

How to Learn New Skills

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Keeping your skills cutting edge can be a significant advantage in furthering your career writes Marie Herman.

Whether as a way to stand out against a field of job candidates or a validation of your readiness for promotion, learning new skills pays dividends in a myriad of ways. From the physical positive effects - such as keeping your brain neurons continually firing along new pathways - to the intangible effects such as serving as a role model for your children showing that learning is lifelong - to the professional benefits, you will always receive value from the effort of acquiring knowledge.

Many people struggle with the actual process of how best to learn something new. There are many ways of approaching this subject and pros and cons to each method available.

Why People Don't Learn New Skills

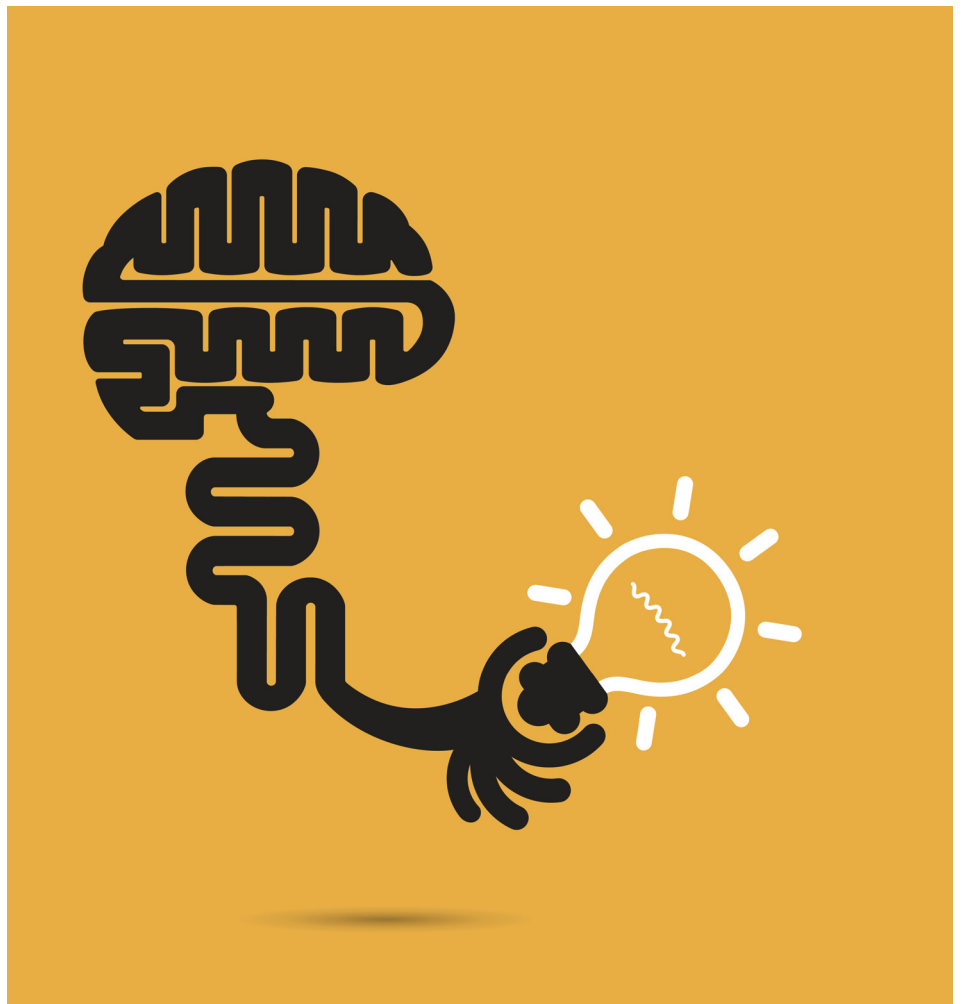
Josh Kaufman, author of *The First 20 Hours: How to Learn Anything... Fast*, talks about three barriers to learning new skills: Most people don't commit to learning anything specific. We don't learn in the abstract. We need to create goals that will focus our efforts. Learning new skills is often intimidating. It can be nerve wracking to face our ignorance and choose to learn a new skill. Learning new skills is usually frustrating. Sometimes the process is slow and painful and requires a lot of repetition to "stick". He stresses that people shouldn't compete against others when it comes to learning new skills, but instead should focus on competing against their own previous lack of ability, so that any improvement is a positive result.

How do people learn?

There are multiple ways of learning new skills. Ultimately you will need to determine the right way for you to learn. Here are some methods to get you started.

- **Self Study**

Self study uses materials such as books, CDs, or online courses, to learn new skills. It can allow



you to be flexible with your schedule and fit in learning around your other commitments. However, it requires self-discipline to stay focused and it may be challenging to understand complex physical steps unless there are pictures or videos. It can be one of the least expensive methods of mastering new skills.

- **Modeling**

Role modeling involves watching someone else demonstrate a task. This can dramatically reduce the learning curve of new material. It might involve signing up for a class or asking someone to privately show you how to do something. It works whether the process is

physical - such as making pasta, or mental - such as practicing job interview skills. You might not be doing the action yourself, but simply observing others as they complete it. It's essentially focused on imitating others. In order to retain what you learn, you need to start practicing it yourself immediately afterwards. Otherwise, you'll soon forget what was covered in the class. You may also be limited to the pace of the slowest student in the class, which can make learning the new skill frustrating.

- **Coaching**

Coaching involves working with an expert one on one to learn new skills. This personalized attention can reduce the amount of time involved in learning new skill and ensure that individual questions are answered quickly. It allows you to learn at your own pace. Because the attention is more focused, the feedback can be specific to you. This method may be more expensive due to the higher hourly rate of the instructor, but ultimately it may be less expensive and stressful if you are a fast learner.

- **Role Play**

Role play involves trying to do the demonstrated step yourself. This could be practicing conflict resolution skills or trying out a new handshake. Developing skills in the safe learning environment of a classroom or with private instruction can build confidence and allow for gentle correction as needed. Practice makes the new skill more comfortable and removes some of the fear factor. Choose a role play partner who will be honest with you about your performance and someone with sufficient experience to be able to suggest improvements in what you are doing.

- **Apprentice**

An apprenticeship is often utilized for learning complex topics that require months or even years of experience. It's common in the trades and often includes a formal training component as part of the skill building process. The administrative equivalent of this might be a formal mentoring relationship or a university certificate program.

- **Repetition**

Practicing a new skill repetitively can help to ingrain the steps in your mind and build muscle memory. The more you do something, the faster you will become and the easier the steps will become. However, you want to ensure that you are learning the new skill properly so you don't inadvertently teach yourself bad habits.

Tips for Success

- **Positive self talk**

One of the critical components of success with learning new skills is to ensure your brain is only providing positive self talk. If you catch yourself internally making disparaging comments, you'll slow your progress. Your body believes what your brain tells it. If you repeatedly tell yourself that "you can't learn ...", "you're too old to do...", "you aren't smart enough to master ...", your body will believe you and it will shut you down before you even start. After all, why bother starting, if you believe you aren't capable of finishing?

- **Map Out Your Strategy**

Do your research in advance to identify what is involved in learning your new skill. What is the best method of education? Should you sign up for a class? Get a book from the library? Hire a coach? Do it alone? This task will help you identify your best option, but you need to have a good understanding of the scope of what you want to learn in order to choose wisely.

Schedule time to DO IT

Learning a new skill takes time and commitment. Plan time on your calendar for practicing your work. Create some form of accountability for yourself, perhaps by finding a compatible partner or utilizing your social media network to keep you on track. Whatever you do, have a plan in place to follow up on your progress to prevent yourself from slipping.

- **Set Yourself Up For Success**

If you tend to procrastinate or otherwise not follow through on the goals you have set for yourself, do what you can to set yourself up for success. For instance, put your study book in a prominent location, such as on top of your

purse or briefcase, where you will be sure to see it and can grab it on the way to work. Put a post it on your monitor to "Read Chapter 1 at lunchtime". By having a plan in place and having physical reminders of that plan, you'll be more likely to follow through.

- **Follow up**

Long term memory learning requires repetition. You must regularly practice the new skills you have acquired or those skills will rapidly atrophy. Consider teaching others what you have learned as we often learn skills in greater depth if we are responsible for teaching them to someone else. We commonly over-prepare in order to ensure we can handle any questions our students throw at us.

- **Reinforcement**

Reinforcement is the reward element of learning new skills. When you reward yourself for progress, you can train yourself to continue what you are doing. Reinforcement can be positive or negative. It can be particularly effective with establishing new habits.

What Next?

Don't forget to update your portfolio and résumé or CV to document what you have learned. You'll want to ensure your employer is aware of any new work related skills that you have picked up, especially if your ultimate goal is promotion. It's not just the completion of the task that will weigh with your employer. It's also a way of showing them that you are an actively engaged employee who wants to ensure your skills remain cutting edge. Your initiative may make you stand out in your workplace and make them more likely to consider you favorably for additional responsibilities. Being prepared for that conversation with your boss will allow you to plan out your strategy for asking for a pay increase commensurate with your new skills and responsibilities.

Utilizing the most appropriate method and actively using success tips will greatly increase your odds of success in learning new skills. You may find that once you start, you'll be inspired to continue building your skill portfolio.

about the author



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