

Enable Your Brain to Remember Almost Everything (May 14)



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May 15, 2014

“Keep in mind that boosters do not need to re-teach the material. Indeed, you have already taught it once and the learner does not need to encode the information a second time. Instead, the secret to effective boosting is simply to provide a retrieval opportunity that signals the brain that the information is important and should be retained.”

People forget the vast majority of what they learn. In my two previous installments (see “Related Articles” at the end of this column), we have explored the nature of memory and ways to change the shape of the dreaded forgetting curve. Just imagine what it would be like if your employees remembered almost everything you taught them. It is possible, but you need to give them a boost. This month I will teach you how to overcome the forgetting curve.

Memory boosters

The key to successful boosting is to provide your learners with repeated opportunities to think about their new information in the days and weeks after training. The simple act of recalling information signals the brain that the particular information is important and that it ought to be retained.

You can deliver boosters personally; for example, you can have your managers quiz employees in the days and weeks after training. Or people can receive boosters via email or a website, using automated tools. Whatever way you do it, there are rules of thumb that can maximize the effect of boosting.

2+2+2

So how often should information be boosted? We recommend that you send boosters out in three phases. You can keep this in mind by remembering 2+2+2. Send out boosters after two days, two weeks, and two months.

The first phase: boosters that induce deeper processing

Your first phase of boosters should be sent about two days after the training. For example, let’s say your employees attended a leadership seminar on Monday. You should send your first set of boosters starting on Wednesday. This first set of boosters should be “recognition boosters.” The strategy here is just to get people to try to recognize the right answer from a list of options. For the leadership seminar example, you should send them a multiple-choice question like this one:

According to the seminar, the first step in consensus leadership is

- *a. Establishing trust*
- *b. Establishing authority*
- *c. Creating lines of communication*
- *d. Developing relationships*

Note that the correct answer to the question is not immediately obvious. That's good. All of the answers are potentially the right answer and the student has to really think about it. This induces a deeper level of processing which will help long-term retention.

Another type of recognition booster is a poll. For example, ask your learners a question like this:

In your experience, how do people respond to you when you use consensus leadership techniques?

- *a. Both men and women respond positively to me.*
- *b. Men respond positively and women respond negatively.*
- *c. Women respond positively and men respond negatively.*
- *d. Both men and women respond negatively.*

Polls like this are great because learners have to think about the topic, determine their own opinion, and then afterward (assuming you have an automated system), they can view the poll results and compare their answer to their peers.

The second phase: boosters that generate application ideas

The second phase of boosters should be sent about two weeks after the training and at this time you should send out "generative boosters." In a generative booster, the learner does not just recognize the right answer from a list. Instead, they have to think about the topic and then create an answer out of their head.

A fill-in-the-blank is a good generative question. For example,

- *During the _____ phase of problem solving, a consensus leader should seek unfiltered input from every member of their team.*

Another type of generative question is one where the learner needs to imagine how they would apply the training to their workplace. For example,

- *Think back to your lesson on consensus leadership. How can you imagine using these techniques in your day-to-day work?*

This type of question gives the learner a chance both to retrieve the information and to think about applying it to their daily job.

The third phase: boosters that elicit examples of use

The third phase of boosters should be sent about two months after the training, and at this time you should send out "integrative boosters." An integrative booster again prompts the learner to retrieve the information, but this question specifically asks them to provide concrete examples of how they have made use of this information in their job. This feedback can facilitate transfer of learning (as we will see next month), and can provide data that can prove the value of the training organization.

How many is too many?

Research shows that each additional booster helps to further reinforce learning. But in practical terms, there are limits to how many times people want to be boosted on a given topic. For most pieces of information, I'd suggest that you send two or three boosters during each of the three phases.

The five-second rule

You may have noticed that the sample boosters I provided are quite brief, and you might wonder if you can get even more bang-for-the-buck by providing ones that are more elaborate. So what do you think? Will your employees remember more if the booster interaction lasts longer?

This question was recently put to experimental test. The testers gave one group of learners a five-second booster experience, the second group got a 30-second booster experience, and the third group got a five-minute booster experience. All were later tested for their recall, and you know what? There was no difference between the three groups! The group whose boosts lasted only five seconds did just as well as the other two groups.

To understand this result, you need to keep in mind that boosters do not need to re-teach the material. Indeed, you have already taught it once and the learner does not need to encode the information a second time. Instead, the secret to effective boosting is simply to provide a retrieval opportunity that signals the brain that the information is important and should be retained.

This data is important. The fact is, learners are more likely to complete boosters that are short and sweet. And this data proves that short boosts are just as effective as long ones.

Additional benefits of boosting

As we have seen, boosting can significantly improve your employees' long-term retention. In addition, if you plan your boosting program carefully it can help you collect valuable data about the efficacy of your training. For example, during the first phase of the 2+2+2, you should carefully examine which questions your employees get wrong. If you note that most students get a particular question wrong, this information will help you recognize shortcomings in your training program.

Furthermore, during the third phase of the 2+2+2 training you will be asking employees to provide examples of how they are using your training on the job. Here is a typical comment we have seen:

- *I started to get into an argument with a grumpy customer, but then I remembered the training you gave me, and I used the techniques. It worked great and I ended up selling the person a washing machine.*

Testimonials of this sort demonstrate how your training benefits the organization and may convince the CFO to increase your department's budget.

Digging deeper

It is important to practice what we preach, so if you would like to experience the power of boosting for yourself, send an email to ELGbooster@boosterlearn.com. You will automatically receive a series of boosters on this series of three articles. The boosters take only seconds to complete, and they will profoundly increase your ability to recall the content of the articles.