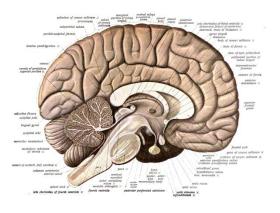


## The Capability You'll Lose If You Don't Use

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One of the hot topics in business today is data—leveraging the massive amounts of information stored in IT systems to spot trends, identify opportunities, detect problems, and make better decisions. This topic is often referred to as "big data", "data analytics", or "business intelligence". This is a promising area, particularly for companies with lots of data, in helping improve strategy formulation, employee productivity, employee engagement, product development, sales, and overall profitability.

Another area that is equally promising, as well as underleveraged, is the storage and processing capacity within our own minds. The most untapped frontier yet to be discovered is the capability that lies within our

brains. Current studies in neuroscience are revealing just how much ability we have and how little we understand it. Scientists are starting to grasp how complex, capable, and adaptable our brains truly are.

When I was growing up, the traditional thinking was that you were born with a fixed number of brain cells (i.e. neurons) which died off with age—as well as with alcoholic consumption and other poor lifestyle choices as my mother told me. Now we know that new neurons are produced daily, a process called *neurogenesis*. With physical exercise, new neuron production increases dramatically to the point of thousands of new neurons a day. This is additive to the considerable plasticity inherent in our cognitive ability. In other words, our intellectual capability isn't fixed. It isn't limited to what we were born with.

Current neuroscience is also giving us new insights into how memories are formed and managed. How unconscious biases are formed and changed. How we react to and fit in our environment. How we can increase self-control, discipline, and perseverance. How we can better manage our emotions, work with others, and deal with mental disorders. These are exciting times as we begin to understand the root causes of many human behaviors and more importantly, how to manage and change them. For those who think that people can't change, there is now scientific evidence that proves them wrong.

Focusing for a moment on the formation of new neurons, neuroscience shows that most new neurons die that are not used within a few weeks. The equivalent analogy using "big data" would be that any new data or knowledge produced in your organization is permanently erased in a few weeks if you don't use it. This of course would be a massive problem for most organizations. There is good news however for us and our brains. Effortful learning, particularly learning that utilizes the hippocampus part of our brain where most neurons are created, employs new neurons and puts them into productive use where they remain alive. So make note—if you aren't regularly engaged in effortful learning, you're not leveraging the amazing brain capabilities you have at your disposal. Even worse, you're losing your capabilities.

If you don't intentionally focus on your learning, as well as your team's if you are a manager, consider this your call to action. Not only does learning improve your skills, knowledge, experience, confidence, and net-worth, it increases your brain capacity. You can become even more capable than you already are. You can learn and do most anything you want. You can be your organization's top subject matter expert or its most inspirational leader. You can be a rocket scientist. You can be a lawyer, doctor, engineer, consultant, or neuroscientist. You can learn to play a musical instrument or a foreign language.



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As you think about the goals you want to accomplish, think about the new knowledge and skills you need to achieve them. Identify the areas in which you need to develop. There are many formal and informal learning methods as well as resources you can employ. The obvious formal learning methods include on-the-job training courses, college courses, and professional certification programs. There are even more less-formal options which provide the most learning. Here are a dozen less formal but highly effective learning methods to leverage:

- Create or participate in a small group focused on learning such as a team book club, team coaching program, or word-of-the day distribution list.
- Read non-fiction books and industry publications.
- Subscribe to online articles and blogs on topics related to your industry or self-improvement areas.
- Teach at staff meetings, work lunch-and-learns, industry programs, or local college courses. No one learns more than the teacher.
- Mentor and coach others. Like a teacher, mentors and coaches learn too. Offer to mentor someone who could benefit from your knowledge and experience. If you are a manager, adopt a "leader as a coach" style and make coaching a regular part of your management activity.
- Receive coaching. Hire a coach who can help you learn and hold you accountable to achieving your goals.
- Attend professional seminars on topics such as time management, public speaking, managing conflict, or whatever you aspire to work on.
- Speak at industry seminars or community events. Effective speaking requires effortful learning including research, practice, and memorization.
- Write white papers, blogs, or articles for professional publications. Like speaking, writing requires research and helps with memory retention.
- Conduct research. Review online summaries of studies, surveys, assessments, and experiments. Look for new
  discoveries, innovations, and best practices you can apply that have the potential to significantly improve your
  performance.
- Take on special assignments. Lead a cross-functional project at work, volunteer for a corporate initiative, or work internationally.
- Seek new experiences. Get out of your comfort zone. Attend meetings and events outside of your normal groups, meet new people, volunteer for a charity organization, or join a non-profit board. Participating in new areas requires more effort which calls into action more of your neurons.

Select the learning methods that suit your needs. Use them as regularly as possible to help retain your steady growth of neurons as well as increase your overall capability.



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