Don’t Learn More, Learn Smarter. A Quick Guide to Agile Learning.



Just like your body, your brain needs to be regularly looked after, fed and trained.

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Owning a Business 101: Streamline your operation to provide more value to users. Lately, I’ve been thinking about this idea and how it might apply in the learning context; whether we should apply the same “lean” approach to our knowledge acquisition and squeeze more value from what we learn. It’s a method that experts call agile learning, and it also entails unlearning information that is no longer useful.

Learning agility is a more dynamic and smarter approach, trimming the fat and leaving the most valuable information. So when I forget for the umpteenth time where I left my keys, perhaps that's not a bad thing. Maybe I'm just making room for more useful data.

To be competitive, entrepreneurs must be able to learn with agility so they can adapt and advance in an ever-changing marketplace. Studies have found that learning agility is even more important than job performance. Here, six strategies for developing your capacity for agile learning.

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1. Make reading your default mode.

As Harry Truman once said:

> *"Not all readers are leaders, but all leaders are readers."*

A pillar of learning agility is continually consuming information, and there's no better way to do that than reading. Not only does it expand my vocabulary and introduce me to new subject matter, reading also helps me discover new ways of thinking. I read to learn about new mental models, for example, which give me tools for processing and organizing the world of information around me.

For a long time, I made excuses for not reading more material that didn't pertain directly to my work. I was trying to scale my startup and still spend time with my family. *Who can find the time?* But at a certain point, I started reading during the "between" times: between meetings, on the train, over breakfast or even listening to audiobooks during my lunchtime walk. That way, there was no need to find the time – I already had it.

Everyone is busy. But if Mark Cuban reads three hours a day

and Bill Gates finishes one book a week, then I can, too.

2. Learn deliberately.

There are three types of learning: accidental, conscious and deliberate. The first kind happens *to us*, e.g. you're walking down the street and see a sign for a new streaming service. The second kind is when we learn but not necessarily purposefully, like via reading the paper or watching the evening news.

The third kind, deliberate learning, is when we're actively trying to acquire new information. Our attention is focused and thinking is sharp. And ultimately, we intend to incorporate this material into our existing framework and be able to access it later. To become an agile learner, it's important to make a habit of learning deliberately. And because only you know which lessons are most relevant to your work and your future, each individual's autodidactic path will be unique.

3. Learn in short, regular intervals.

It's crucial to set aside time for that deliberate learning every day, and a little bit goes a long way, especially if you stick to a regular habit. Though on average, knowledge workers spends just five minutes on learning each day, experts recommend dedicating between 30 minutes and an hour per day.

To make the most of your study session, entrepreneurs and Harvard Business Review contributors Josh Bersin and Marc Zao-Sanders recommend maintaining a to-learn list, advising: "Write down a list of concepts, thoughts, practices and vocabulary you want to explore, book mark them in your browser and add them to your list. You can later explore them when you have a few moments to reflect."

Learning in small but regular time allotments is effective because they are brief, and therefore sustainable, but also consistent, helping to continually cement recently acquired information.

Benedict Carey, author of *How We Learn: The Surprising Truth About When, Where, and Why It Happens*, is also a proponent of the idea that knowledge should be consumed in bite-sized quantities.

As he writes:

> *"You can water a lawn once a week for 90 minutes or three times a week for 30 minute. Spacing out the watering during the week will keep the lawn greener over time."*

4. Learn from others with experience.

If you want to learn anything faster, start by tapping someone who has personal experience with that subject. And if they've mastered it, even better. Entrepreneur and author Tony Robbins captured this idea perfectly:

> *"The fastest way to master any skill, strategy or goal in life is to model those who have already forged the path ahead. If you can find someone who is already getting the results that you want and take the same actions they are taking, you can get the same results. It doesn't matter what your age, gender or background is. Modeling gives you the capacity to fast track your dreams and achieve more in a much shorter period of time."*

This "modeling" technique, as Robbins calls it, enables us to learn from the experience of others, including any mistakes, and save time in our own journey. Not to mention, it's more

fun and energizing than learning alone.

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5. Cross-train between subjects.

In the past, people thought success came through specialization, or achieving mastery in a single subject. As the saying goes: Jack of all trades, master of none. That way of thinking is antiquated at best and self-defeating at worst. As Vikram Mansharamani wrote for Harvard Business Review:

> *"Corporations around the world have come to value expertise, and in so doing, have created a collection of individuals studying bark. There are many who have deeply studied its nooks, grooves, coloration and texture. Few have developed the understanding that the bark is merely the outermost layer of a tree. Fewer still understand the tree is embedded in a forest."*

Today, people are increasingly recognizing the value of becoming "expert generalists" — understanding the forest. Because, as Vikram writes, "our highly interconnected and global economy means that seemingly unrelated developments can affect each other."

What's more, we learn better and with more agility when we can forge connections across boundaries and transfer knowledge from subject matter to another.

6. Practice.

Finally, like any skill, your capacity for agile learning will improve with practice. Forget the notion that some people are born better learners. As Dr. K. Anders Ericsson, an expert on expert performance, explains: "People believe that because expert performance is qualitatively different from normal

performance, the expert performer must be endowed with characteristics qualitatively different from those of normal adults. This view has discouraged scientists from systematically examining expert performers and accounting for their performance in terms of the laws and principles of general psychology."

With few exceptions (e.g. height and the ability to play basketball), most factors that determine our performance aren't genetically prescribed. Ericsson and colleagues argue that "the differences between expert performers and normal adults reflect a life-long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain."

Similarly, your effort vis-a-vis learning should be deliberate. But don't consider it another task to add to your routine. Instead, think of agile learning as a lifestyle, one that will improve your business and hopefully enrich your life.

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