

Wash, Rinse, Repeat: Addressing Learning In The Workplace



Understanding learning allows you to design training that sticks

Although methods of learning vary from situation to situation, subject-to-subject and person-to-person the opportunity to learn occurs all of the time. People learn through formal study, casual observation, hands-on experience, social interaction, cognitive processing, directed reading and more. When you understand how learning works you can design better learning opportunities for your employees.

Remember to Wash Your Hand

Within the workplace productivity, safety and success are significantly impacted by how well you are able to transfer knowledge to your workers. Learning is an everyday activity and today needs to be consistently identified as a priority in most workplaces. Recently we shared an article in the HR insider that presented information about concerns of IT executives in Canada, Are IT Concerns Impacting Your. Among their concern was that the rapid changes in IT technology made it difficult for their IT workers to stay up-to-date. Even learning that seems basic, such as getting people to remember a new procedure or to wash their hands is boosted when training sticky.

Technology and Learning

Understanding how the brain learns and exploring the technology that enables learning, have become popular topics of late. New technology has enabled us to watch the brain learn and change. With technology not only are we creating more information and knowledge than at any time previously they are also providing opportunities to access information more rapidly. As a result we need to find ways to efficiently learn and process all we are learning on an ongoing basis.

Brain Plasticity

There is evidence emerging from neuroscience on the brain's plasticity. This means we can continue to learn throughout our lives by overwriting old learning and creating new pathways for learning. Connectivist learning theory, often referred to as learning for a 'digital age', proposes that learning occurs based on how we connect to learning; through our experiences, feelings and technology. Constructivist theory of education posits that we are constantly constructing our knowledge through filters of experiences and interpreting information based on what we know already and how it connects with what we are learning. These two theories suggest that how we are connected to and feel when learning impacts how well we learn. In other words, we need to connect what we need to learn to what we already know and see how it is relevant if we want to improve learning and retention.

Your employees are always learning, which can be a good thing or a bad thing. If you are not actively enabling learning, whether that is related to procedures, customer service, technology or hand washing, the learning may not stick.

Relevance, Surprise and Repetition Are Tickets to Learning

The ability to effectively transfer information to a person or group of people in a way that they can understand, process and apply is a vital skill:

Relevance, Surprise and Repetition Help Make Learning Stick.

1) Relevance: Most people will not learn if what they are learning has no relevance to them. Consider Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs; Physiological, Safety, Belonging, Esteem and Actualization. If what you want someone to learn cannot be connected to these needs it is less likely they will learn it. Sometimes your employees will make these connections themselves but ultimately if you help make the connection you help make it stick.

2) Surprise: Most people learn when the information grabs their attention. If you provide people with information that is relevant in an interesting, surprising or novel way they are more likely to take notice. This means that putting up a sign reminding people to wash their hands may work initially when the sign is new, but soon after information will lose its surprise.

3) Repetition: Our brains may be plastic but they take time to re-write and develop new neuro-pathways. Repetition that is relevant and sometimes surprising makes us pay attention and that reinforces new neuro-pathways.

Common Training Methods:

Some of the most common ways organizations train employees includes: Technology based learning; Group presentations and discussion; Simulation (including technology and role play); Hands-on on the job training; Mentors and coaches; Game play; Case Studies; Educational materials including reading, video and audio recordings. Within each of these methods there are opportunities for relevance, surprise and repetition. Varying training methods on a regular basis and incorporating different methods of learning increases opportunities for surprise and repetition.

Story telling is a great way to make content memorable. Instead of focusing on facts and statistics, which some people might find interesting, include interesting stories that make people stop and take notice. A story on the different types of germs that live on peoples hands, perhaps posting a video on the internal company website and then a new sign in the washroom reminding people to wash their hands help make the lesson sticky. If you leave the same sign up for 3 months your customers may take notice but the chances are your employees will not.

If you want learning to stick you will need to make it relevant, novel and repeat it frequently especially during initial learning and then intermittently thereafter. Incorporating different methods of training over the same time period helps with stickiness.

Taken together this means that your information and training should be built into the workweek on a regular basis. You do not need to do this alone. Get your employees involved in the process by asking them to share reminders, tips, images, stories and more over multiple channels of information once per week. Make it fun and collaborative and it can become part of the culture in your organization.