approximately 30 minutes of your work time to answer questions.

**Risks:** There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.
**Benefits:** You can be provided with a copy of the final research paper that may provide you with insights into informal learning and the career development of your employees.

**Compensation:** There will be no compensation provided for participating in the research project.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study you may decide whether or not the information you have already given will or will not be used in the study.

**Anonymity:** In terms of protecting your anonymity, references to individuals will not be made in the research report.

**Confidentiality:** Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by locking hard copies of the questionnaire responses in a locked filing cabinet and electronic information will be password protected for access by the researcher only.

**Dissemination of Results:** The results of this study will be shared with the Deputy Minister and will be available to other students or faculty of the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. Copies of the final report will be made available to all participants.

**Disposal of Data:** Data from this study will be disposed of by shredding hard copies and deletion of electronic files after the research report has been successfully accepted by the University of Victoria.

**Contacts:** In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

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<th>Name of Participant</th>
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*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
APPENDIX 5: INFORMAL LEARNING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Career related informal (or continuous) learning is “characterized as a self-initiated, discretionary, planned, and proactive pattern of activities focused on applying knowledge for career development.” One central attribute of people who engage in informal learning is that they are more likely to be proactive and engage in self development. They set self development goals for their careers and are more prone to self analysis, to seek and use feedback, and are more active in wanting to learn. Informal learning opportunities often occur on the job.

In contrast, formal learning may involve professional development course work, post-secondary courses, training programmes, co-op or internship experiences, or diploma and certificate programmes.

Examples of career development activities that foster informal and continuous learning:

Mentorship activities
- *Mentoring*. Individuals can initiate a developmental relationship with mentors or peers in gaining advice, modelling, sharing experience, and providing general support. This can be within a formal or informal structure.
- *Peer Relationships*. Peers can develop a relationship to exchange job-related information, ideas, and feedback. The relationship may be established for informal sharing of information or for more focused feedback with a special, trusted peer.

Temporary job restructuring activities
- *Matrix Organization*. Individuals are based in one department but also participate in cross-organizational projects where they can contribute existing expertise, utilize skills untapped in the home department, and develop new competencies. In this structure, the employee reports to supervisors in both the functional (home) and cross-functional departments. This is sometimes referred to as matrix management.
- *Job Rotations*. People in the same field of work (e.g., human resources) can exchange responsibilities for set period of time. This provides employees with wider job experience and encourages them to acquire a wide range of skills.
- *Temporary Assignments*. Individuals can jump-start their careers by engaging in temporary assignments. These assignments are generally thought of as a time-limited

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assignment within an organization. This can help get your career started or provide opportunities to experience new challenges.

- **Team Responsibilities.** This training uses many of the similar principles of job rotations and refers to training a number of employees to undertake the same type of assignments so they can fill in for one another when needed.

- **Special Projects and Stretch Assignments.** Individuals can get involved on special assignments that respond to their development needs in providing useful skills, contacts, or experiences that employees find valuable.

**Interview Questions**

I am carrying out a study of how we in the Ministry of Education can develop informal learning opportunities to foster a capacity to develop from within, building on the mentoring and peer relationships of others.

There are two central issues that give rise to this project:

1. We have key positions for which a succession plan is needed and people who have knowledge that is valuable to the organization and we need to develop ways to learn from them.
2. We have people leaving the organization and we are unable to backfill their positions. Consequently, other people are taking on more and more responsibilities. We can explore new ways to accomplish our work-related goals and objectives.

I would like your input into how we can best utilize informal learning activities such as mentoring, matrix management, and temporary assignments so that staff learns from others and other areas. I also am interviewing other supervisors who may provide some insight into these issues for the organization.

You will be asked to comment on examples of informal learning and for ideas about how this may be developed in your area.

This interview is anonymous and confidential. Your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable or for which you have no information to provide. Whether you participate or choose not to participate is confidential. Please be assured that all information provided by you will be kept STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. Your name will never be associated with any of the comments you make. I am simply interested in the collective responses of a number of people who can offer a perspective on this issue. Only my academic supervisor will have access to the data. I intend to compile your anonymous responses and those of other people I am interviewing to develop a report for the School of Public Administration and our Deputy Minister.
The questions I will ask are open-ended. In responding, I encourage you to reflect on your experiences in this organization. I intend to take your responses and those of other people I interview to develop a report for the School of Public Administration and our Deputy Minister.

Before I begin, do you have any questions about the project? Alright, let’s begin.

1. Informal Learning

We defined informal learning as a self-initiated and proactive pattern of formal and informal activities focused on developing knowledge for career development.

Questions:

Can you describe an example of an informal learning activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Can you describe an example of an informal learning activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

What ideas do you think would work in developing this in your area?

- Can you give me an example of how this might be done?

2. Mentoring and Peer Relationships

Individuals initiate developmental relationships with mentors, coaches, and peers in gaining advice, modeling, sharing experience, and providing general support.

Questions:

Can you describe an example of a mentoring or peer relationship you were involved in or of which you are aware that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Can you describe an example of a mentoring and/or peer relationship you were involved in or of which you are aware that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

What ideas do you think would work in developing this in your area?

- Can you give me an example of how this might be done?
3. Temporary Job Restructuring Activities

Individuals can enhance their careers with new challenges by engaging in time-limited shifts to their job responsibilities through activities such as job-sharing, temporary assignments, matrix organization, cross training, or special projects.

Questions:

Can you describe an example of a temporary job restructuring activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Can you describe an example of temporary job restructuring activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

What ideas do you think would work in developing this in your area?
  • Can you give me an example of how this might be done?

4. Other examples of informal learning

Questions:

Is there a different example of informal learning you wish to describe that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Is there a different example of informal learning you wish to describe that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

What ideas do you think would work in developing this in your area?
  • Can you give me an example of how this might be done?
APPENDIX 6: INFORMAL LEARNING QUESTIONNAIRE

I am carrying out a study of how we in the Ministry of Education can develop informal learning opportunities to foster a capacity to develop from within, building on the mentoring and peer relationships of others.

Career related informal (or continuous) learning is a self-initiated, discretionary, planned, and proactive pattern of activities focused on applying knowledge for career development. One central attribute of people who engage in continuous learning is that they are more likely to be proactive and engage in self development. They set self development goals and are more prone to self analysis, to seek and use feedback, and are more active in wanting to learn.

In contrast to informal learning, formal learning may involve professional development course work, post-secondary courses, training programmes, co-op or internship experiences, or diploma and certificate programmes.

Examples of career development activities that foster informal learning:

Mentorship activities
- **Mentoring.** Individuals can initiate a developmental relationship with mentors or peers in gaining advice, modelling, sharing experience, and providing general support. This can be within a formal or informal structure.
- **Peer Relationships.** Peers can develop a relationship to exchange job-related information, ideas, and feedback. The relationship may be established for informal sharing of information or for more focused feedback with a special, trusted peer.

Temporary job restructuring activities
- **Matrix Organization.** Individuals are based in one department but also participate in cross-organizational projects where they can contribute existing expertise, utilize skills untapped in the home department, and develop new competencies. In this structure, the employee reports to supervisors in both the functional (home) and cross-functional departments. This is sometimes referred to as matrix management.
- **Job Rotations.** People in the same field of work (e.g., human resources) can exchange responsibilities for set period of time. This provides employees with wider job experience and encourages them to acquire a wide range of skills.

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- **Temporary Assignments.** Individual can jump start their careers by engaging in temporary assignments. These assignments are generally thought of as a time-limited assignment within an organization. This can help get your career started or provide opportunities to experience new challenges.
- **Team Responsibilities.** This training uses many of the similar principles of job rotations and refers to training a number of employees to undertake the same type of assignments so they can fill in for one another when needed.
- **Special Projects and Stretch Assignments.** Individuals can get involved on special assignments that respond to their development needs in providing useful skills, contacts, or experiences that employees find valuable.

There are two central issues that give rise to this project:

1. We have key positions for which a succession plan is needed and people who have knowledge that is valuable to the organization and we need to develop ways to learn from them.
2. We have people leaving the organization and we are unable to backfill their positions. Consequently, other people are taking on more and more responsibilities. We can explore new ways to accomplish our work-related goals and objectives.

I would like your input into how we can best utilize informal learning activities such as mentoring, matrix management, and temporary assignments so that staff learns from others and other areas. I also am surveying other supervisors who may provide some insight into these issues for the organization.

This questionnaire is anonymous and confidential. Your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable or for which you have no information to provide. Whether you participate or choose not to participate is confidential. Please be assured that all information provided by you will be kept STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. Your name will never be associated with any of your answers. I am simply interested in the collective responses of a number of people who can offer a perspective on this issue. Only my academic supervisor will have access to the data. I intend to compile your anonymous responses and those of other people I am surveying to develop a report for the School of Public Administration and our Deputy Minister.

Please contact me if you have any questions prior to completing the questionnaire. I would be very happy to provide further information.

**QUESTIONS:**

Below are four statements about informal learning activities. Based on the scale provided, please write a number in the blank beside each statement that best describes how frequently these activities occur in your workplace.
After you rate each statement, you are asked to provide an example of the activities and briefly comment on how we might improve opportunities or circumstances for these activities to occur (expand the space if needed).

There are no right or wrong answers, only how you feel personally about the statements. This information will not be used to identify you.

1. __________ I have undertaken informal learning activities, either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

If you have undertaken these activities, then a) please provide an example of the informal learning activities you have found most useful in your learning and development in this organization and b) briefly describe how we might encourage similar opportunities for this to occur:

Example:

______________________________________________________________

Suggestions:

______________________________________________________________

The next three questions focus on specific types of informal learning. The same scale applies, from 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always) as above.

2. __________ I have undertaken mentoring or peer relationships, either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

If you have undertaken these activities, then a) please give an example of your mentoring or peer relationship and b) briefly describe how we might improve or encourage opportunities or circumstances for these activities to occur:

Example:

______________________________________________________________
Suggestions:

3. ______ I have undertaken part-time temporary job restructuring activities (such as stretch assignments, matrix organization, or team responsibilities), either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

If you have undertaken these activities, then a) please give an example of your part-time temporary restructuring activity and b) briefly describe how we might improve or encourage opportunities or circumstances for these activities to occur:

Example:

Suggestions:

4. ______ I have undertaken full-time temporary job restructuring activities (such as temporary assignments or job rotations), either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

If you have undertaken these activities, then a) please give an example of your full-time temporary restructuring activity and b) briefly describe how we might improve or encourage opportunities or circumstances for these activities to occur:

Example:

Suggestions:

This concludes the questions. Thank you very much for participating.

PLEASE RETURN THIS COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE TO ME AS AN EMAIL ATTACHMENT BY WEDNESDAY, MAY 12, 2010.

If you prefer, please print the questionnaire and provide responses to me in a written format. Please return your completed paper questionnaire to me by Wednesday, May 12, 2010. Alternatively, please let me know by email if you wish me to come by your office to pick up the questionnaire. I would be happy to do so. Thank you very much.
## APPENDIX 7: THEMES DERIVED FROM RESPONSES TO INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES – DETAILED COUNTS

Table 2: Broad Themes from Responses to Informal Learning Interviews and Questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Themes Derived from Specific Themes</th>
<th>Specific Themes from Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count of Interview Responses (% of Total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning Opportunities Provided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Count of Responses to Themes (% of Total)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 (8.5%)</td>
<td>Acting Management Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Temporary Job Restructuring Activities Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total 33 (8.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Thoughtful Planning and Process</td>
<td>Defined Parameters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandatory Mentoring for New Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poorly-Matched Employees and Assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress on Remaining Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfocused Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use Skills Database</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well-Matched Work with Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total 30 (7.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling</td>
<td>Decision Makers Need to Understand the Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embedded in Ministry Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Shared with Colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor Role Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proactive Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purposeful Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support from Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work Environment to Encourage Informal Learning</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Connections Between Participants</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Positive Relationship Dynamics</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Connections Between Participants</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. Learning Tied to Application</strong></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Connections Between Participants</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Mentoring</strong></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7. Temporary Job Restructuring</strong></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. Other</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. No Example</strong></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Respect</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Total of Responses</strong></td>
<td>588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving Trust</td>
<td>173</td>
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</table>
## APPENDIX 8: ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES – DETAILED COUNTS

Table 3: Analysis of Responses to Interviews – Impacts on Informal Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Themes</th>
<th>Specific Theme</th>
<th>Questions Regarding Positive Impact on Learning</th>
<th>Questions Regarding Not So Positive Impact on Learning</th>
<th>Questions Regarding How to Develop Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1a</td>
<td>2a</td>
<td>3a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning Opportunities Provided</td>
<td>Acting Management Opportunities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal Pro-D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online Opportunities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for All</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Temporary Job Restructuring Provided</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 33</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Thoughtful Planning and Process</td>
<td>Defined Parameters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management Training</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandatory Mentoring for New Roles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poorly-Matched Employees and Assignments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress on Remaining Employees</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfocused Mentoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use Skills Database</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well-Matched Work with Employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 30</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling</td>
<td>Decision Makers Need to Understand the Work</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embedded in Ministry Culture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Networks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning Shared with Colleagues</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need Positive Role Models</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 17</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table shows the counts of responses for each theme and sub-theme, categorized by whether they are considered positive impacts, not so positive impacts, or how to develop learning. The columns 1a to 4c represent different sets of questions, and the counts reflect how many responses fall into each category.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>21</th>
<th>Proactive Employees</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Purposeful Observation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Support from Supervisor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Work Environment to Encourage Informal Learning</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Positive Relationship Dynamics

| 13 | Clear Communication | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 13 |
| 6  | Involving Trust | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 5 |   |
| 3  | Lack of Trust | 0 | 3 | 3 | 0 |   |   |   |
| 5  | Mutual Respect | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 |   |
| 6  | Positive Connections Between Participants | 0 | 0 | 6 | 6 |   |   |   |
| Total | 33 | Total | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 16 | 3 | 6 | 29 |

5. Learning Tied to Application

| 9  | Balancing Learning with Core Work | 1 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 8 |
| 4  | Employees Not Wishing to Return from Temporary Assignments | 0 | 4 | 4 | 0 |   |   |   |
| 12 | EPDP Linkages | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 11 |
| 10 | Focused Learning | 0 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 10 |   |
| 13 | Focused Mentoring | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 12 | 13 |   |
| 5  | Lack of Follow Through | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 0 |   |
| 7  | Unfocused Learning Activities | 0 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 0 |   |
| Total | 60 | Total | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 16 | 16 | 14 | 7 | 5 | 42 |

6. Mentoring

| 16 | Mentoring | 14 | 1 | 15 | 0 | 0 |   |   |
| 3  | Formal Mentoring | 0 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 |   |   |
| 6  | Informal Mentoring | 4 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 |   |
| 27 | Peer Relationships | 6 | 19 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 1 | 1 |   |
| Total | 52 | Total | 10 | 35 | 0 | 2 | 47 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

7. Temporary Job Restructuring

| 3  | Cross Training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 |   |   |
| 11 | Matrix Organization | 1 | 6 | 3 | 10 | 0 | 1 | 1 |   |
| 9  | Stretch Assignments | 6 | 3 | 9 | 0 | 0 |   |   |
| 9  | Temporary Assignments | 1 | 8 | 9 | 0 | 0 |   |   |
| Total | 32 | Total | 9 | 0 | 19 | 3 | 31 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |

8. Other

<p>| 44 | Other | 1 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 12 | 4 | 12 | 7 | 4 | 27 |
| Total | 44 | Total | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 12 | 4 | 12 | 7 | 4 | 27 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9. No Example</th>
<th>35</th>
<th>No Example</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>4</th>
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**Full questions:**

Question 1a: Can you describe an example of an informal learning activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 2a: Can you describe an example of a mentoring or peer relationship you were involved in or of which you are aware that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 3a: Can you describe an example of a temporary job restructuring activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 4a: Is there a different example of informal learning you wish to describe that has positively impacted your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 1b: Can you describe an example of an informal learning activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 2b: Can you describe an example of a mentoring and/or peer relationship you were involved in or of which you are aware that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 3b: Can you describe an example of temporary job restructuring activity you were involved in or of which you are aware that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 4b: Is there a different example of informal learning you wish to describe that has not been so positive for your career or that of your employee(s)?

Question 1c: What ideas do you think would work in developing informal learning in your area?
  - Can you give me an example of how this might be done?

Question 2c: What ideas do you think would work in developing mentoring and/or peer relationships in your area?
  - Can you give me an example of how this might be done?

Question 3c: What ideas do you think would work in developing temporary job restructuring activities in your area?
  - Can you give me an example of how this might be done?

Question 4c: What ideas do you think would work in developing these other examples of informal learning in your area?
  - Can you give me an example of how this might be done?
### Table 4: Informal Learning Questionnaire Responses – Count of Responses to Qualitative Questions

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Full questions:

Question 1b:
If you have undertaken these activities, then i) please provide an example of the informal learning activities you have found most useful in your learning and development in this organization and ii) briefly describe how we might encourage similar opportunities for this to occur:

Question 2b:
If you have undertaken these activities, then i) please give an example of your mentoring or peer relationship and ii) briefly describe how we might improve or encourage opportunities or circumstances for these activities to occur:

Question 3b:
If you have undertaken these activities, then i) please give an example of your part-time temporary restructuring activity and ii) briefly describe how we might improve or encourage opportunities or circumstances for these activities to occur:

Question 4b:
If you have undertaken these activities, then i) please give an example of your full-time temporary restructuring activity and ii) briefly describe how we might improve or encourage opportunities or circumstances for these activities to occur:
## APPENDIX 10: CATEGORIZED RESPONSES TO SCALAR QUESTIONS ON QUESTIONNAIRE

### Table 5: Informal Learning Questionnaire Responses - Ratings on Scalar Questions

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<th>Question #</th>
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<th>2 Very Seldom</th>
<th>3 Seldom</th>
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Full questions:

Question 1a:

________ I have undertaken informal learning activities, either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

Question 2a:

________ I have undertaken mentoring or peer relationships, either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

Question 3a:

________ I have undertaken part-time temporary job restructuring activities (such as stretch assignments, matrix organization, or team responsibilities), either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).

Question 4a:

________ I have undertaken full-time temporary job restructuring activities (such as temporary assignments or job rotations), either for my own development or that of my employees. (In the blank space provided, please write a number from 1 to 7 based on the scale provided that best describes the frequency of these activities).
APPENDIX 11: GLOSSARY OF SPECIFIC THEMES FROM RESPONSES

Acting Management Opportunities
Acting management opportunities are presented when an incumbent manager vacates their position for a short term enabling an employee to temporarily fill the position. Acting managers are in a position to explore something different, showcase their abilities, develop new skills and competencies, and try out a management position to see if they like and are able to do the work. If the position becomes posted, successful acting managers may have a greater chance at winning the competition for the position. Organizations benefit because different employees know each other’s jobs, creating more overlap in human resources to support succession planning.

Balance Learning with Core Work
Employees’ pursuit of informal learning should be balanced with their core work so there is a connection to the work of the branch, core work is completed, the learning may aid in solving immediate problems of the branch, and colleagues are not overloaded with extra work. Depending on the type of informal learning, it may need to occur during down times to ensure this balance.

Clear Communication
Informal learning must be facilitated by clear, open communication among all involved; namely, among participants in the activities, between supervisors (in matrix management activities), and between employees and supervisors in particular. Employees must clearly communicate their needs and wishes to pursue informal learning opportunities and supervisors must communicate opportunities and expectations.

Cross Training
Employees within the same branch learn aspects of each other’s core work so there are back-ups in place to complete the work if unexpected events occur. This activity provides employees with opportunities to learn and grow in their work, understand the linkages between jobs, and build relationships.

Decision Makers Need to Understand the Work
If the core work of branches is not understood by the organization’s decision makers, decisions can have a negative impact on that work. There is cause for concern when managers and human resource staff are disconnected from one another resulting in decisions that negatively affect informal learning opportunities.

Defined Parameters
Temporary job restructuring activities must have defined parameters, such as appropriate timing, a defined end, and a balanced work load for the home branch. Without specific parameters, employees who move from temporary assignment to temporary assignment, for example, may lose their base position or be viewed as uncommitted to their work.
Embedded in Ministry Culture
Informal learning is facilitated when embedded as a natural part of the organization’s culture where employees are supported to take on activities and development is mapped into career and organizational planning. The organization needs to value different types of learning. Learning activities, such as mentoring and temporary job restructuring activities, need to be encouraged and employed as a natural part of the organizational structure. If a cultural shift is required, it would be helpful to develop a common set of guidelines across branches or ministries so concepts and opportunities are recognized universally.

Employees Not Wishing to Return from Temporary Assignments
Some employees undertaking temporary assignments may not wish to return to their base job position, resulting in hard feelings and lack of engagement back in their main role. While this is often beyond the control of supervisors, hard feelings may be mitigated by expanding the scope of responsibility or providing new challenges in the home position.

EPDP Linkages
Informal learning should be built into the Employee Performance and Development Plan (EPDP) to help prioritize and structure the development, set goals, formally recognize the activities, connect learning to the core work, build the employee’s competencies, and formalize the employee and supervisor commitment to the employee’s development. The EPDP can be used as a professional growth plan and tool to build on strengths and plan for focused career development.

Focused Learning
Focused learning is structured learning that involves planning, purpose, developmental goals and objectives, appropriate time allotment and defined end, value added to the core work, a mutual vision between supervisor and employee, and a good fit for the participant. Focused learning is meaningful learning.

Focused Mentoring
The mentoring relationship requires a focus to be productive. Focused mentoring is undertaken by delineating gaps in knowledge, concentrating on competencies, and defining purpose, goals and expectations for the mentoring relationship. It also may be necessary to determine a context for the relationship, such as mentoring through the completion of a specific project or initiative. Protégés should identify mentors with qualities, abilities and/or knowledge connected to their own career development goals.

Internal Professional Development
Formal training and development opportunities are offered in-house so many employees can benefit and dialogue among staff can be initiated.
Involving Trust
Mentoring and peer relationships must involve trust because at times topics may be risky or require confidentiality. The mentor must have at heart the best interests of the protégé.

Lack of Follow Through
Lack of follow through after informal learning activities devalues the potential learning experience, as when projects are completed through matrix organization assignments but leadership does not follow through with conclusions, results, or implementation of the project.

Lack of Trust
Mentoring and peer relationships will not be enriched or may be damaged without trust. Lack of trust erodes the opportunity for informal learning.

Learning Networks
Connections are formed among colleagues within or across branches in the ministry, across government ministries or professional associations, or even inter-provincially and internationally to have meaningful, focused discussions on current topics and learn from participants’ shared expertise and diverse perspectives. These communities of practice may meet at regular intervals either formally or informally, depending on the group logistics. These networks may also form through online technologies, such as chat rooms and Wikis.

Learning Shared with Colleagues
Sharing informal learning experiences with colleagues in one’s home branch contributes to maximization of the learning in cases when all branch employees have not been able to participate. This shared learning can impact positively on the branch.

Management Training
Informal learning activities may be more successful and occur more regularly with formal training and guidelines for managers that delineate necessary expectations and parameters as well as ways to support learning activities.

Mandatory Mentoring for New Roles
All the new roles should include the support of an experienced informal mentor given the learning rewards for those in the early stages of career development.

Matrix Organization
Matrix organization entails employees undertaking part-time responsibilities beyond their immediate job requirements and work unit as a way to utilize existing skills, showcase untapped skills, and further develop competencies. Such learning opportunities necessitate supervisor support and employee commitment and engagement. If properly planned and with enough staff, colleagues in the home branch may have an opportunity
to learn by taking on new challenges in the work that is temporarily suspended when their colleagues assume matrix responsibilities. Given current challenges in human resources, matrix opportunities may become a necessary part of the organizational culture to get the work done, with potential to increase efficiency by avoiding duplication. Such activities also provide occasions for employees to see the larger organizational picture and to network and develop new working relationships in the ministry and with the field.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a learning activity that involves a more experienced individual imparting advice or knowledge to a new employee or someone wishing to advance in the organization. Mentors also may advise protégés in resolving work-related issues. Mentors are knowledgeable, experienced, and skilled role models who may or may not be direct supervisors of their protégés. Some mentors may be more practised colleagues or leaders in other branches of the organization. Those who are direct supervisors are in a position to give their protégés room to learn in their daily work. The main goal of mentoring is for the protégé to learn from the mentor, thus improving their work or enhancing career development.

**Formal Mentoring**

Formal mentoring is a mentoring relationship undertaken by signing up for a formal programme or by request of one’s supervisor. Formal mentors may be trained to provide mentoring advice, as opposed to informal mentors. Such mentoring is sometimes characterized as “forced” because it occurs formally rather than through a natural, existing working relationship. Formal mentorships need time to establish trust and respect between participants.

**Informal Mentoring**

Informal mentoring is a mentoring relationship that develops from existing relationships in one’s own workplace rather than from a formal, central programme. The mentor and protégé are often known to and thus comfortable with each other.

**Mutual Respect**

Participants in mentoring and peer relationships must be willing to build and nurture a positive relationship that involves mutual respect for each other’s opinions, ideas, and decisions. Without mutual respect, participants may not be fully engaged nor feel safe.

**Online Opportunities**

Informal learning may occur through online options such as webinars, web conferencing, and discussion forums, especially when information is shared with branch colleagues.

**Opportunities for All**

All employees interested in informal learning should have opportunities to undertake such activities, not just those who are hand-picked or have extra time in their work days.
Peer Relationships
Learning relationships develop between work colleagues who share their knowledge and experiences about work-related issues. Such relationships often are ongoing and present an opportunity to tap into and learn from existing expertise and diverse perspectives in the work unit or organization. One open to ideas can quickly benefit from years of experience or a new perspective on issues. The peers involved sometimes are referred to as “critical friends” because they are in a position to share honest, open, critical, fresh viewpoints on another peer’s work. Often, more experienced individuals can provide sound advice to newer colleagues on work- and career-related issues. Those involved grow in knowledge and skills.

Poorly-Matched Employees and Assignments
Some employees are offered challenging learning opportunities but ultimately do not have the necessary competencies or capability to fulfill the requirements. If an employee’s skills or abilities are ill-suited to the task, they may be unsuccessful.

Poor Role Models
Poor role models are those leaders or supervisors who demonstrate poor behaviours and management practice. One can actually use observation of poor role models as a learning tool by discerning what not to do from their behaviours. Individuals with lengthy seniority do not necessarily make good mentors if they are poor role models.

Positive Connections between Participants
Participants in mentoring and peer relationships must be well-matched and have a natural, positive working connection.

Proactive Employees
Informal learning is maximized when driven by engaged, proactive employees who take charge of their own learning and are motivated toward career growth. Such self-directed employees focus on goals for development and connect learning activities to their annual employee development plans. They direct their learning toward meeting development needs and adding value to their work. Proactive employees may need to have the courage to take risks, undertake challenges, and be open to criticism for the sake of development and advancement.

Purposeful Observation
Purposeful observation involves watching how role models (such as experienced individuals or effective leaders) strategize, think, approach situations, and present themselves to discover successful practices and those that are not as successful. One can observe what to do and what not to do in specific situations, learning to emulate successful behaviours and approaches.
Research
Research might involve dedicated work or personal time to study and stay current about relevant issues in publications, such as books, articles, online publications, and journals. One can learn without waiting for formal training programmes and thus prepare one’s self for possible future opportunities.

Stress on Remaining Employees
Employees undertaking informal learning activity might cause increased workload and stress for their colleagues, resulting in hard feelings and eroded branch cohesiveness.

Stretch Assignments
Individuals can take on projects, assignments, committee work, or responsibilities beyond their current job descriptions to stretch and develop new competencies in preparation for greater responsibilities. For example, one may identify leadership development in one’s employee development plan and then pursue leadership activities (such as volunteering to chair a committee or lead a special project) to test one’s ability to undertake such tasks outside of one’s usual work parameters.

Structure
Informal learning is supported when temporary job restructuring activities are designed with structures such as accountability for employee progress, appropriate time allotments, regular scheduling, and defined scope. Structures must be in place to ensure opportunities are provided, to raise awareness of opportunities, and to meet the needs of participants.

Support from Supervisor
Informal learning must be facilitated with support from supervisors and management who are themselves committed to an informal learning culture, so that employees are empowered to undertake development opportunities and take risks. Supportive supervisors model the importance and benefit of informal learning, encourage staff to develop learning relationships, and help employees to develop a learning plan that includes development goals. In addition, informal learning requires the full support of executive and their understanding of the need for learning options balanced with core work and the bigger organizational picture.

Temporary Assignments
Temporary assignments are opportunities to undertake a different full-time work position for a limited period of time. Participants can try new challenges (sometimes at a higher classification), become familiar with different work units, re-energize with new work, develop new knowledge and skills, and sometimes earn a higher salary. Work units can benefit from new skill sets and expertise of the temporary employee. Two drawbacks of these appointments are challenges for supervisors in temporarily back-filling the position of the employee on assignment and employees who do not wish to return to their home positions.
Temporary Job Restructuring Activities Provided
Learning opportunities are presented by providing temporary job restructuring activities, such as temporary assignments, stretch assignments, special projects, job rotations, and assignments through matrix organization.

Unfocused Learning Activities
Unfocused learning activities are those activities undertaken without rationale or structure, such as learning goals or connection to career and work.

Unfocused Mentoring
Unfocused mentoring has no scope, plan, parameters, or goals. Unfocused mentoring may be of little benefit to career development, resulting in a poor learning experience and a negative impact on the relationship between the mentor and protégé.

Use Skills Database
Utilize the existing ministry skills and opportunities database to support informal learning; specifically, employees should register their own skills on the database while supervisors use this tool to post internal work opportunities.

Well-Matched Work with Employees
Supervisors can work with employees to glean their skills and potential for development and then help them to find opportunities for learning. It is important not to set up employees to fail. Some learning opportunities, such as short-term assignments, are best matched with individuals who are capable of the work. The ministry’s skills and opportunities database can be used as a tool for matching employees with appropriate work.

Work Environment to Encourage Informal Learning
The work environment must provide time, space, support, and a variety of opportunities to enable informal learning in an organization that values learning. In a supportive environment, informal learning can become a natural part of the work, rather than adding strain to workload and resources, with a focus on the core work of branches as well as larger organizational objectives.
APPENDIX 12: EXAMPLES OF QUOTED COMMENTS FORMING THE BASIS OF EACH THEME

Learning Opportunities Provided

Acting as branch director... was a wonderful learning experience. If there were some way for managers to experience a temporary assignment as a director, even for a short while, it can be beneficial to all members of a work unit. It provides a good experience in discovering firsthand the scope and limitations of those in authority. It also gives the employee a big picture view that may be lacking in their day-to-day work life.

Within a work unit – make it open and fair for everyone, not just tapping one person on the shoulder.

Provide reverse secondments so people understand how the system works – especially as ministry becomes smaller, shrinks – broaden people’s perspectives – as well as cross-ministry opportunities.

An attitude that on-the-job informal learning is valuable, everyone can be involved (not just those on the management fast track) – not just the hand-picked – the whole organization.

Better option – bring someone in to us to train – bring in an expert to deliver to a large group in-house – how to gear content to suit audience needs (can pick and choose).

Professional reading helps individuals to keep current for themselves.

Secondments, cross-training, temporary assignments can all be positive opportunities.

Everyone’s work processes impact others; therefore, we need interactions to see the bigger picture. This helps to mitigate duplication of effort, for example, put pieces together on SharePoint – potential for savings regarding improved efficiency – working together – embedded in the culture of the organization – avoid duplication across the ministry.

My first management position was temporary opportunity – a safe environment to explore if I liked the work and could to the work.
Thoughtful Planning and Process

Formal mentoring programme – I signed up but we had no rationale or structure, no scope or intention; therefore, it resulted in no benefit to my career. I was new to government so didn’t know what to ask or how to structure it.

Matrix management works if the branch is project-based, but we are not, so the timing must be right; no lengthy terms.

Work closely with a staff member to glean his/her skills, types of work desired – shop around – skills to match with career development and experience (and formally with the skills inventory database).

I have concerns about restructuring staff where they may not be successful.

When people leave to undertake other opportunities and the remaining work is redistributed unequally – this increases stress and workload.

Skills and opportunities database – Take work there for staff to have opportunities.

All the new roles should include the support of an experienced informal mentor – as a practice, not just by chance.

In order for mentoring or peering to occur more regularly I think there should be a guide or checklist to make it more successfully on a more formal basis, i.e., what does it look like in action and what is expected of the mentor?

Counteract negativity when employees don’t want to return from temporary assignments by expanding their scope of responsibility when they return, or risk losing them – enable them to step up to the plate, if possible.

Responsible, Active Learning and Modelling

Purposeful observation – watch how others (superiors) present, think, strategize – this is to find out what works and what doesn’t – develop learning styles and approaches through others.

Communities of practice: tap into those who ignite passion; for example, my connections with those in education in other countries – informal networks for informal learning and support – provide sense of inner strength when times are tough or challenging – critical friends (thinking partners) to talk about potential.

Constantly pursue team for volunteers, encourage staff to undertake opportunities around branch – team building, business planning – push people outside of comfort
zone, get outside of the box, expand horizons – learning opportunity – increase level of engagement, get outside of job description – pays off in the long run – develop their own networks and peer relationships – knowledge has a multiplier effect, more confidence to speak out, builds character.

Some supervisors have poor management practice, but I learn from those experiences as well – I learn from behaviours.

Organizational culture – staff needs to feel supported (by peers and supervisors) in order to take on opportunities – understand how opportunities will be valued and recognized – how to map it to career development – how to get credit to propel someone to be eligible to apply for new positions – how to take on more responsibility – there are many interested, talented people – raise their profile.

Support from management – branch management, executive management in divisions, and executive management in the ministry – often tend to focus on what needs to be done daily – don’t see bigger picture (blinders on) – tensions can arise.

In one’s existing job – think of career path and trajectory – think of next job and how to position oneself – then one is prepared to take on next job – what I need to learn to take advantage of new opportunities.

The very fact that the words are being used and that some opportunities are being established is great. This will nurture a culture where people will look to establish these types of relationships with or without the more formalized opportunities. I also think that as supervisors we can support these types of relationships better. I think some training for managers on how to support, nurture, and coach employees would be valuable.

There are many projects where this is possible. It requires some cooperation and foresight on the part of staff in different work units. Also, managers must be flexible and accommodating in allowing their staff to work on projects outside of their own work units, knowing that when they have their own large project that they can then expect to draw on the expertise of other work areas in a reciprocal fashion.

Executive needs to be cognisant of the impact of informal learning on managers and the branch level. Top down goals are the priority, but sometimes employee needs to carry out the work are not met – sometimes ‘say’ is taken out of the manager’s hands.

Bring staff to meetings as observers – learn how to handle themselves in situations – high stakes meetings; for example, Minister’s meetings where senior staff speaks – prep for future meetings where staff person speaks.
Reflect and discuss info from conferences (half way between formal and informal activities) make presentations to the ministry on what we’ve learned.

While we haven’t participated in this relatively new arrangement, I would (and have) encourage staff to consider it. Supervisors should be encouraged to participate (both allow their staff to go, and to post opportunities) – it’s really a win-win. Supervisors get some extra help and a chance to try out potential future employees, and employees get to try out other jobs, expand their skills, use some latent talents, and increase their exposure and reputation as a good worker. I would suggest bringing this to Managers’ Council to hash out and share ideas, perceptions, apprehensions, and potential benefits to break down the barriers to healthy participation in this type of programme.

Something that employees can choose themselves and that is encouraged is more valuable than a formal process that is ‘done’ to employees – employees that do self-directed informal learning.

Mentor – huge time commitment (not watching the clock) – having credible sound info to share experience or long service does not mean one is a good mentor (there’s more to it than that).

Networking – insights into where organization is and where we are going – intra- and inter-ministry relationships – learning experience – perception of others – learn from it.

Positive Relationship Dynamics

Communication is very critical with everyone involved (between people involved in training (laterally) and with supervisors (vertically) – clear expectations, purpose and intention.

Willingness to build positive relationship is needed; respect for each other’s experiences and opinions and ideas (even if ideas are opposing).

Need to have the right fit for mentoring.

Communication between supervisors is needed in matrix organization.

Mutual respect and trust are prerequisites for informal learning and mentoring – not everyone has this; therefore, we sometimes need a formal mechanism (such as the EPDP) in cases where a relationship between employee and supervisor is not as likely to flourish.
People need to feel safe and respected, empowered and supported – need to feel like one can make a decision and be backed up (even if it’s not the best decision).

Purposeful, intentional communication and empowerment – watch for people who don’t walk the talk and talk at people, not with them.

Mutual respect is critical; if not, then the mentor will not be engaged (nor will the protégé).

Communication of needs and opportunities – individuals get what they need as does branch – ensure positive outcome.

**Learning Tied to Application**

EPDP – puts a structure in place to enable conversations re: what staff wants to develop – formal structure forcing us to talk about development goals – encourages thought to support activities for development.

Need an end in mind – what to achieve, for example, matrix has potential to affect government – be clear about what we want to achieve so people can benefit and have a fair chance at opportunities.

Mentor – define gaps and knowledge, focus on competencies – what can the mentor specifically provide (define why and expectations). Clearly articulate what one wants or is seeking from the mentor or peer relationship – can’t be broad. Clarify the problem or issue; create a starting point (for example, what about ‘communications’ do you want to know?) – make a plan.

Individuals should identify people whose qualities/abilities/knowledge will have benefit or will help with own career growth – seek out opportunities to learn from them, be self-starting, for example, someone who chairs meetings well, or is a brilliant writer, or a great presenter – identify what’s important for career development and learn from them.

Need a balance between employee needs and priorities and benefiting the work of the employee and branch.

I participated in a project related to another area – collaborated, but was then thwarted by organization (not the activity itself, but what the organization does to support it) – ‘tossed the baby out with the bath water’ – we present info, but don’t know where it goes – top heavy, hierarchical – miss out on potential and brains in the organization.
Purposeful, meaningful activities, so learning is meaningful, for example, don’t do an exchange for the sake of doing an exchange.

Must benefit branch and be related to the work in the branch – relevance, for example, attending conferences – share experiences with colleagues.

EPDP – elevate to acquire a broader understanding – EPDP like a professional growth plan – what employees want to explore next – identify strengths and areas needing training – preparation for future – work smarter, teamwork... one-offs don’t work – need to think about future directions – matrix budget realigned – different people from different branches with different perspectives, for example, workload review – communication should be intentional and thoughtful.

A definite end to a project – terms of reference must be really clear – start with an end in mind – developed and defined equal success and the ability to move on – how it integrates into day-to-day operations.

**Mentoring**

I was approached to be a mentor and I approached someone to mentor me. Tapping into existing relationships works better than formal government programmes. Informal mentoring continues even after the formal mentoring period is over. Positive relationships are built. Someone I know and am comfortable with.

Regular practice – consult with peers (other directors) – invaluable opportunities – make a point of this practice – development as an ongoing process. Learn from other people and from staff with expertise (for example, in project management or problem solving) – be open to ideas of those I work with and my staff – learn from those I interact with.

Formal mentoring/coaching – I was asked by my supervisor to take part in this activity. It was forced – no relationship as a foundation. Not a natural, existing relationship. It was designed for the coaches in the workshop to practise coaching. We can’t be forced to take on something extra that doesn’t fit.

Early on in career my boss was a mentor – he trusted me, gave me free reign to learn.

I have always considered my reporting relationships (both to and to me) as primary mentoring opportunities. Peer relationships have been extremely helpful in ensuring that my interpretations of workplace issues and challenges are not overly skewed by “personal” blind areas.
Informal learning takes place outside of offices and in the pods/cubicles – personal connections where we learn from each other’s work – tapping into historical knowledge.

Formal mentoring – I haven’t experienced it. I actually learn from those I work with who have skills – can learn from the good and bad. A colleague as a good learning experience – learn from staff as well – can be a grounder, helping to manage expectations – great introduction to public service – showcase strengths and weaknesses.

Mentoring/peer relationships – higher level organizational/social dynamics – how to ‘finesse’ different situations, interpersonal skills – bounce off ideas – get a ‘sober second opinion’.

Lots of peer-to-peer relationships – people with experiences to share – gain confidence – they express willingness to help – help get what I need to get where I want to go.

Job where I worked for an ADM – he adopted me in an informal mentoring relationship – took me to meetings where I wouldn’t normally go – job shadow – witness to his decision-making process at executive-level meetings – got to know other executives, their perspectives, interactions, ways of dealing with things – see the big picture, understand broader business goals (for example, service plans, accountability).

Coaching – critical friends – informal mentorship – a group of people who share honest, critical perspectives of each other’s work, offer different ways of looking at things and give pointers and clear perspectives.

Mentoring with director of another branch – needed to go to another director because I don’t have that kind of relationship with my current director – most useful learning to date – even one hour gave me a wealth of knowledge and tools to benefit my work, to communicate and problem solve.

Temporary Job Restructuring

While on a secondment, I was given an opportunity to work with a branch to provide research assistance. I learned about their work and research – appreciation of another side of how things work – working in joint partnerships with stakeholders, bigger picture work.

My first management position was a temporary opportunity – a safe environment to explore if I liked the work and could to the work.
Stretch assignments – great opportunity to develop a new skill set.

Planning meetings – see who’s got what and share the work – provides new challenges for some and relief for others.

We’re an operational branch; therefore, people don’t work independently of each other, for example, someone taking on matrix opportunities means someone else needs to pick up the work – must restructure the work so it’s balanced – sometimes we need help or temporary assignees from the rest of the ministry.

Temporary assignments – can be energizing, invigorating, bringing positive energy back into the branch (but not always).

I have a project management background. Matrix management is a natural part of the realm – the norm in that sector – helps to meet deliverables, determine what equals success – ability to stretch, not just a one-dimensional job, access to others, networking, multi-disciplinary – different strengths brought to the table – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

I believe in temporary assignments – they provide opportunity to broaden horizons, but can be negative where the individual goes off and comes back to the same role and then they have difficulty back in the main role – can result in individuals going through difficult period, can be disgruntled, especially if they want the TA to continue and it doesn’t.

Broadens perspective – staff gains insight into their own jobs – build relationships – cross-training can help staff to broaden their perspective.

Temporary assignments – can be a successful way of advancing careers, often to try a higher level (my experience) – worked out very positively for me – staff comes to me wanting a TA and I encourage it (even though it leaves gaps in staff to fill).

Matrix management within a branch, for example, if someone goes on leave, others take on duties – adds to skill set, depth and knowledge.

Ministry-wide activities – district review process – I was part of a team that visited schools, talked to school staff – organized across divisions – it was a fantastic learning opportunity. Now, maybe achievement contract reviews are an opportunity – open up ministry-wide organizational opportunities – need these to allow/facilitate staff to connect with the field – stay current – it’s energizing to connect with teachers, gain focus.
Other Comments

Experience is not necessarily equal to good mentorship.

Consistency across the ministry (lack of consistency can create barriers to learning).

Risk-taking needs to be part of mentorship; in other words, the protégé can take risks and receive constructive feedback.

Change management needs to be in place – executive needs something in place to understand all the work and who does what – where the work is – balance it out.

Mentoring should not be confined to the immediate supervisor – can include other branches and ministries – immediate supervisor may be too close/conflict of interest/not objective/feel the need to problem solve.

BCGEU\(^{13}\) collective agreement regarding study days presents an opportunity for Education Officers\(^{14}\) to see what opportunities exist.

Imposed activities impact negatively – telling someone to do something – if we don’t allow for organic development or growth, then it’s just compliance.

Succession planning – when good people are going to retire, set up a mentoring role for a year to help with developing staff (hire a replacement and assist them) – transfer the knowledge, skills, and networks. We know the wave of people is leaving (at all levels of staff) – transfer the knowledge, skills and abilities – mentorship at the retirement end – assist successors to get up to speed.

Managers need to be involved in human resources decisions – need to have a voice in these decisions – need conversations to help figure it out.

Pay employees for successful completion of internal training. Offer employees a trajectory to move through the organization indicating how gaining new skills will enable them to follow the path.

No negative impacts of informal learning – in my experience it’s more likely that formal learning exercises will be irrelevant, not good learning.

No real negatives – peer relationships and mentoring tend to be positive experiences for me – sometimes different interpersonally, but not professionally.

\(^{13}\) BCGEU is the British Columbia Government and Service Employees’ Union.

\(^{14}\) Education Officer is a BCGEU job classification for education specialists.
I have no negative examples of informal learning to provide; in fact, I took a formal accounting course that was not as positive as my informal networking experiences.

No negative example – generally positive experiences – even if just to find out how to do something or not do something.

No negative impacts of informal learning – I even learn from the negative ones.

No negative example, really - Setting up formal structures often doesn't work.