

CASE STUDY: A BRAIN-BASED WORKPLACE INDUCTION PROGRAM

BY JANE HUDSON



The more we understand about how the brain learns, the better our learning designs will be. Thanks to neuroscience, we now know so much more about the human brain than ever before. We know that human brains are wired to learn; humans are social learners; emotions play a large part in learning; brains have limited energy; attention plays a major role in activating the hippocampus (a key to memory formation) and sitting for too long (e.g. more than 45 minutes) slows the brain down.

Learning does not happen in a vacuum

The learner's brain is only one part of the equation; the learning context is a critical element. For many learning and development practitioners that context is the workplace which adds a myriad of other considerations. For example:

- time (How long will this take, we need them back on the job ASAP);
- budget (I do not care if the training is cobbled together with string, just make it happen); resources (We do not have any training rooms, are you sure you cannot squeeze 15 people into a room which normally seats six?);
- content volume (Seeing as we have got them in the room they should be able to learn brain surgery as well as anatomy) and;
- workers attitudes to learning (What do you mean I have to do this training, I have been doing this job for 20 years... there is nothing you can teach me).

About the Compliance Officer Program

The Compliance Officer Program's (COP) purpose was to equip the learners with the skills and knowledge to be able to demonstrate their competence to

become a compliance officer, a complex role that requires the ability to exercise judgement and discretion and make effective evidence-based decisions.

The COP was a 10-week program, each week the learner spent two days in the training room and three days on the job with their coach. Participation was compulsory.

How did we do it?

We kept it super-relevant (focussed on the 'must learns') to both get the learners attention and manage their cognitive load. We bridged the gap between in-room training and on-the-job application by taking an integrated approach and creating space for long-term memories to be formed. We involved a number of well-respected internal experts so the 'street cred' factor was high which went a long way to supporting both the learners' identity and emotional needs.

We built their self-directed learning capability to set them up for the future (learning is one of the top employability skills) and maximised the face-to-face learning time by flipping the classroom e.g. eLearns, policies and procedures to find and read, webinars and video learns. We catered to the learners social learning brain through group activities, coaching and peer-to-peer learning and built in repeated opportunities to apply the learning in different situations including coaching and shadowing (building neural pathways, leveraging mirror neurons).

In the training room

We worked hard to create an environment where the learners felt safe to ask questions and make mistakes thereby catering to their limbic system (emotional) needs. On day one we included a session on how the brain learns so they could more consciously manage their personal learning journey and encouraged the learners to 'own' the space e.g. sitting is not compulsory.

Being an interactive program helped to keep the learners engaged and exercising their agency in the learning

space and short quizzes were a bit of a feature (guessing and then finding out the right answer can help learners remember).

Because of the COP's length and intensity we paid particular attention to the learners' brain energy we built in short energy breaks (in addition to morning/afternoon tea and lunch); took the lollies off the table; provided cheese, biscuits and fruit, rather than cakes and pastries, for morning tea and sent participants out to get lunch and go walking outside.

We used a variety of delivery modalities to maintain the learners' attention and had 'toys' on the tables, e.g. hacky sacks and squeeze balls, to give the more kinaesthetic learners something to do with their hands. By spacing the program out with two days in the training room and three days on-the-job over 10 weeks this gave the learners time to apply the learning and their brains time to process and embed the learning. And we encouraged the learners to have fun learning together - sense making (learning) is fun when that 'aha' moment hits.

The Results

The learners actively participated in all parts of the program and successfully demonstrated their competence for the job. Their engagement levels were consistently good over the ten weeks and while energy levels slumped a bit around the mid-way point (weeks five and six) overall the energy was good (even for Henry who worked out he had travelled 6000 kilometres to attend the face-to-face training days!).

Participant feedback was that they had enjoyed the program, learned a lot, were confident to go out and do the job and had built a strong network to draw on throughout their career with the organisation. Some of the other staff started asking why they could not do the COP and management feedback was that they were very happy with the quality of the work the staff were producing.

Reference

The COP was bookended by complementary changes to the recruiting of and continuing professional development of compliance officers. For a more comprehensive review of all three phases see: Pink, G. & Hudson, J. 2016, *Teaching and Learning: The Approaches of a Modern Environmental Regulator*, in Seventh Asian Conference on the Social Sciences conference proceedings, Kobe, Japan. pp. 415-434, available at: http://iafor.org/archives/proceedings/ACSS/ACSS2016_proceedings.pdf

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