

TEN REASONS WHY IT'S SO HARD TO LEARN

Less than 10% of professionals are agile enough learners to quickly process an experience and apply their lessons to new situations. In the new economy where innovation, skill development and learning are the only means to circumvent personal obsolescence, why is the number of agile learners so small? In other words, why is it so hard to learn? Max Bazerman of Harvard suggests three basic obstacles to learning.¹ In this brief summary I add seven more insights gleaned from face-to-face experience with hundreds of clients.

The need for balance

If you've achieved some level of professional success, the idea that your skills could be lacking won't compute. In fact, as Bazerman reminds us, balance theory emphasizes that we want consistency when we organize our thoughts and think about our expertise. To maintain our cognitive balance—our need to *believe we're consistent*--we are nearly certain to avoid hard or painful truths

If it ain't broke, why fix it?

Generally, most of us reach a level of competency between four and six years into our vocation—then we slow down and eventually stop learning. Partly, that's because we've been praised in the past for our work prowess. According to reinforcement theory, we tend to continue behaviors (*skills*) that brought positive rewards such as raises and promotions. If your professionalism has rewarded you, you'll tend to resist information suggesting that your judgment and your toolbox could be systematically improved.

Mistakes were made, but not by me

You've probably relied on your way of doing things for years. When you receive negative feedback about your performance, that will mean that you've made some costly mistakes in the past—and that will be unsettling. Interpersonal theory suggests that getting negative feedback causes us to avoid the person who gave it, filter information to him in the future, and constrict our thinking. It's no surprise that most of us will try to discredit the truth about our deficiencies, and become impervious to self-correction.

Missing the big picture

When learning new competencies, some people are so wrapped up in the detail and concrete specifics of a new skill that they miss the big development picture. Our education, whether business, law, architecture or engineering is highly specialized—making us all incrementalists. As a result, we fail to *fully integrate* the new skill into our toolkit, thinking that learning is merely an item-by-item matter, which makes for mediocre results.

Lack of effective information gathering tools

Even if people know that they need to add skills to their toolkit, they're hamstrung by lack of information-gathering skills. Among the tools necessary in today's volatile environment are intelligence networks, the ability and willingness to ask for help, the expertise to googize your way to needed tools, and the know-how to identify cutting-edge tools. That's a lot of demands for already stressed professionals.

Networks that don't work

In spite of the widespread emphasis on networking, recent studies show there is little interaction across business units, organizational functions and office locations. That makes the development of multi-function *intelligence networks* problematic. As a result, most networks are *echo chambers*—peopled by those who are friends, with beliefs, norms and skills similar to our own, and who work in our narrow silo.

Difficulty in gaining developmental feedback

In most organizations there is a two-way conspiracy of silence that makes a key skill development factor--*honest feedback*--nearly impossible to gain. Furthermore, most of us have been trained to believe that to ask for feedback implies incompetence, inferiority or dependence—a nasty trinity. Though some managers will attempt to give feedback, very few understand how to give developmental feedback.

Taking on outsized expectations

Attempting to learn an important competency in one fell swoop can bring you back to square one very quickly. You get overloaded, get *push back* from colleagues when they see you working differently, or, you have difficulty managing the inevitable fine tuning of the skill. You've set up your practice for failure, and can't get off the slippery slope.

Try, try and try again

Mistakes are inevitable in skill development and since most of us focus first on what's going wrong, we get frustrated by the experience. Perseverance does not come easily to action-oriented, results-driven professionals. Furthermore, research shows that those who believe that intelligence is innate and fixed—and that's the vast majority of professionals—find mistakes demoralizing, which is a serious deterrent for perseverant behavior.

New skills require new scripts

New skills, especially those like managing projects and conflicts, leading, and influencing and working with clients require new language for professionals. Old ways of talking won't work with many of the workplace's new demands. Indeed, the lack of training in language technologies makes the creation of new talk and conversation competencies a dilemma that's off-the-radar-screen.

We need to correct the harmful idea that people can learn and succeed in a big way without enormous amounts of dedication and effort. Admittedly, it is difficult to gain new competencies, but it is through effort that people build their abilities and realize their potential. More and more research is showing that there is one thing that sets the great successes apart from their equally talented peers—how hard they’ve worked—no matter how difficult it is.² The message professionals can confirm in the new workplace is that by confronting challenges, profiting from mistakes and failures, and persevering in the face of setbacks, they are building the new essentials for their success in the Talent Age.

¹ Bazerman, Max (2005) Putting Negotiation Training to Work. *Negotiation*. (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Publishing), September, 3-5.

² Ericsson, K.A., Charness, N., Feltovich, P.J., & Hoffman, R.R. (Eds.) (2006) *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*. (New York: Cambridge University Press).