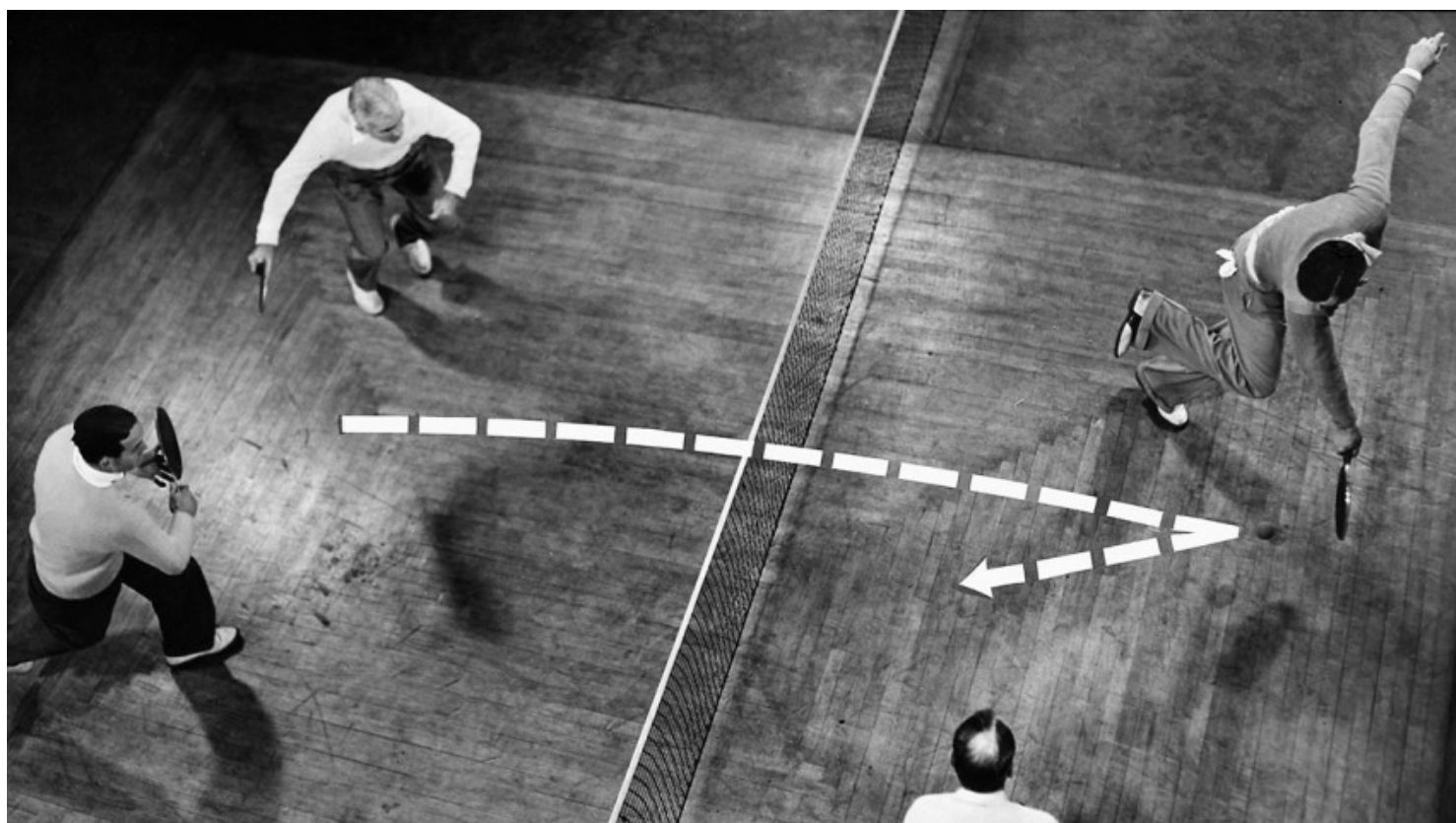


4 Habits of People Who Are Always Learning New Skills

by Mike Kehoe

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Working in online learning, I've found that every year around this time there's a burst of sign-ups from workers seeking new skills. Perhaps it's a matter of New Year's resolutions, or a reaction to seeing their friends and colleagues make big career changes each January.

Unfortunately, the initial commitment to learning all too often fizzles out. Studies have found that 40% to 80% of students drop out of online classes.

Those who give up miss out. In one survey of more than 50,000 learners who completed MOOCs on Coursera, 72% reported career benefits such as doing their current job more effectively, finding a new job, or receiving a raise.

Having worked in HR at a large banking corporation and in strategic HR consulting, I've seen the effects of learning and development on career mobility – and what leads people to let it fall by the wayside. Over time, working with users as well as learning experts, I've found that four crucial habits can make a tremendous difference.

Focus on emerging skills. With so many learning options available these days, people are often tempted to simply go to Google, type in some general search terms, and start one of the first courses that pops up. That's a waste of time.

Job requirements are quickly evolving. To ensure relevance, you need to focus on learning the latest emerging skills. You can do this in a couple of ways.

First, track what skills the leaders in your industry are hiring for. Look at recent job postings from the top companies, and see which qualifications keep popping up. Second, reach out to people in your network or on LinkedIn who have the job you want. If you want to know what sales skills and technologies are becoming most important, talk to some high-level salespeople. Ask them what they're having to learn to keep succeeding at *their* work and what skills they think someone needs to acquire in order to become a viable candidate.

You may feel intimidated about reaching out. But I've found that most of the time, people are happy to share this information. They want to see more and more capable candidates filling jobs and staying on top of trends.

As you get a sense of the most important skills to learn, ask these experts whether they can recommend specific online courses with practical value. Also take a close look at course descriptions to find content that will be useful on the job rather than provide mostly academic insight. For instance, you might seek out instructors who are leading experts in your industry or content created in conjunction with companies that you admire.

Get synchronous. In this era, micro-learning – engaging with online learning tools when and where it’s convenient – is becoming a much larger part of the training and development scene. This has its benefits, including freedom, convenience, and digestible content.

But there’s also a downside. These asynchronous experiences are often solitary. And without at least some real-time interaction, whether in person or online, many students lose motivation. Researchers have found that “the sense of isolation” for some online learners “may make the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful online learning environment.” They call for more *synchronous* experiences. Others have also identified interaction and collaboration as critical factors in fruitful learning.

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In my work, I’ve consistently seen that when online students sign up for a live course, in which they interact with a professor and one another at a set time at least once a week, they stick with it longer and learn more. Often, these kinds of programs offer materials you can work on individually. But the camaraderie can serve as a huge motivator, as can the desire not to fall behind the group.

When a live course isn’t available, I encourage learners to find a “synchronous cohort” – a friend or acquaintance with similar learning goals. Make a pact to do online learning together weekly. You can learn a lot from hearing each other’s questions and explaining things to each other as you come to understand them, since

the act of teaching can improve content understanding, recall, and application.

Implement learning immediately. Research shows that performing the tasks you’ve learned is crucial, because “enactment enhances memory by serving as an elaborative encoding strategy.”

This is part of the problem many engineers face when looking for jobs straight out of college: They've been stuck in "theory land," with little experience putting what they've learned into practice. You can run into the same issue with online learning. For example, I could spend weeks watching videos on how to set up a distributed computing system. But if I don't go to Amazon Web Services and deploy it – soon – I'll forget much of what I learned.

So whatever field you're studying, find opportunities to use your new skills. (In addition to increasing "stickiness," this also gives you a chance to discover unforeseen challenges.) Depending on the skill, you might participate in a collaborative project at work, for instance, or set up your own project on a small scale at home. Or you could find an online simulation that is similar to the real experience.

Set a golden benchmark. Just like runners in a marathon, online learners need to have a clear goal in order to stay focused. A return on investment (in terms of time and money spent) is hard to gauge in the near term. But those who persevere generally have their eye on a larger prize – a new job, a promotion, or the chance to lead a project. I encourage people to determine a specific career objective and keep it front of mind as they learn.

Of course, that benchmark will change as you develop. Learning is a career-long process. After you achieve one big goal, set your sights on the next one. That's how you make learning a part of your normal routine. The more you do that, the less likely you are to stop.

Mike Kehoe is a cofounder of BitTiger. He was formerly a consultant with Deloitte and an HR analyst at Citi.

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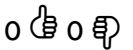
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RAY HARKINS 9 days ago

What I don't see addressed in this article is the "tried and true" business skills. Accounting, finance, negotiation, analysis, marketing, quality ... these fundamentals aren't going anywhere and are often left out or underemphasized in the front-loaded training of most business professionals.

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