

# “Stupid is as stupid does...!”

(As Forrest Gump’s Mum would say)

Create a learning, not a training, culture in your business and massively increase ROI.

*A follow-up to our hugely popular “Brain Glue” White Paper with insight from Professor Nick Lee of Aston Business School and Adrian Harvey CEO of Elephants don’t forget*

## 1. Executive Summary

We published a White Paper earlier this year based on the 2013 work of John Dunlosky, Kent State University Professor of psychology, looking at effective learning strategies, <http://elephantsdontforget.com/files/brain-glue.pdf>. In it we showed that most students favoured truly *ineffective* learning strategies and that the two most effective strategies were distributed learning and practice testing.

Our recent research would indicate that L&D professionals know that for training to become ‘learning’ and for it to stick, then they must invest in post event activity, or as Dunlosky puts it, distributed learning and self-testing. This conclusion is also supported by Hermann Ebbinghaus’ proof about how the human brain ‘learns’

On 10<sup>th</sup> July 2013, we surveyed 141 attendees of a Personnel Today webinar <http://www.personneltoday.com> and asked them to estimate what percentage of their total training budget was invested in transitioning employees from being simply trained to genuinely learning the content. Remarkably, 95% admitted that they invested less than 10% of their total budget in learning and 85% of those admitted to investing less than 5% - many of whom privately admitted to investing NOTHING AT ALL.

Without investing sufficient time and effort (budget) in this activity, while employees receive ‘*training*’ they do not subsequently ‘*learn*’ the content of the training course.

This means employers are wasting millions of pounds annually, training their people who without adequate follow up activity, (very) promptly forget the content of what their employers have invested in them! Further review indicated that the primary reason for the lack of investment was not a shortage of knowledge on behalf of the L&D community, but rather failure by the line management to invest sufficient time or any budget for what was regarded as ‘unnecessary’ and ‘optional’ activity.

So is Forrest’s Ma right when she says “Stupid is as stupid does!”? And should L&D professionals start enforcing post event activity so companies develop *learning* rather than *training* cultures?

## 2. About the Poll

The survey was conducted during a webinar hosted by Personnel Today on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2013 called “Compliance Failure. How to stop staff forgetting”. The webinar was recorded and is available for you to watch via the Personnel Today website in the Webinars section. In it, Professor Nick Lee of Aston University, shared his knowledge of how the brain works to remember information and why people forget so much of what they are trained so very quickly.

During a section hosted by Adrian Harvey, CEO of Elephants don't forget, a live participant poll was conducted, the results of which are shown below. The question posed by host Rob Moss was:

"How much of your training budget is invested post event to ensure that staff have retained knowledge".

Percentage of Budget Spent	Volume
0-5%	80%
6-10%	15%
11-20%	3%
21-50%	1%
50% +	1%

The value of the individual training budgets was not established and therefore the above colour-coding is an estimate of what is clearly insufficient investment (red), what is likely to be more than sufficient (green) and what represents probable adequate investment (yellow).

Subsequent to the poll, Elephants don't forget made contact with a number of L&D professionals in an attempt to establish why this was the case.

### 3. Employees Forget Much of What You Train Them – GUARANTEED!

A "company", by definition: "a number of people gathered together; assembly" is therefore a group of people, and what differentiates one from another is the quality of those people. Jack Welch the iconic leader of General Electric (GE) put it most succinctly:

**"The team with the best players wins!"**

So what do companies do to ensure that they have the best players? Logically they recruit the best and then they invest in training to ensure that the best stay the best. BUT, just how effective is that training and are L&D professionals inadvertently failing their employees and collectively wasting billions of pounds every year because while they are training, employees are NOT learning? That is, they create a training culture not a learning culture?

Nick Lee, Professor of Marketing and Organizational Research at Aston University, featured in The Times as one of the 15 scientists whose work will shape the future, commented in the webinar:

"Learning cannot occur without repetition" and Hermann Ebbinghaus the 19<sup>th</sup> century German scientist proved this with his study into how quickly people forget and what to do to compensate for this. Check out [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgetting\\_curve](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forgetting_curve)

Ebbinghaus proved that people forget and they forget very quickly. In fact, the amount retained by an individual after 30 days was around 10% of the original content (see figure 1 below)! Now if your job is training employees to be expert in their role this is a depressing statistic!

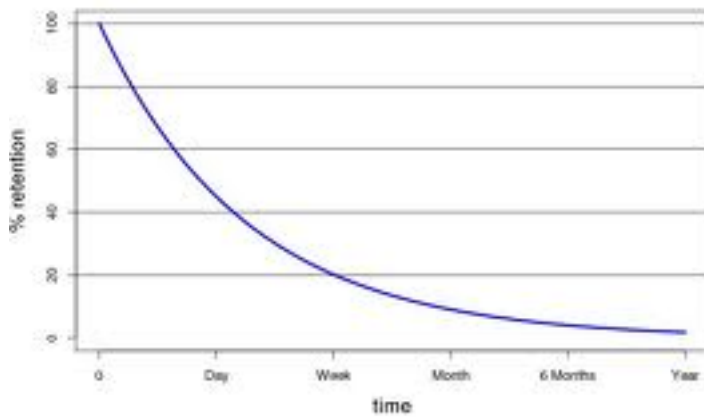


Figure 1 – Hermann Ebbinghaus' Forgetting Curve

Professor Lee went on to explain that any training must progress on to “learning”. It’s obvious. But in order for learning to occur the messages/content need to be frequently repeated and the most effective methods for doing so are self-testing and spaced learning.

What this means in a nutshell is that the subject matter in question needs to be revisited repeatedly after the training intervention, also that individuals are best served by being tested on their understanding and that this testing should be uniquely focused on their personal knowledge retention and not a ‘sheep dip’ exercise.

So sending all the participants of a training course the same ‘quiz’ (read ‘exam’ if you are an employee!) at a point in the future post the training is as ineffective as it is unpopular.

If your organization does not follow these science-based principles/rules then you are probably operating in a training culture and not in the desired, learning based culture.

#### 4. Line Management Influence the Outcome of Training Effectiveness

Post webinar telephone discussions with more than 200 L&D professionals, conducted by Elephants don’t forget, indicated that Line Management are a key driver of these results. By far the most common reason cited by L&D professionals as to why they didn’t follow the science was that their ‘internal clients’ (generally line management) were reluctant to or point blank refused to invest time, effort and budget in anything other than the ‘training event’.

The rationale centered around the TIME that was required to conduct post training activity, reinforced by the belief that line management didn’t understand the difference between training and learning. In other words, a line manager didn’t see why he/she should disrupt business-as-usual, by taking employees away from their day job to do something that as far as they were concerned had already occurred. After all, the employees had “already been trained, they don’t need training again so quickly afterwards”!

In other cases, commentators explained that training budgets, which were often viewed as insufficient, were ‘owned’ by the line management and when requests for post event activity were made, they were turned down as a waste of money. With little enough budget to cover what was deemed the ‘essential training requirements’, none was left over for ‘optional’ post event activity.

Some respondents admitted that line management considered the suggestions but rejected them on the basis that staff would be quickly bored with repetitive or follow-up training and thus would disengage. Boredom or training fatigue, particularly in relation to e-learning was frequently mentioned.

No commentator expressed the opinion, that despite knowing what was needed to create a culture of continual learning (as opposed to training), they simply chose not to do so; there were always external influences of time, line management buy-in and budget.

Therefore the biggest barrier cited for creating a learning culture was line management's lack of understanding as to what was required for an employee to learn and the fact that sending somebody on a training course didn't as one commentator put it "... immediately make that person a subject matter expert"!

## 5. Solution

Simply telling line management that they are wrong and they need to free employees for lots more refresher training and repetition is unlikely to work! We must be true to the science but we must also acknowledge the fact that the workplace is more demanding now than it has ever been and employees get precious little time for training and development.

The answer is to use distributed learning and self-testing that is low cost, takes little time from the employee's busy schedule and doesn't bore the employee.

[www.elephantsdontforget.com](http://www.elephantsdontforget.com) has an e-mail app (they also have a non email based app for companies who for data security reasons do not issue all their employees with email access) called 'Nelly'. Nelly is an artificially intelligent app that knows what your employees should know, what they have been trained on and most importantly what they *don't* actually know.

Coupled with this knowledge and using distributive learning and self-testing techniques, Nelly can facilitate the journey from training to learning and form the backbone of a continual learning culture in any business.

Because Nelly uses gamification techniques, employees love her and quickly become addicted to the daily interactions, in addition, line management love Nelly because she eats so little of the training budget (she is cheap!) and on average uses just 1 minute 42 seconds of an employee's precious time each day.

Compliance managers love Nelly because Nelly enables them to *prove* that employees genuinely know what they are required to know to comply with various increasingly strict Regulations.

L&D professionals love Nelly because not only does she make training into learning, but, because she never forgets, she can provide amazing insight into training effectiveness and future Training Needs Analysis.

Visit <http://elephantsdontforget.com/clients/> to see what some clients of Elephants don't forget think about Nelly and how this remarkable app helps them to create a culture of continual learning.

## 6. Conclusion

- Increasingly HR and L&D professionals recognise that post event activity is not an optional extra but is a critical part of the learning journey.
- Line management would appear to exercise considerable influence over either the availability of staff to attend training and/or the training budget itself.
- Line management would NOT appear to understand that attending a training course doesn't mean an employee has learned the content and few would appear to understand what is required in order for learning to occur.

There is no escaping the FACT that employees forget and there is no escaping the fact that certain knowledge retention/learning strategies work better than others. If L&D professionals are to have any hope of increasing their influence on enterprise success then they MUST educate line management about how learning actually occurs and furnish businesses with tools that employees willingly embrace and that work to transition employees through a training intervention on to genuine learning.

Failing to do so would appear to prove Forrest's ma correct!

## Appendix

Nick Lee Bio

<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/nick-lee/33/885/316>

Adrian Harvey Bio

<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/adrian-harvey/16/549/493>

Nelly bio

<http://www.linkedin.com/in/nellyelephant>