



How to Make Your Training Stick

How can you be sure people retain the information you give them? Here are some tricks that will help.

By Brannon Dreher

Evaluating training programs can boil down to one simple question: Why are you spending time and money on training if nothing changes?

There are many ways to get a better return on training. You can revise your materials, hire more energetic trainers, and send trainees off to a weekend retreat. These are all good ideas but unlikely to provide a big payback unless you ensure that you're delivering training that *sticks*.

How Much Do Learners Remember?

According to psychologists who have studied how people learn (like Prof. Ton de Jong at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, John Sweller at the University of New South Wales, and many others), the human brain absorbs a small percentage of the information delivered in a learning

situation – at times as little as 10%. But it's possible to improve that percentage dramatically.

How Does Cognitive Load Theory Fit In?

To understand how that percentage can be increased, it's important to understand cognitive load theory. When your senses are processing a lot of input, they filter how much information gets passed to your short-term memory. As an example in training, your learners are dealing with a great deal of input that's competing with the information you want to teach. They're adjusting their eyes to see your slides, getting distracted by other trainees at their tables, trying to get comfortable in their seats, and maybe even getting their first gulp of coffee.

If information does get around that cognitive load, it makes it to people's

“You can dramatically improve the amount of information people absorb.”

short-term memory, where they decide if it's important. If they think it is, they'll pass it on to their long-term memory where they can use it later.

How Long Does Information Reside in Short-Term Memory?

The answer to that question will probably surprise you: New information gets processed for only 10 to 15 seconds in short-term memory. If the information doesn't stick during that time, it's lost. So, think of short-term memory as a kind of buffer zone that fills up quickly and then empties as new information flows in.

What Can Help Pass Information to Long-Term Memory?

There are a number of ways to increase the chances that people will absorb information and put it to use for the long term. Let's take a look at some of the most helpful:

Mnemonic devices: Back when you were a student in high school, you might have learned the sentence, "My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas" to help you remember the planets in their order from the sun. (The words in that sentence stand for Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Since Pluto is no longer considered a planet, the updated version is "My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos.") Acronyms are useful in training too. For example, SMART is a mnemonic acronym used to guide people in creating objectives. (Objectives should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound).

Activities: Participation in shared group activities is another effective way to move information into long-term memory. So are quizzes and self-tests delivered at key moments during training to reinforce concepts and skills.

Resources to be used after training: A content library for trainees to use once training is done can be very effective in making sure key concepts move into long-term memory. An easy-to-access online library can explain procedures and concepts that were covered, though probably not fully absorbed, in training.

Storytelling: Let trainees tell stories about experiences that relate to what you're teaching. ("Here's what I once did when I was having that problem . . .") Storytelling reinforces

“Millennials are especially fond of games.”

key ideas for the person telling the story and for those who are listening too.

Scenario-based learning: Present a simulated situation and let trainees come up with solutions. This helps learners realize, "If this happens, this is how I'll handle it."

Certificates and certifications: When people are recognized for learning important information, it tends to stick.

Games: Millennials are especially fond of games, although everyone likes them. Playing games works much better than bombarding trainees with information. And add a competitive element, because healthy competition goes a long way toward getting learning to stick. For example, you can give a quiz and keep score on a leaderboard until someone wins. 

Brannon Dreher is a client engagement manager at Tortal Training (tortal.net). Brannon brings a continual learning focus and communication skills to increase the effectiveness of human capital.

Put Training to Good Use in Your Organization

Get the best possible results from your training with these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Motivate Workers with Training Opportunities (Vol. 33, No. 3)

How to Present Training Workshops that Educate and Inspire (Vol. 29, No. 4)

The Nonprofit Executive as Chief Learning Officer (Vol. 16, No. 2)

Using Training Strategically to Build Organizational Capacity (Vol. 14, No. 4)

Training Programs Need More than Good Information (Vol. 21, No. 2)

Keep Your Volunteers Happy with Dynamic Training (Vol. 31, No. 4)

Let's Take the Mystery Out of Training Millennials (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Are You Sure You're Training the Right Things? (Vol. 39, No. 3)

“Healthy competition goes a long way toward getting learning to stick.”