



How to Help Employees Embrace Continuous Learning

April 4, 2014

Continuous learning at work has never been more important. In fact, it's not just important, it's *imperative* if you want to grow as a business.

It helps your organisation tap into the full potential of your employees, but it also helps them tap into their full potential as people.

For your employees, studying the latest trends, undertaking research and constantly learning new information allows them to come up with new and innovative ideas which should collectively translate into a competitive edge for your business.

All of this should be a no-brainer. Any company with big ambitions needs a workforce that is geared towards challenging itself and going from strength to strength. So why is continuous learning so hard? Why do some many organisations struggle to keep their employees current and learning throughout their careers?



The main reason is that creating a continuous learning environment isn't a process problem, it's a cultural shift that requires management to actively work towards **fostering a culture of continuous learning** across the company. Top performing companies have a deep understanding of the importance of continuous learning within their organisations.

It's easy to say that any real change has to begin with the management, but culture changes (particularly those involving learning and development) in particular have to start from the top. To be effective, you have to be convinced of the importance of the change and be clear about the benefits. Along the way you will need smart and knowledgeable managers who are bought into the goal and familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of their teams to come up with learning suggestions pertinent to them.

If you're thinking that you know all this already and have come across similar advice many times before, here are some suggestions to help you move from knowing to doing. Here's how you encourage continuous learning in your employees, and thus give yourself the best possible chance to set your company up for long-term and sustainable success.

Define Learning Objectives and Goals

There's a lot to learn. But only a fraction of what's available out there is pertinent to your specific goals. Even within your niche, the learning needs of your staff will differ drastically from team to team. As part of the process of implementing these changes, you need to be very clear about the direction you want each of your teams to progress in, and accordingly **devise strategies** to make this happen. You may not have to **define an entire curriculum**, but you do need to know what you're aiming for with regards to outcomes.

Important questions you need to ask yourself:

- What exactly do you want your teams to learn?
- How much time can you afford to spend training?
- How much money are you willing to spend training?
- Is this going to be an ongoing commitment?
- What are you hoping continuous learning will do for your teams?
- What competitive edge do you want them to gain from it?

Not all teams need to be learning all the time, but some will need to invest in education much more than others. For example, if you run a company that creates mobile phone apps, you certainly need your engineers and creative designers to do a lot of on-the-job reading and learning. If you're in another field that changes at a more predictable (or slower) pace like accounting, you can probably rely on quarterly or annual updates.

At the end of the day, it's up to you to decide what the learning you have in mind for your staff will look like and



how it will benefit your business.

Make Resources for Learning Available

Don't expect your staff to read work-related material in their leisure time, like on the weekends or after going home. That's not going to happen. People lead full lives, and your creative people especially need to switch off completely in order to be productive the next day.

Rather than fight an uphill battle against human nature, focus on incorporating reading and learning sessions into normal office hours. You can ask your teams, depending on their roles and job responsibilities, to spend an hour or two every few days towards this end.

You will also need to ensure that you don't swamp them with so much work that they aren't able to find any time for this much-needed reading. Make sure they have the time as well as a good Internet connection for this purpose. If they need to join a library for weekly trips, encourage them to do so and subsidise their memberships. See if there are any courses that they can attend to improve their skills and knowledge.

However, you need to give them clear directions about what you want them to be reading and learning about. Learning is a time-consuming process. And if you aren't clear about what you want your staff to achieve from it, you could be wasting precious company hours asking your people to browse the Internet on vague or irrelevant things.

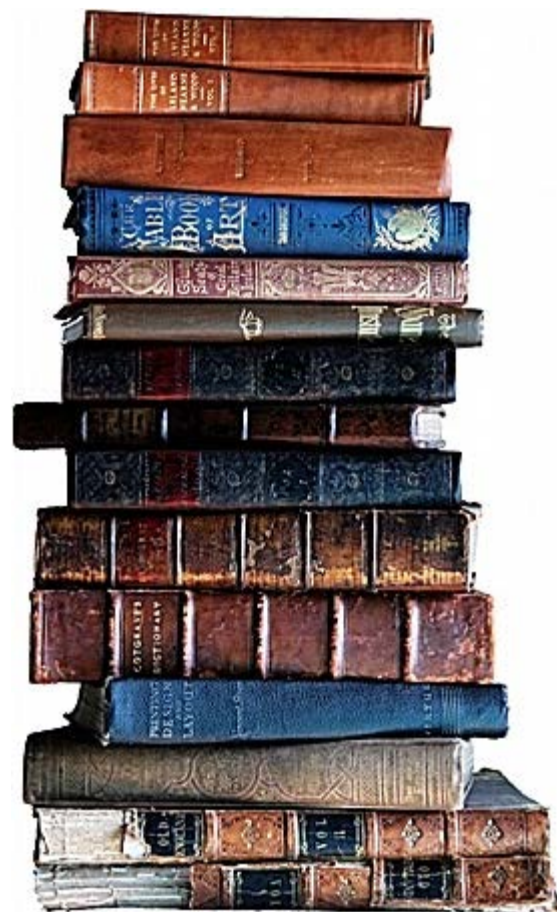
Train Managers to Groom Talent and Facilitate Learning

The human resources department or recruiters can do a great job finding the best talent available to fill any given position, but how well that employee is groomed ultimately depends on the manager she works under and directly reports to.

Hence, training managers to appreciate talent and to maximise the ability of those under them is almost more important to your long term workforce outlook than hiring. [Team managers are best aware](#) of the strengths (as well as the areas for improvement) of each and every individual on their teams. They are also in tune with the larger vision of the company, and should groom new members accordingly.

Your managers should be able to determine:

- The type of skills the team members need to work on. This will, obviously, differ from person to person.



- How to make up for any shortage of talent in different areas via a systematic approach to learning.
- What the strengths of your team members are, how to build on those strengths, and in the process convert them into a long term competitive advantage.

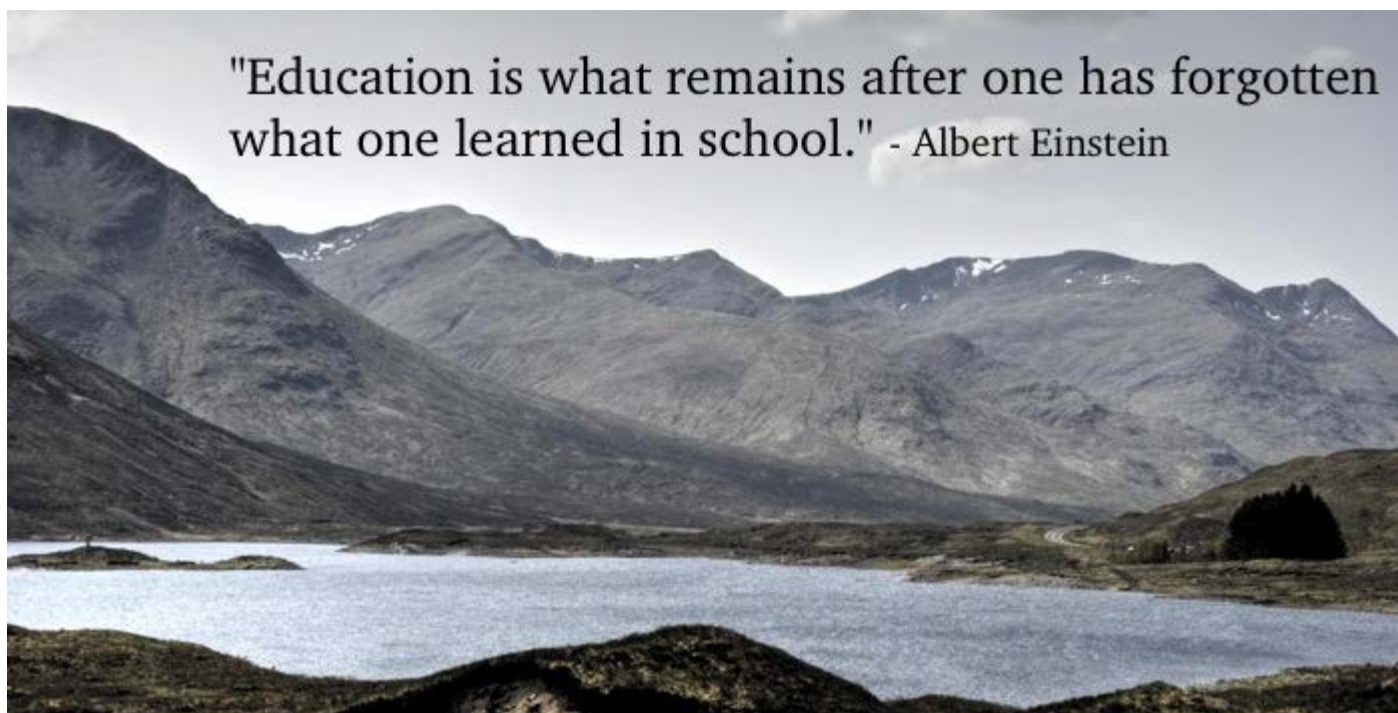
Evaluating Learning

So what are your employees learning? How do you know if they have even been paying attention and not just using company time to browse through websites of their interest instead of reading up on industry trends?

You need solid assessment criteria in place to evaluate their progress.

- One of the ways in which you can accomplish this is by inviting them to share their ideas with you. Sharing takes many forms, but even an informal question on “what have we learned this week?” can work wonders.
- Encourage them to speak their mind. After all, what use is learning if people cannot share it with others?
- Notice if they are implementing any new work-based skills they ought to have picked up via their learning. If they aren’t, encourage them to do so. Sometimes people need help bridging the gap from knowing to doing.
- Host a weekly “lunch and learn” session for the team in question. Within the context of the main topic for discussion, employees can share what they’ve learned, discuss, debate, and recommend reading sources.
- Another good way to keep everyone on track is to have them write a few sentences or a blog (internal or externally available) post which can be shared with everyone in the team, and anyone in management responsible for ongoing learning.

Here’s another good overview of how to make sure you’re evaluating your learning according to [four key evaluation levels](#).



What About Employees Who Are Simply Not Interested?

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. This is even more true for people! Not everyone likes the idea of learning all the time, and in some cases, they'll actively resist it. Common objections will be centered around lack of time, or that they learned everything they need to know in school, or that learning is a distraction from financial or other business objectives.

If you have employees that are [resistant to the idea of continuous learning](#), you'll want to listen to their objections, but approach them in a supportive manner:

- Truly listen to their objections, particularly those around time constraints, as this exercise may expose areas where employees are truly overstretched in their commitments. It's rare that employees will turn down education, all things being equal.
- Explain (again) what's in it for them.
- Delineate all the ways in which they will benefit from keeping their skills updated and how they risk getting left behind if they ignore this aspect.
- Talk about their how their overall career progression will require ongoing education and learning

Worst case, you may need to make changes to staff who are resistant to ongoing education and development, but if you've clearly built ongoing education into your corporate and team values, this shouldn't be a surprise to the employee or others.

If you have clear goals, enough support in place, and lead by example, you should find that most objections fade away.

Tags: [training](#), [workplace training](#)

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