

## **Re-animate your learning**

The start of a new year is the time when many of us decide to make changes or take on another challenge. Often this will involve learning something new, whether work or hobby related.

To increase our likelihood of success, a great starting point is to reflect on HOW we approach learning. We all have habits and preferences, developed over time, that will have worked for us to an extent. That is why we revert to those practices. However, recent research indicates that what many of us are used to doing, might not be the best way.

*'make it stick'* – The Science of Successful Learning, by Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel, offers some very useful pointers over its 328 pages. We have summarised some key points below.

## **True learning takes effort**

The principle behind all the strategies is that learning is deeper and more durable when it takes effort. A common approach of reading and re-reading material can lead us into the 'fallacy of fluency'. In other words, the more we read something, the more familiar it becomes; and we mistake that familiarity with actually knowing the material. Instead, we should make an effort to challenge ourselves, using **Five Strategies**.

### **Strategy One: In order to learn – retrieve**

Retrieval practice— recalling facts or concepts from memory, is a more effective learning strategy than re-view by rereading.

How can you do this?

When you are studying, pause periodically to ask yourself, without looking in the text: *What are the key ideas? What terms or ideas are new to me? How would I define them? How do the ideas and facts relate to what I already know?*

At intervals, set yourself mini tests, or use flashcards, to make yourself recall and retrieve – rather than just repeat.

### **Strategy Two: Space out your study**

Doing regular, shorter periods of applied study is far more effective than doing long blocks of work on the same topic. In the 'downtime' between studying, your mind is still working on assimilating and processing the information.

Also, by moving between topics, and then coming back to each topic at a different time and *testing* our recall – we have a better indicator of how much has actually stuck with us.

### **Strategy Three: Start with questions – read for answers**

We have probably all experienced a version of this when we have been in a hurry. Perhaps desperately scanning a document, newspaper or article for some specific information – and because we are primed as to what we are searching for, we find it.

We can use this strategy to help our learning. Faced with reading a manual, watching a video or even attending a seminar, if we take a few minutes to consider what we want to find out or the kind of information we think should be there, the answers will be more evident to us when we see or hear them.

### **Strategy Four: Put new knowledge into a larger context**

Make connections. Link the new learning to ideas and concepts that you know already know. This makes more hooks for your learning to hang on to. This is sometimes called elaboration; we weave the new materials into a broader context, helping our recall.

### **Strategy Five: Reflect; Review; Reflect**

This is essential to any learning – whether knowledge or a skill. Even if we only take a few minutes to reflect on what we have studied, practiced or learnt it pays huge dividends. This could be reflecting on what we have heard at a seminar; what we have read in a technical journal; or even thinking back over a client meeting. *What have I learnt? What went well; what could I change? What are the key concepts that I can apply elsewhere? Or even – what are the parts that I would set questions on if I were the examiner??*

### **Teach to Learn.**

A final thought, not just from the book. One of the best possible ways to learn something is to teach it to others. This might be as simple as sitting down with a work colleague and taking turns explaining things to each other. Or planning to deliver a short session. Perhaps asking a friend or family member if you can try explaining something to them.

In applying your thinking to how you would teach something, it forces you to retrieve, reflect, link the concepts and consider how to explain it. And in doing that, you are cementing the learning, and making it stick, for yourself.