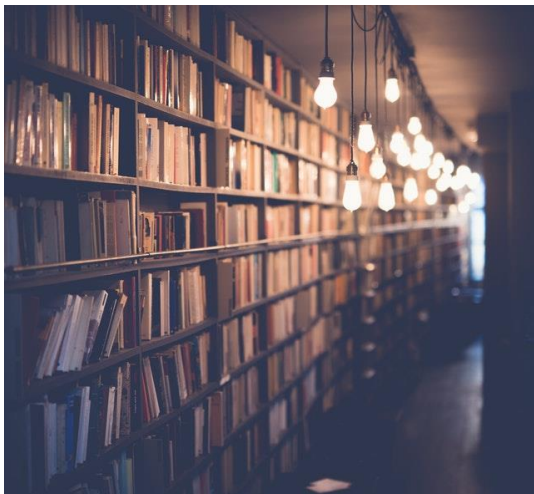


Take Control of Your Learning at Work

Human beings have an astonishing ability to learn, but our motivation to do so tends to decrease with age, particularly in adulthood. As children, we are naturally curious and free to explore the world around us. As adults, we are much more interested in preserving what we learned, to the point of resisting any information — and data — that challenges our views and opinions. Unsurprisingly, there is now big demand for employees who can demonstrate high levels of “learnability,” the desire and ability to quickly grow and adapt one’s skill set to remain employable throughout their working life. This demand has been turbocharged by the recent technological revolution.

Indeed, one of the major cultural and intellectual changes of the digital age is that information has been commoditized, and access to it is now ubiquitous. With the right question (and WiFi), we can all pretty much find the answer to anything, so long as we are able to judge if the answer is true — which in a world of fake news and dirty data is no small feat. The main career consequence of this is that knowledge and expertise have been devalued. What you know is now less relevant than what you can learn, and employers are less interested in hiring people with particular expertise than with the general ability to develop the right expertise in the future, particularly if they can do it consistently and across a wide range of roles. Note that our interest in people who can learn how to learn is not precisely new. Over a century ago, the French psychologist Alfred Binet, who pioneered the



application of modern pedagogy and child development science to formal education, observed that “our first job was not to teach [the students] the things which seemed to us the most useful to them, but to teach them how to learn.” Fast forward to today and Binet’s perspective is perhaps more current than it ever was.

When we can all retrieve the same information, the key differentiator is not access to data, but the ability to make use of it; the capacity to translate the available information into useful knowledge. Ironically, a surplus of information can create a poverty of knowledge. It requires curiosity and a hungry mind to resist digital distractions and have the necessary discipline to learn. Unlike our evolutionary ancestors, who lived in a world of relatively low environmental stimulation where attending to novelty was rewarded, it is now more advantageous to ignore new information than to absorb it. Just like our evolved inclination to maximize caloric intake is no longer adaptive — but maladaptive — in a world of abundant and cheap fast food, our evolved predisposition to consume as much novel information as possible is no longer advantageous in the age of Facebook, Twitter, and clickbait news. Kim and Kanye are the intellectual equivalent of burgers and pizza — hard to resist, but with limited nutritional value for our hungry minds.

To make matters worse, today’s jobs and careers often handicap our ability to learn, demanding consistent levels of high-performance and focusing our energies on attaining results rather than broadening our skillset. Instead of genuinely promoting a learning culture, most employers obsess over results, demanding higher and higher levels of efficiency and performance, which can be the biggest barrier to curiosity and learning. Individuals looking to overcome this challenge should consider these four suggestions:

Pick the right organization. Most people don't include "learning potential" as one of the key criteria when they choose their job, but you should. Of course, your learning potential is partly dependent on your own personality, with traits like learnability, curiosity, and openness to experience being key. Unsurprisingly, intelligence is also a very important quality. But regardless of these qualities, your propensity to learn will be strongly influenced by the type of job, career, and organization you pick. For example, research shows that enriching learning environments play a critical role in shaping our experiences and helping us develop new knowledge. Companies like Google, Unilever, and Edmunds.com have successfully put in place cultures to unlock employees' curiosity and reward their formal and informal learning. To create a learning culture, organizations must value psychological safety, diversity, openness to ideas, and reflection time, all of which can hinder short-term results.



Set aside time for learning. One of the biggest barriers to learning is time, particularly when you are focused on delivering top levels of performance. This is also true for your boss, so you cannot expect them to devote much time to your learning journey. In fact, chances are your boss is too busy to set aside time to learn themselves. It is therefore essential that you own your own learning process, managing your professional growth and development. If you are waiting to be told what to learn, you are not being proactive about your learning. Even if you are not given a specific time to achieve this, it is up to you to set aside the necessary time to learn.

Ignore your strengths. Although it is convenient to pick jobs that are a good fit for our strengths — and talent is largely personality in the right place — we can only develop new strengths by addressing our weaknesses, so if you want to acquire skills you don't have, or develop new expertise, you will inevitably have to focus on what you don't know rather than what you do know. This takes courage — and support from your employer. At times, finding a skill adjacency can be a compromise: leveraging some of your existing capabilities to learn new things or acquire valuable experiences in a new area. Remember: even if it makes you a relatively worse performer to begin with, it will improve your ability to learn new things and absorb new types of training, expanding your range of strengths.

Learn from others. Too often we equate learning with formal training or education, but some of the biggest learning opportunities are organic or spontaneous, and this is also true at work. They involve learning, not from structured courses or training materials, but from others: e.g., peers, colleagues, bosses, and especially mentors. In fact, whereas formal learning interventions tend to boost only the acquisition of specific content or subject matter expertise, spontaneous and social types of learning are more likely to result in the formation of new habits and practical behaviors. It has also been noted that most of the problems we encounter during our everyday working lives are ill-defined rather than well-structured, so they do not have an objectively correct solution, requiring adaptive rather than technical learning. However, this requires seeking the right feedback and being receptive to others' suggestions, including criticism. Most of us are so busy trying to demonstrate competence that we forget to learn, and we perceive asking for suggestions as a sign of weakness. And if you have limited opportunities to learn from others, you can always learn something about yourself: how do others perceive you, including your talents and performance? Answering these questions will help you identify gaps, as well as future learning areas.

Importantly, learning should never stop. Regardless of your past achievements and your present level of expertise, your future depends on your ability to keep learning

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