Forming an Open Circle: Informal online social learning at a UK university

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Abstract Whilst many organisations might offer employee training, this is often in the areas of compulsory or developmental training to facilitate adherence to compliance regulations, the law, or for promotional purposes. These learning interventions exist at universities in the UK. At one, there exists something a little different; a suite of informal, online social learning opportunities which aim to enhance motivation, broaden skills, and provide an informal social online developmental space for employees. At the same time, these sessions, which are voluntary to attend, facilitate different topics and ways of approaching potentially new topics for attendees. This paper will provide the rationale for these learning opportunities and analyse primary research involving a range of means to ascertain attendee satisfaction and how these learning interventions can improve employee performance, morale and interpersonal connectivity whilst raising skill levels and enhancing changes in how employees consider key workplace factors like employee relations, respect and understanding. It was discovered that while there is scope for quantitative measurement of performance improvement; at a qualitative level, new working relationships were formed, workplace skills were transferred and novel avenues of dealing with problems were promulgated.

Keywords: Workplace learning, development, online, employees, motivational, informal, voluntary.

Background

The university concerned in this research is one of the oldest established providers of distance-based higher education based in the UK, founded in 1969. It provides a range of pathways to qualifications, up to, and including, doctoral degrees. As with any comparable organisation, it has an obligation to train its staff in several aspects of their roles and in areas where promotional, developmental, and compulsory compliance learning is required to meet internal university regulations and British law. Aside from the promotional and compliance aspects of internal learning interventions, the People Services team at the university (essentially, the Human Resources division) additionally offers a series of Open Circles (OC) online social learning events which are open for all staff to attend and where attendance is voluntary. The purpose of these events is to provide an informal, inclusive, evaluation-free, and safe environment where colleagues can engage in structured, facilitated discussions around a range of workplace topics. Designed to encourage reflection, connection, and shared learning, Open Circles (OC) enables attendees to explore diverse perspectives and consider novel approaches to professional challenges, thereby supporting both individual and organisational development. The OC events were established in 2023 by the People Services team at the university in response to a recognised gap in informal colleague interaction, particularly the loss of spontaneous workplace exchanges that previously occurred in shared physical spaces. They were introduced to help reestablish those connections within a virtual environment.

The publicity promoting these events is circulated to university staff via websites, email, and learning platforms. The number of OC sessions presented to date is 82, with attendance ranging between four and 100 with a mean average of 24 attendees per session. The topics covered are chosen by one of the authors (NB), who is also the lead facilitator. Topics are driven by corporate need, missions, and priorities, and have included: Nurturing Positive Workplace Connections, Coping with Imposter Syndrome and Dealing with Change Positively in the Workplace. But this is not an exhaustive list. Each individual session last for one hour and is delivered online using a single facilitator. Events include plenary sessions and two breakout sessions, each consisting of at least three delegates. On most occasions, pre-reading is distributed with the joining instructions to provide some background to the topic being discussed. These sessions are not recorded. There are no assessments and feedback regarding the content presentations is welcomed at the end of the event.

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But there is a knowledge gap, which this study will help to fill, regarding how this series of events has impacted on university staff, their workplace performance, and personal interactions? The rationale of this study, and this resultant article is to understand, by collection and analysis of new primary data, the effects of these learning events. By asking, for example, if workplace motivation, attitudes toward colleagues and the University have altered. If methods of working have changed, and how performance was affected.

Findings are grouped into thematically similar areas to reveal the experiences of participants attending OC event(s) and if attendance changed how participants worked within the university and how they perform in the workplace. Further themes will reveal if participants have changed in the way that they relate to others – either with university colleagues or in their personal lives. The final theme will provide other inputs that participants deemed to be important. A broad range of comments were invited, whether positive or negative regarding the OC events and the associated outcomes.

Related Academic Literature

This section will offer, for background information, a selection of peer-reviewed academic sources which reflect the effectiveness, or otherwise, of both informal corporate learning and online learning for remotely based employees. The literature searches were informed by authors working within organisational learning perspectives. These, and the findings, will then be brought together for the Discussion section, below.

Workplace learning needs to be authentic and relatable for the attending employees to their role, organisation, and environment (Park, Kim, and Yu 2011). These factors make learning more effective and enjoyable. If relatable, for example, workplace informal learning can increase connectivity and achievement. Park et al show that relatable and authentic tasks can add to the understanding of roles in a collegiate way and can build attitude change positively. The OC series aims to deliver relatable learning by bringing together colleagues from the same organisation – although from different directorates – to build cross-understanding. Moreover, the use of teams and teamwork in the workplace is increasing (Lacerenza et al, 2018:528) and the OC events support and emulsify the team ethos by building team-based tasks and influencing team strategies. Lacerenza argues that building a team is not, by itself, enough to promote success, instead teams must be enthusiastic to incorporate corporate learning and an ethos of working synthesis, these again are attributes of the OC learning programme. Teams finding it difficult to gel in a formal atmosphere can find it easier to bond together if the learning environment is an informal one (2018:527) – again, just that provided by the OC series. Team members can struggle to develop the team working skills required for effective collective and individual working – and this can be exacerbated by a virtual, remote, meeting and working regime. But evidence shows that this negativity can be overcome partially by developing interpersonal relationships and laying the foundations of teamworking in an informal online setting. The range of learning opportunities offered by the OC series, was again designed to bolster inter-developmental mutual respect and understanding, outside of the more formal working environment. Synchronously, building trust and mutual respect, attributes which can be transferred to the formal workplace. Moreover, at an individual level, improvements in human cognitive processes can result from such informal learning opportunities and team building (Klein et al, 2009).

A case study concerning German craft workers revealed that informal training for the workforce can result in an uplift of 'human capital,' in that the workforce will be a more knowledgeable resource as informal leaning is more learner-centred and is not based upon top-down-driven tasks and performance measures (ILED, 2000:1-2). The report from the highly regarded Emerald Insight team, posits that when learning is self-motivated and encapsulated within an informal setting, that workers will self-invest more in that learning and derive more from it. The use of informal learning provides a break from the formal, deductive, learning processes and instead offers employees the chance to induce their learning into their working environments and into their roles. Colleagues can learn from colleagues, and the facilitation of these sessions is pivotal. Therefore, an experienced and trained facilitator is required – as is the case with OC. Moreover, pre-learning can build a resource prior to the learning so that the learner can quickly relate to what might be a short learning session – OC offers pre-learning for most events.

To provide balance, Kittel and Seufert's, approach (2023) to informal learning was a sceptical one. Arguing initially that employees struggle to incorporate informal learning and may not believe in it having any advantages for their working lives. However, following intense research involving 122 employees, Kittel and Seufert were enlightened in their discovery that employees participating in informal training – verses a control group – had a marked increase in declarative knowledge (2023:1969; see also, Klein et al, 2009, above). Also, they gained improved planning skills regarding goal setting and workplace strategies for improving performance. Although the educational resources used in their study were different in that they utilised audio and video podcasts, the material was relatable to that provided in the OC series of events. Both contained the softer skills, axiomatically, so often sought after in a workplace. In the German case studies, employees were motivated to examine their own attitudes in the workplace and to assess if any positive change could be adopted. These are similar outputs to those desired from the OC events. Kittel and Seufert additionally argue that these informal events could be brought into formal working time to further incentivise attendance.

Gerken et al (2018), argue that increased innovation and competitive awareness are required in any organisation to maintain it as a market leader. To be innovative at work, employees need to be able to learn to thrive in their roles. Outside of the formal learning, they need the opportunity to gain experience informally and of their own choice. The opportunity to learn self-reflexively, to learn from oneself and from peers is irreplaceable, they argue (2018:81). This learning builds competencies which are neither formal qualifications, skills nor developmental necessities, but, instead, are opportunities which reflect everyday encounters in the workplace, where problems and solutions can easily be recognised and shared. In the workplace where employees gather physically, these opportunities may be rare, because there may be a reluctance to seek help and advice. But in the world of remote working, these opportunities are even more distant from being available (20218:83). Gerken et al argue that for informal learning to be flexible, iterative, and up to date, feedback is an essential avenue of information for the facilitator of the informal learning to maintain interest and to be contemporarily informative. The OC strives to maintain consistent levels of feedback from learning delivery. Innovations, skills, and knowledge have all been shown to offer innovative solutions for workplace problems (2018:85) and add new thinking which has been advantageous for the employees' organisation. Avenues to establish new thinking may not normally be available to employees, but the voluntarily attended informal learning sessions have been pivotal for such new thinking to emerge. The effect of thinking though problems with peers has provided a bottom-up way of analysing a problem that is simply not available when a problem is analysed a senior level, and instructions cascaded down the command chain. The informal gathering and working together of peers with similar experiences is essential to realising experience-based issues and providing experience-based solutions (2018:93). Therefore, it can be argued that informal, voluntary learning provides the space, opportunity, and atmosphere to provide innovative and experience-driven solutions of organisational problems (2018:94). Together with being personally beneficial in its enablement of self-reflection and a meeting place for colleagues, both those working in-situ, and those working remotely.

The OC events themselves begin with a chat. Allen, Lehmann-Willenbrock, and Landowski (2014) argue that this time for breaking any ice within the informal learning space is an important attribute, Allen et al describe these as pre-talks. They argue that these are valuable in that they serve to relax attendees, helping them to prepare for the more structured parts of the learning events. Thus, they argue that pre-talks have 'spillover effects' (2014:1067) which stimulate interest in the learning itself.

Online events can draw negative considerations and these can be because of technical unreliability and feelings of isolation. However, online learning can effectively bring together colleagues from across the university, if, as Cutler, et al (2021) argue, the tools of the online medium are made available and are used professionally. In the OC series, pre-meeting materials are available in most cases, the facilitator is technically adept and is trained using such media, for example, breakout rooms, animations, and polls. Continuing the technical debate, Yarmand, et al. (2024) found that some participant preferences are not met in online learning environments. Comparing hybrid with online meetings, they argue that the chat/comments facility is often used less effectively but added that such deficiencies can be overcome speedily by a trained and experienced moderator - such moderators are used to deliver the OC events. These effects of overcoming deficiencies are further

overcome when the moderator is conversant with the organisational goals and the structure of the host organisation (2024:429-16), again, these are desired facets of the OC series.

Citing a more personable study, Clacey and Morris (2020) posit that the building of a nurture construction is necessary for effective learning, another desire of the OC events. Clacey and Morris (2020) add that this atmosphere adds to the effectiveness of the learning event and that the moderator is key to making the event a comfortable and a safe learning space – again, an aim of the moderators of OC events. Indeed, informal learning in this type of space leads to a 'playful and friendly' learning environment (2020: online). It needs to be recognised that the online learning space remains a newer learning experience and one that is fast evolving Palloff and Pratt (2013). In their enthusiasm for online social learning spaces providing informal educational opportunities, they argue that social and informal learning is essential for the development of employees in an atmosphere where they can connect with each other and develop together (172). Indeed, this study explore whether the OC series of events has created a safe and comfortable learning space, for informal and social learning which has enhanced workplace attitudes, motivation, and knowledge across the university. In doing so, it has offered an alternative to formalised training, and one which has proven beneficial to the university.

Research Methodology for the Study.

The related research study was conducted between September 2024 – August 2025. The researchers, one being the lead facilitator of the suite of Open Circles events (NB) and the other an experienced social researcher (DW), collaborating in a study to examine the effectiveness of the OC online learning events and the impacts on attendees, and the university, regarding workplace motivation, personal attitudes, and workplace performance. To that end, ethical clearance was attained via the university's Research Ethics Application system[1]. A pool of 56 potential participants was established following a general canvass of all employees who had shown an interest in attending one, or more, of the OC series of events – whether they had attended, or not. Of the voluntary participants to this study, the first level (of three levels) of enquiry involved an online survey of 17 multiple-choice questions, utilising scaled responses, ascertaining general feelings toward the OC events. The survey was responded to by 139 participants, 15% of the invited 931 participants. The completion time was a mean average of 29m:08s. Of the respondents to the survey, 67% were academic staff, 89% had attended an OC session 91% wanted to attend future sessions. This survey additionally included a call for participants to voluntarily participate in focus groups to gather more detailed, qualitative, information and 31% if survey respondents accepted this invitation.

The focus groups, and later interviews, were necessary to qualitatively examine the experiences of attendees of the OC events and to gather qualitative data not available through the administration of a quantitative survey alone. Combining focus groups and interviews together with the survey ensured a triangulation of data collection and a tangentially accumulated data set. The focus groups, where the dynamic of the group discussion (see Farnsworth and Boon, 2010) can compare with the interviews, where experiences could be gathered in the confidential space provided.

All participants, whether they took part in one, or more, levels of the study were repeatedly offered a right to withdraw without repercussion. No participant was offered a reward. All participants had received an information sheet and contact details of the researchers in case of requiring feedback or the signposting of emotional support. All participants had completed an Informed Consent form. Participants were anonymised for the study with only the researchers being aware of true identities. Aside from the information sheet, participants were further briefed as to the purpose of the study and were made aware of the possibility of the outcomes being published to a potentially global audience as the ultimate output. All data were retained securely by the authors, data would have been destroyed following an application by a participant, but this act was not requested. Interviews and focus groups lasted one hour. The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded in accordance with the ethical approval demands and the resulting generated transcript was analysed for comments with the most popular comments being captured for use in this paper. Transcripts were supplemented with handwritten field notes. Focus group attendees were asked to respect the confidentiality of those groups and not to discuss content or attendees outside of those

groups.

Aside from the popular comments, other salient inputs were noted and will be presented in this paper. A total of 139 surveys were returned, and also five focus groups were conducted consisting of a total of 29 participants, giving an average attendance of 5.8 per session. From the focus groups which used semi-structured questioning, three further unstructured interviews were conducted to allow for more private input from those participants. Interviewees were invited based on the highest level of participation in each focus group. Five interview invitations were made, and three accepted, interview opportunities were constrained by participant availability. From the focus groups and interviews 228 discussion points were obtained. Questions in the focus groups and interviews focused on what participants thought of participating in the OC events, if attending an event changed how they worked within the university, how participants now relate to other people and if OC impacted on workplace performance. Negative comments were also invited.

All participants were offered feedback as to the data collection and the resulting findings. The anonymised findings were also shared with the People Services department within the university who had initially provided consent for this study. Anonymised raw data are openly accessible[2]. The project was written up in the summer of 2025 for submission and subsequent potential publication.

Outputs from the surveys, were collated. Focus group and interview data were encoded into areas of similarity and then ranked in order of popularity and correlated with the survey outputs. These will be discussed in the Findings section below.

The Findings

These findings are grouped into thematically similar areas revealing the experiences of participants following attending OC event(s). These include if this changed how participants worked within the university and how they perform in the workplace. Further themes will reveal if participants have changed in the way that they relate to others – either with university colleagues or in their personal lives. The final theme will provide other salient inputs that participants proffered. Positive and negative comments are included. Themes are presented in order, beginning with those soliciting the most responses Within themes, discussion points are ranked commencing with the most popular. Popularity, in all cases, was established through a numerical count of individual contributions.

Working Practices at the University

The theme with the most responses concerned working practices within the university, and changes since attending the OC event(S). In a sprawling organisation of around 10,000 employees and one in which many are working remotely, contact between staff members can be a rarity. Participants reported on 117 occasions (50% of themed responses) that staff lose the ability to cross-pollinate ideas and the ability to 'pick each other's brains' (F3.1).[3] The remote working environment has led to many personal freedoms and flexibilities being enjoyed but also brings an isolation which makes those 'water cooler moments' impossible to revive (F4.2). the less formal conversations are difficult to spontaneously participate in, as F4.4 stated:

In a faceless organisation, you miss other people's faces too. You miss informal exchanges, tips, ideas, gossip, and friendliness. An informal learning space helps us to reinvent that interaction without formal expectations. OC is a friendly place, a sociable one.

Remote working also disables personal understandings of colleagues' roles and needs. It becomes difficult to read peoples 'intentions, stresses, powers, and abilities' (F1.4). Although you can read a brief description of the colleague online, you cannot 'reach that person in a personal way' (F1.2). The opportunity for informal learning means that you, once again, have a chance to see someone in their 'off-duty state' (F1.4). To chat, exchange ideas and challenge concepts – it is 'time to enjoy other company without being monitored' (F5.3).

Participants also espoused that they became more patient and understanding of colleagues and their needs. Indeed, 37% sated that they were more patient and understanding of colleagues in roles that they had not previously tried to comprehend. Moreover, participants declared that they had misunderstandings or misconceptions of colleagues' positions and difficulties, these had now become more understood, their issues and problems became more relatable. These new understandings built new respect and discoveries that often problems are shared, and similar frustrations are experienced. F54. Stated:

'I never wanted to phone her, I always knew it would be no good, and then I met her on an OC session and realised that we had the same problems and faced similar issues. We could never have openly discussed these in a formal meeting. Following the OC - we are now friends'.

Moreover, a new and 'continuous connection' (F2.2) between colleagues was reported by 23% of OC participants and 22% stated that they had changed their career priorities as a result of attending an OC event. In other words, attending an OC and meeting others provided a wider functional understanding of other roles and practices within the university and consequently participants chose to adopt some of those practices. In 7% of cases staff absorbed new yearnings for migrating to those other departments or working in the newly understood roles. After becoming aware of the breath of work within the university and the opportunities that existed, some participants chose to re-model their career development goals so that they could re-align with new potentials within the organisation. These examples illustrate that informal learning events do have the capability for opening understandings of colleagues, roles, and departments to the potential advantage of both the staff member and the university. These data corelate with the study's bespoke online survey which revealed that 75.2% of respondents agreed that OC has improved their connectivity with the university.

Workplace Performance

In a remote working environment, the OC sessions have been 'fundamental' (F2.5) in reducing the effects of silo working and misunderstanding colleagues' frustrations and problems, amounting to 86% of contributors to this theme. 'If you have no understanding of what is happening in another silo, you cannot address your own performance to be able to help that colleague' (F2.5), and continues:

The 'great thing about [OC] sessions is that you can learn with and through each other. In a formal meeting you would not chat in this way, it would simply be unacceptable. In OC you can share and believe in each other. Imagine doing that in a formal training session where you are being assessed – unimaginable'.

Furthermore, 65% agreed that being aware of the working practices of others was key to being able to forecast difficulties and then being able to troubleshoot these. As F1.5 states:

'Once you know the issues that others are regularly facing from OC, and the problems in dealing with these, you can, yourself, adapt and change. You can head-off the problem once you are more aware that it is coming down the road. You can empathise with other members of staff and help them, whether, or not, they know that you are doing that. It is selfish really, because if you can ease their problems, then your get eased as well'.

A senior manager cited that using the OC model of events has helped her overcome performance issues in her team (INT1). By using elements of informal positivity management techniques, the manager was able to overcome a post-COVID malaise which had crept into the teams working culture. This was facilitated by improvising methods of 'open' thinking (INT1) from the OC events. Another senior manager espoused the need for elements of motivational activities promulgated within the OC series to be incorporated into the university's career development and staff appraisal programme – the formal annual career development scheme for all university staff (INT1).

Moreover, 51% espoused that if you feel closer to colleagues, despite working remotely, then you feel the need to work more closely with them. A closer working relationship can be built and maintained following meetings with colleagues through an OC event and networking again later (F1.5; F2.4; F3.4 are examples). This corresponds with outcomes from the survey which indicate that

82% of respondents felt that OC offered professional value – thus OC can be a significantly valued working relationship enhancement tool.

In a slightly different respect, OC was seen as valuable by 34% in that the events provided teamworking, interpersonal understandings, relaxation methods and leadership skills – among others. Among this group, 33% became more aware of their own impact on others in the workplace and how pivotal they are in providing services to others. Another 33% were also aware that they were 'not working alone' (F2.3; INT2). these reflections allowed participants to adjust their own styles of working and deliverable expertise so that they could more accurately provide skills, knowledge and even leadership to others in a timelier way. Understandings all achieved through facilitation of OC events.

Personal Relationships: the university and in Private

The largest proportion of participants to this theme (92%) reported that OC events brought people together and provided an alternative to facing the rigours of remote working. This newly experienced togetherness was also instrumental in overcoming the loneliness experienced by working remotely. 'It has broadened my experience and appreciation of other people' (F2.3). You often feel so alone – it is so cool and good just to be informal with someone that you work with, even though you never knew them before that session (F3.3). Moreover, 81% within this theme agreed that although working remotely, the OC events have increased cultural awareness among colleagues.

'I never knew that so many different people had such similar problems' (F4.2).

'It is good to know that personal experiences can bring us together, even when we are so far apart' (F5.3; INT3).

Certainly, 43% stated that OC has given them enhanced confidence, not only in the workplace, but in their personal lives. 'I had forgotten how to connect, and that deflated me, dented my confidence, until OC helped to bring that back' (F5.2). A further 42% indicated that they had not enjoyed the opportunity to chat with a colleague until they attended an OC. Additionally, 38% stated that their mental health had improved because of attending OC sessions. There were also experiences proffered that OC events had informally improved understandings of diversity and enhanced opportunities for inclusion with people from diverse cultures (F5.2; INT3). Moreover, the topic of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) being proliferated on a top-down basis does not always result in acceptance of the principles. Ideas from the OC events have also directly influenced a support network for women in the delivery of its objectives (INT3). The OC series has additionally provided an opportunity to informally promote and discuss EDI issues and effectively influence cross-culturation and understanding (F 5.1; INT3).

In participants' personal lives, 35% related that they used the materials from OC events as discussion points with friends, family, and colleagues, whilst a further 11% stated that OC influenced them to meet more with others and 7% stated that they had made new friends. Relating these data to the survey, 83% agreed that OC had helped enhance their personal lives.

Other Findings

Of potential corporate interest will be that 85% of participants revealed that their sense of belonging to the university had been enhanced. The OC sessions brought a feeling of bonding with colleagues, and they created a 'level playing field' for employees to 'be themselves' and 'express themselves in a safe space' (F2.1; F4.5; F3.2 respectively). As F3.5 and INT2 stated:

'I feel closer to the university knowing whom I am working with. Crazy as it sounds, you just don't get to meet people in other and formal sessions'.

Moreover, the perceived safety of the OC space for discussion and confidential anecdotes was apparent on many occasions. In this area, 47% sated that they felt the OC to be a safe and confidential space, this aligned with the survey which correlated with 97% in agreement therein. From that survey, 54% had attended more than one session and 88% would recommend an OC to a colleague. One participant (F4.2 and 2.5 concurred) declared that OC was:

'A safe space where I can afford to reveal my own vulnerabilities, and it has to be safe for me to do that'.

Participants also voiced that they felt free to express their own ideas without the fear of ridicule or having to conform to the expectations of a meeting or the facilitator. One participant, F5.3, said:

'In a learning organisation I have learned to voice my own opinion and not be afraid of doing so. It helps to beat my imposter syndrome'.

Or, as F5.1 stated:

'I am happily in the middle of a Venn diagram; between safety, collegiality, and informality – and it feels good'.

In other comments, 7% declared that the breakout room technique acts to gently introduce attendees, and this facet is not normally available in tightly controlled, formal online setting. Furthermore, 6% felt that they were not being judged as they might be in formal sessions and that they were comfortable with this, it made them feel at ease. An 11% of contributors said they would like to see a follow-up to the OC sessions, and this could take several routes. Perhaps through an online group, delivered via an app similar to Microsoft Engage, whereby a continuation discussion could be moved online - although, this approach would require moderation and corporate consent. Another idea was to discuss a wider range of topics within the OC events, or for attendees to introduce topics themselves. A rota of leaders was also suggested as was an online resource where materials from the discussions could be archived. However, this facet could bring copyright problems into the fore. Ultimately, some contributors recommended that physical meetings in safe places would be a natural outcome of the online OC sessions – this was popular with 6% of respondents. Other participants, (F4.1 and F4.8) had attempted to use the OC model in their own teams but were yet to achieve success.

It is evident, therefore, that the OC events provided a safe and confidential space in which freedom of expression was enjoyed and the range of discussions were helpful in both the professional and personal lives of many of the attendees of OC.

Discussion

Although the authors were open to understanding all aspects of OC feedback from the participants, including negative aspects, the outcomes from the OC learning events were overwhelmingly positive for both the learners and for the university. However, it is noteworthy that this research is limited in ascertaining measurable latent performance outputs from the attendees. Therefore, this study recommends a subsequent study to measure the workplace performance of OC attendees in both the short- and long-term, post-attendance of OC, and in consideration of how many events are attended. Whilst the authors have qualitatively collated the feelings of attendees, their measurable performance in the workplace remains, to date, untested. Moreover, this study has its limitations in that 29 participants contributed via five focus groups and three interviews – as with any study, the sample could always have been larger.

From the sample studied, it was evident that the learning provided relatable and situationally beneficial interventions for staff who are feeling isolated because of working remotely or being in a position whereby they do not enjoy a full understanding of other roles and functions. This links with findings from Park, Kim, and Yu (2011). The bonding that Park et al discuss, is clearly visible in the yearning for further meeting and interaction voiced by the participants. That attendees felt comfortable and safe to discuss a range of subjects and indeed reveal their own vulnerabilities is a telling endorsement of how effective the OC sessions are at providing a progressive learning space.

Many posited that teamworking was beneficial in that whilst they were working with comparative strangers, and for the first time, relationships were speedily formed and working understandings moulded. This aligns with Lacerenza et al (2018) in that enhanced teamworking is both beneficial and necessary. Furthermore, an abundance of mutual understanding and respect was formed through a myriad of new contacts and relationships developed at the OC sessions (see: Clacey and Morris, 2020). These were, as Klein, et al (2009) argue, key progressive drivers in improving the cognitive aspects of attendees by building new levels of respect and comprehension among colleagues who, previously, had not met or formed a relationship. These relationships were built through the informal, but developmental, environment of the OC sessions which also developed what ILED (2000) cited as human capital – those beneficial opportunities to gain experience from each other, whilst, at the same time, constructing trust and respect among colleagues. The informal setting being the catalyst and the safe environment for birthing and nurturing both working relationships and new friends, and exchanging ideas, support and troubleshooting problems together.

Kittel and Seufert's (2023) quasi-experimental approach was initially pessimistic regarding the potential for workplace informal learning. But their latter positivity can be seen as reflected in this study. The OC events have proven to be beneficial for employees within this study to examine their own attitudes and to challenge themselves within a range of situations. These events have widened cultural appreciations and provided both materials for discussion in the workplace and home settings and provided ideas as a bedrock of cultural understanding and discussion away from the place of learning. Indeed, aligning with Kittel and Seufert's findings, OC is a popular learning intervention among its attendees especially as learners herein are asking for more of these sessions and the opportunity to continue networking after the events have concluded. The informal nature and voluntary attendance of the OC events are in keeping with previous findings of the Gerken et al (2018) study. They argued that new and innovative thinking can be a positive outcome of voluntary, informal learning interventions which cultivate novel approaches and the opportunity to cross-pollinate ideas from colleagues who have faced the same or similar problems. Without this informal learning space, attendees would be more reticent to share what might be deemed unimportant or irrelevant material and ideas in more formal meetings and training sessions (see Palloff and Pratt, 2013). Formal training would often involve a fixed agenda or assessment criteria which would result in little time to develop personal ideas, characteristics and allow the proliferation of working relationships – or more friendly ones.

Cutler et al (2021) cited the need for professional leadership in online training and Landowski (2014) asserted the need for breaking the ice early in learning sessions to fully develop learning and utilise the time available. The facilitators of OC sessions use these techniques and participants have voiced that any 'ice' is quickly broken using an early breakout session which, although short, gets people talking early and deflates concerns whilst increasing confidence levels. Traits which OC attendees have confirmed above. Furthermore, the chat facility has been observed to be regularly and positively utilised as well (INT1) in accordance with the requirement found by Yarmand, et al. (2024).

Conclusion

Whilst the authors accept that further research is required to ascertain any measurable performance outputs as a result of OC attendance, evidentially many of the desired outcomes cited in previous peer-reviewed research are being met by the delivery of the OC informal, workplace learning events within the university. Many positive experiences are noted above and whilst these are a representative sample of those solicited during this 2024-5 research study, there are many more, and these are archived and available for future research. These informal events are, at the time of writing (summer 2025) not regarded by the university as either required, or even recognised, staff training events. But they are popular and are being replicated across departments at the university by team leaders and managers – albeit with varying levels of success. Therefore, there remain two further ways to investigate the potential for innovative, informal workplace learning events. The first is to initiate new research regarding performance measurables for those who have attended OC sessions, in comparison with those who have not. A second method might be to widen the use of the OC model into further and more diverse organisational facets to ascertain how the OC model can be used and how successful it is, or is not, on a trial or pilot basis.

But what has already been ascertained from this study looking at the qualitative effectiveness of OC learning is that there are many positive benefits, especially when staff are working within the necessity of remote working. Attendees have revealed that they have found new ways of working, established new collegiate relationships, and also discovered the business needs and desires of people they work with – but have never met, online or otherwise. Participants to this study have espoused that they desire more informal networking, more OC-style learning, and the need for online and even physically meeting to develop ideas and relationships. The informality of OC events is valuable in that there is not a fixed agenda, no formal assessment, no monitoring of performance and no restrictions to thinking and discussion. Bonds have been formed and methods of troubleshooting and workarounds shared and utilised. Attitudes have changed and experienced amended values – all in an informal learning atmosphere. That one of the world's leading universities should have this informal learning environment for the development of its staff is a notable achievement and perhaps one that should be cultivated more widely. This study demonstrates that voluntary, informal online learning fosters cross-departmental relationships and improves employee morale in remote university settings

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