



The Memory Game – Improving Learning Retention

How many times do you forget where you put your car keys? Or do you forget why you walked into the kitchen? Our memories can be tricky to manage. We want to believe that what we put in them is stored safely, and when we cannot retrieve the information we blame ourselves for the faulty recall. The reality is that our mind is not the fool-proof safe we imagine it to be, but we can help it along when it comes to improving the retention of newly acquired knowledge or skills.

Learning happens through different methods. We have instant, powerful emotional learning experiences David Sousa¹ refers to as “flashbulb memories,” which cause instantaneous and long-lasting memories of an event. This information is permanently retained in memory without any effort or choice.

On the other end of the spectrum is information that is presented during learning related activities. These memories suffer a natural decline in retention. In 1885 Hermann Ebbinghaus discovered the exponential nature of forgetting. Through repeated tests over various time periods he studied the memorization of nonsense syllables and defined the Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve². What he found was that memory retention was relative to the strength of the memory and time.

Applied to Modern Day Learning and Development

“Relative to the strength of the memory”- What Ebbinghaus discovered is that material will stick longer in memory if it is made more relevant and meaningful to the participant. This component is especially important as we want to ensure that all curricula are not only relevant but presented in a meaningful way. This encourages participants to relate to the material and makes it easier to grasp.

“Time” – This factor is presented by Ebbinghaus as a multiplier. His learning curve initially demonstrates that the more time elapses the more material an individual forgets. His follow-up experiments demonstrate that if you can practice learned skills/recite material at sufficient intervals then you can increase your retention.

The key to any successful training session is information retention. The key to retention is ensuring that the material participants are learning is relevant to them and that the curriculum is presented in a way that is also relevant and engaging.

Finally, we must also follow up all training with reinforcement activities and material on a regular basis to reinforce what participants have learned. Oftentimes, once training is delivered it is considered finished. Achieving return on a training investment means making sure participants are recalling, reusing and remembering what they have studied.

Even our memories need to be worked out every now and then to guarantee they are working at top form. For a solid training program, make certain that your participants get the most out of any training and ensure they are practicing their newly learned skills!

(1) Sousa, David A. (2006). How the Brain Learns. Third Edition. Thousand Oaks, California. Corwin Press.

(2) Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology -- Ebbinghaus (1885/1913)