

Barriers to Learning to Learn

Previous columns have explored how to facilitate the process of learning to learn, covering knowledge acquisition, the taxonomy of knowledge, and tools such as mind mapping and document deconstruction.

While it is clear that continuous learning is essential, there are many barriers to achieving it. The most common barriers are explored in this column and, wherever possible, hints and suggestions on how to overcome them are provided.

Procrastination

Natural, almost instinctive, procrastination is the “Never do today what you can leave for tomorrow” philosophy. The definition of “tomorrow” varies in many distinct cultures and locations. It may not mean the day after today, but rather an unspecified future time.

Regardless of the specifics, procrastination is a powerful enemy of progress and success. It takes considerable discipline to overcome the temptation to avoid doing now what needs to be done now. A quick Internet search on “techniques to avoid procrastination” will reveal many sources

Ed Gelbstein, Ph.D., 1940-2015

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of tactics that can help overcome the temptation to procrastinate. The key is to do the search and start taking action—now.

The Lazy Brain

While the brain accounts for, on average, only 2 percent of body weight, it consumes 80 percent of the typical person’s energy intake and is amazingly busy controlling everything people do, feel, say and think.

Nature has made provisions for this by forcing the brain to rest in several ways, including dozing, sleeping and building routines. Routines are like a railroad track causing the brain to follow well-defined paths created over the years to reduce its workload, a process referred to as “unconscious competence.”

The process of learning pushes the brain toward unknown, uneven paths and only repetition, going over this new path many times, will reinforce it to the point that it becomes usable and retained in long-term memory. This represents a progression from unconscious incompetence (where the learner does not know what he/she does not know) to conscious incompetence (a stage at which the new knowledge has not yet been fully acquired).

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If the progression does not continue beyond conscious incompetence, the learning will be quickly forgotten (e.g., a foreign language learned many years ago and only very slightly retained now). Short-term memory is quickly erased (e.g., the common experience of searching for car keys or your spectacles used just moments earlier).

Even if conscious competence has been reached, it will degrade if not maintained by continuous practice as long-term memory is overwritten by other topics. Common knowledge suggests that riding a bicycle is a skill that, once learned, is never forgotten; common wisdom would suggest not putting this to the test in heavy traffic.

To find out more about the mechanisms of the brain, the book *Brain Rules*¹ is a good start. Two other authors who have made valuable contributions to the processes of thinking and learning are Edward de Bono and Tony Buzan. Discovering more about their work can be rewarding. After all, the human brain does not come with an owner's manual, so it is not always obvious how to make the best use of its capabilities.

Work/Life Balance

Job satisfaction, a sense of creating value and being recognized are vital to remain engaged in one's work. Outside work, each of us has a different set of values, aspirations, commitments and relationships. When all these are balanced, quality of life is enhanced.

Learning a new topic disrupts this balance and requires compromises that, left unresolved, could turn into stress, even when such learning is essential for professional survival.

The learning process is most likely to be successful when the individual is organized and motivated and maintains a healthy lifestyle that includes quality sleep and physical exercise. Ancient Romans advocated a *mens sana in corpore sano* (sound mind in a healthy body). These days, neurologists and psychologists fully agree.

Difficulty in Making Time for Concentration and Thinking

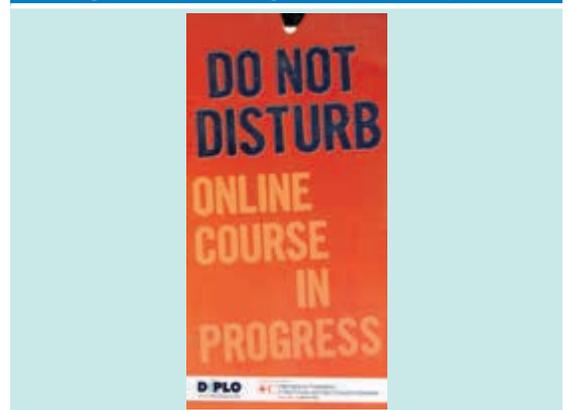
Perhaps among the prevalent challenges in many societies is the relentless pressure in the workplace to attend meetings, handle assorted administrative trivia, be contactable 24/7, and respond immediately to email and quickly to mini-crises. This creates an environment of artificial urgency.

For those who wish to learn from their home, the challenges are just as demanding: the domestic timetable of events (dinner, visitors, domestic activities) and, most important, human needs for contact and support from the other members of the household.

However, without making time to study and think (finding time is unlikely), learning becomes impossible.

One of the organizations with which the authors have collaborated provides online training to diplomats in full-time employment. The study modules are designed to offer compelling content in a concise way to allow their completion in a relatively short time. Hundreds of copies of the card shown in **figure 1** have been distributed to the courses' students, who are also advised to discuss and agree on their time needs with their bosses and their families.

Figure 1—Making Time to Study Aid



Source: DiploFoundation. Reprinted with permission.

Distractions and Interruptions

Most people are inundated with requests on a daily basis (“When will you be home?,” “Do you have a minute?”). These requests, albeit legitimate and warranted, interfere with the state of mental flow that learning requires. Sometimes it is easy enough to ask if the request can wait until later, sometimes not. A “do not disturb” sign is often useful. Ultimately, it is up to individuals to protect their learning time from disruptions, which requires good skills in the art of saying “no.” An Internet search will point to many sources concerning this skill.

Creating an appropriate level of isolation and concentration while learning may require the learner to exercise the willpower to go offline and avoid all devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, email). Unfortunately, many appear incapable of doing so. This inability is common enough to have acquired a name (or two): fear of missing out (FOMO) and the inability to switch off (ITSO) syndrome.

Poor or No Support at Work or Home

There are many permutations of factors that support or hinder learning work-related tools and techniques. In an ideal situation, the organization has policies that encourage individuals to acquire such skills during working hours.

These may include lunchtime or early evening seminars or workshops, encouraging access to online learning material (the company’s own or someone else’s), group discussions on specific topics, and in-house training led by an instructor or facilitator. Of course, these may be matched by a formal requirement for the employee to acquire and retain the appropriate certifications.

Other, less supportive organizations consider the acquisition of new knowledge the employee’s personal responsibility and do not provide any of the learning options mentioned earlier or even consider supporting participation at evening classes, conferences or association meetings, e.g., the local

ISACA® chapter meetings. Trying to study in the home environment is not always ideal unless there is a room where the learner can hide for hours without the risk of alienating the rest of the household.

Quality of the Didactic Material

The ideal didactic material should be concise, contain “just in time” rather than “just in case” material, make extensive use of illustrations, be structured in manageable modules and include tests to validate the extent to which the reader has comprehended the module.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as some of the material is designed to be a 500-page or more comprehensive guide to a topic. The content may be brilliant, but going through it is akin to reading a dictionary as if it were a novel. While mind mapping and document deconstruction may help in reformatting the material into digestible chunks, the learning process is handicapped when the authors of the material are unfamiliar with how to construct didactic material.

Personal Engagement to Learning

This is absolutely essential. The Nigerian proverb “Not to know is bad; not to wish to know is worse”² is worth bearing in mind at all times by those who wish to keep their knowledge fresh, up to date and relevant to their professional activities. The same is true, of course, for material related to personal interests, ranging from changes in taxation legislation to the arts.

For those who have such engagement, there are fascinating opportunities to explore some exceptional material available, mostly free of charge, from several massive open online course (MOOC) providers.

Personal Learning Skills

Part 1 of this column, which was published in the *ISACA® Journal*, volume 3, 2015, discussed the ways in which people acquire information and what

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it takes to turn it into knowledge that can be applied to specific situations. The reader is invited to reflect and experiment with various formats such as audio books, online learning, visual material, interacting with others, and personal trial and error to identify which of these, or which combination of them, is the most effective for the individual.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the reader will accept the dual notions that acquiring and maintaining skills are essential for professional survival. If so, doing nothing is not a real option. The reader is

encouraged to develop a personal learning plan and put it into effect. Ideally, the result will be the realization that acquiring new knowledge is a pleasure, not a problem.

Endnotes

- 1 Medina, J.; *Brain Rules (Updated and Expanded): 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Home, Work, and School*, Pear Press, USA, 2014, www.brainrules.net
- 2 Boston University Pardee School of Global Studies, African Studies Center, Massachusetts, USA, www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/resources/np/