

The Key to Change isn't Learning, it's Unlearning



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Imagine you rent a car with a manual transmission. If you've previously only driven automatic cars, learning how and when to change gears would require focus and repetition, but eventually you'd catch on. Now imagine you're renting the car in London, where you have to drive on the left side of the street.

If you're used to driving on the right side of the road, and suddenly you need to make a mental switch to the left, both learning and unlearning come into play. You must not only learn to operate a different kind of car on the opposite side of the street, **but also unlearn what's been ingrained in your mind as normal.**



For many people, this process of unlearning is more difficult than learning new information. That's why, in London, crosswalks have signs that remind people to "LOOK RIGHT." For pedestrians, drivers' failure to unlearn old driving habits can have dangerous consequences.

While the topic of learning and change has been thoroughly researched, the importance of unlearning is often overlooked by professionals planning how to [implement change](#) management. As industries evolve and more businesses embrace digital, the need to unlearn is paramount to transformation.

[Help employees unlearn outdated processes and embrace change.](#)

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What is Unlearning?

Learning and unlearning are not opposing concepts. While learning is gaining new knowledge, [unlearning is the process of relinquishing mental constructs](#) and ways of thinking that no longer serve you. It's not forgetting information you learned before; rather, it is the process of actively choosing a different mental paradigm to better guide decisions and actions.

In business, all processes, policies, and decisions are predicated on certain mental models. We inherit many of these systems of thinking and doing from our predecessors without question. For instance, a company might escalate issues, reward positive performance, respond to crises, and attend to customer complaints according to the same set of protocols for years.

While one way of thinking may have been suited for a certain time, context, and set of circumstances, today that approach could be obsolete. Thus arises the importance of unlearning that model in favor of something better suited to our current needs and goals. Unlearning is a critical part of change management.

Unlearning involves three main steps: Acknowledging that a mental model no longer works, identifying a new one that does, and embedding it into your way of thinking.

Change Management Requires Unlearning

The ability to unlearn outdated ways of thinking and doing is essential when determining how to best implement change management. This concept is particularly relevant to digital transformation. As businesses become increasingly reliant on technology to satisfy strategic and customer demands, they must constantly assess which processes and procedures are no longer relevant or hinder productivity.

New Standards for Customer Experience Require a New Approach to Service



Companies must unlearn what previously qualified as a positive customer experience. In the past, businesses strived for “customer satisfaction.” Today, companies that merely satisfy their customers will quickly lose out to competitors that delight them.

With the help of the internet, the customer experience has become a greater strategic objective than ever before. Online review sites and social media not only empower customers to share

their experiences with others, but they can also influence other potential customers' decisions about using your product or service. Good or bad experiences can have a direct impact on your bottom line.

Companies must also unlearn the notion that there are just two categories in business: the company and the customer. Instead, a mental model that defines “customers” more fluidly, and even views them as partners, will better position businesses to succeed.

Platforms such as Airbnb, Uber, and Lyft have grown exponentially in a customer-centered market because they deliberately blurred the line between customer and provider. For example, while Airbnb guests are customers of Airbnb hosts, both groups are the company's customers. Both are users. They both impose expectations and demands on Airbnb regarding their experience, so the company aims to fulfill all of them.

As Software Evolves, Organizations Must Unlearn Outdated Training Models

Traditional methods of [training employees](#), such as instructor-led training sessions, video tutorials, and webinars, may have been sufficient in the past. However, when applied to complex software systems, such approaches to learning are ineffective. They lead to low retention rates, slow time-to-competency, and long adoption periods. The learning experience is frustrating for employees and slows down productivity.

The training challenge is compounded by the rising prominence of cloud-based software systems, in which updates occur automatically and frequently. Traditional training methods for each update are time consuming, frustrating, and impractical. Companies that cling to them will simply be unable to keep up with the pace of change.

The importance of unlearning outdated training methods is critical to effective onboarding. Instead of trying to make old approaches to learning compatible with new software systems, the best course of action is to let go of that paradigm in favor of something more efficient. For instance, training solutions that provide on-screen, contextual guidance at the time of need — such as after an update — help users learn new features easily without slowing down productivity.

Leaders Have to Unlearn Traditional Roles to Face Contemporary Challenges Head On



Across all levels of the organization, job descriptions must be fluid and malleable to adapt to new challenges. Everyone from the CEO to an entry-level employee must see their responsibilities as evolving, not fixed.

This mindset requires learning and unlearning. For example, in the past, the CIO had nearly exclusive oversight over all technology projects, while the CEO focused on higher level strategy. However, as technology becomes more deeply embedded in all aspects of business, CEOs and CIOs must unlearn these divisions and collaborate.

For some companies, it has become necessary to completely unlearn the traditional organizational chart. Some have elected to do away with formal hierarchies in favor of matrixed or networked systems, in which authority is not vertical but dispersed and multi-dimensional.

Many companies have also identified the need to add new leadership roles and remove others. For example, emerging titles such as chief innovation officer, chief technology officer, and chief information security officer are becoming more common as companies place greater emphasis on technology and related objectives. Many have also appointed chief experience officers to focus on optimizing the customer experience.

On the flipside, long-held roles, such as the chief operating officer, are on the decline. According to the Crist Kolder Associates [2017 Volatility Report](#), the percentage of Fortune and S&P 500 companies with a COO in office has declined from 48% in 2000 to 29% in 2017.

Successful change management requires both learning and unlearning. Employees must be willing to let go of obsolete processes and mental models, just as they need to embrace new systems and tools. Unlearning is a process that requires deliberateness and effort, but it is an essential component of transformation.