

# TRAINING REINFORCEMENT

Moving Beyond The Forgetting Curve



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the leader in training reinforcement





## Introduction

Pick any employee at your company, no matter the department, and ask them if they remember everything they were taught during their last training. Now ask them if they have changed their behaviors to better suit your company's objectives as a result of that training.

The forgetting curve proves that a majority of employees will forget important information within hours or days after training has ended. It also proves that without constant reinforcement, that knowledge will continue to fade. These are your training dollars going to waste.

Maybe your training program has great content, but are your employees actively changing their behaviors to better fit the needs of the business (e.g. using new technology, planning weekly meetings, following safety guidelines)? Without behavior change, you are only reminding employees; you are not reinforcing learning objectives.

What is the learning/forgetting curve and how can an understanding of it help your training program? This ebook will help answer these questions and give you a better understanding of why organizations need to continuously reinforce their learning objectives.



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## Chapter 1: The Forgetting Curve

### **WHAT IS THE FORGETTING CURVE?**

Back in 1885, Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, began an experimental study on the relative strength of memory over a short period of time. In his experiment, Ebbinghaus repeatedly tested various nonsense syllables (such as “WID”) over a variety of time periods. He later plotted these results on a graph for what is now called the forgetting curve.

From his studies, Ebbinghaus was able to determine the amount of time it takes to forget information. In addition, he was able to hypothesize on the effects of “overlearning” material. He hypothesized that overlearned material was harder to forget, making the participants’ forgetting curve shallower.

Ebbinghaus asserted three things about learning and increasing the strength of memory:

1. Using mnemonic techniques can help with memory representation
2. Information should be repeated over a period of time
3. Use meaningful material


So according to Ebbinghaus, in order to increase memory of a topic, it should be repeated continuously for a longer period of time. With each repetition of the material, you begin to retain more information. But Ebbinghaus' curve only deals with knowledge retention; it does not consider behavior change. Remembering material is only one part of training reinforcement. Knowing "how" to do something does not mean that you can actually do it.

### **WHY THE FORGETTING CURVE IS IMPORTANT**

Ebbinghaus taught us quite a lot with his studies on the psychology of learning and forgetting. We can directly apply this knowledge to training programs around the world, regardless of the industry or the content being learned.

Ebbinghaus' forgetting curve teaches us that through continuous training, participants can decrease the amount of material forgotten after training has ended (thereby increasing their knowledge retention). This increase in knowledge often leads to an increase in productivity and positively impacts a business' training return on investment.





“Without behavior change, you are not reinforcing;  
you are only reminding.”

## Chapter 2: Reinforcing Knowledge

### **WHY BEHAVIOR HAS TO CHANGE**

The forgetting curve teaches us that knowledge should be continuously reinforced over a period of time, using mnemonic techniques and meaningful material. So why does behavior have to change? Without behavior change, you are merely reminding your participants; you are not creating the behavioral change desired as a result of the training program.

For example, you can provide training to your participants on the importance of wearing a safety helmet while on a construction site and send reminders to them daily, weekly, or monthly. However, this does not mean they will actually wear the helmet. You need to reinforce behavior changes to get your participants to actually wear the helmet, not just retain the knowledge!

### **REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT**

One of the biggest aids to increasing knowledge retention (though by no means the only aid) is repetition. Repetition includes reviewing learned material and revisiting content that has already been covered. By introducing repetition, learning may not necessarily be enhanced but retention most certainly will.





## Chapter 3: Repetition's Many Forms

When re-learning material, it is important to spread the material over a period of time with an effective reinforcement program. This expertly crafted program should use meaningful material and repetition to increase knowledge retention and change behaviors.

In the reinforcement of behavior change, a participant will go through three stages:

1. The Knowledge/Skills Stage
2. The Awareness Stage
3. The Applying Stage.

### *Example Scenario*

*An administrative assistant is being sent to a class called "Telephone Guidelines for Customer Calls". She will learn everything about handling complaints and connecting calls. In the end, the organization would like customers to give a good score on end-of-call satisfaction surveys.*

### **The Knowledge/Skills Stage**

The administrative assistant has completed the training program but is still receiving low scores on end-of-call satisfaction surveys. In an effort to increase satisfaction scores, the client sends their administrative assistant to a refresher course on telephone guidelines.

After careful analysis, it is discovered that the administrative assistant did not know how to use the telephone and did not understand all procedures for dealing with customer complaints, causing the low satisfaction score.

In spite of her people skills, the administrative assistant could not provide quality customer service. The assistant is currently in the knowledge/skills stage.

### **The Awareness Stage**

In order to invest the time and energy into learning the necessary skills, the administrative assistant has to realize that the knowledge will help her perform the job at a higher level. She needs to find the knowledge relevant and meaningful.

### **Applying Stage**

After the administrative assistant understands that the training and knowledge are necessary for continued growth and has proven proficient in the necessary skills, she will then have to apply the information to the job.

In developing a reinforcement course, these three stages need to be distinguished. To provide each stage with meaningful material, a reinforcement specialist will need to analyze what is meaningful and identify the necessary steps to get there.

You can convince a person with facts and figures, but to inspire someone you need anecdotes and information on how the topic relates to and assists the learner. Each stage has its own demands for meaningfulness.

The participant will quit if the wrong materials are being used.

### **REPETITION IS ESSENTIAL**

According to Ebbinghaus' Forgetting Curve, we should remind participants five times before knowledge retention begins to plateau. Wouldn't it be amazing if participants could remember everything you taught them after only five repetitions?

Unfortunately, in daily practice, five repetitions are not enough. Depending on the research article and year it was published, some organizations believe material has to be repeated at least 20 times before it becomes a habit.

### **TIMING MATTERS**

Did you know that the time of day when Reinforcement Messages are delivered is also important?



Recently, Mindmarker created a Reinforcement Program for one of the largest companies in the hospitality industry. Their goal was to have managers using their system more effectively. After the Reinforcement Program, which focused on changing behaviors, 97.5% of the company's managers were working more efficiently.

The key to success for that Reinforcement Program turned out to be not only meaningful information and repetition, but also the delivery of Reinforcement Messages at the right time of day.

*Example Scenario*

*You recently trained an employee on your company's sales analytics program. During training, the employee was asked to check the software daily. You have reminded him more than five times over the course of two weeks, but he is still not actively checking the program on his own.*

With a Reinforcement Program, you can change his behaviors to better suit your business needs. Repetition, along with meaningful material will help you achieve this goal.

In the case of our sales analytics employee, the Reinforcement Program would start with messages reminding him to look at the program daily. Further into his reinforcement, he would receive messages that asked if he had a chance to review the software. And finally, he would receive messages concerning content that could only be seen by using the analytics tool, as well as ask for some self-evaluation regarding what was learned.

Organizations can increase the impact of their reinforcement programs by moving beyond the focus of remembering and paying attention to important factors such as repetition, timing, and behavior change.





## Wrap-Up

With the information in this ebook, you should have a better understanding of the learning curve, the forgetting curve, and how a reinforcement solution can help your current training program. Here is a quick summary of what was covered:

- › Ebbinghaus was a German Psychologist who asserted three things about the learning of information: use mnemonics, use meaningful material, and repeat information over a longer period of time.
- › Without behavior change, you are not reinforcing your training material; you are merely reminding participants. In order for training to be effective, behaviors have to be reinforced/changed in addition to knowledge retention.
- › Participants go through three stages when being reinforced: The Awareness Stage, the Knowledge/Skills Stage, and the Applying Stage.
- › In addition to repetition, content timing is incredibly important.