

Intentional learning: The fifth 'I' of real learning

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This brief exploration of truly intentional learning is the fifth element in the series explaining the six Is model of real learning. Each element – Individual, immersive, incremental, iterative, intentional and intrinsic is considered separately, so too the combinations that create measurable value from the application of what is learned.

Why intentional learning really matters

How many times have we heard 'you learn something every day'? Too many! Yes, we do learn everyday, and more than one thing, now here's the issue – what was even one thing yesterday, last Tuesday, or today so far? Most of what we learn is accidental, random, not managed anticipated or *intentional*.

Intentional learning is a deliberate, conscious and planned process. It starts with clarity around the specific knowledge, skill or capability you are working on, and want to improve.

If you are blindfolded and reach for any item on your desk it will take more time than if your eyes are open, and focused on whatever it is you want, and simply reach, then hold. Learning blind, by chance, and without eyes open is inefficient, wastes a lot of time, and is frustrating. Intentional learning is none of that, it is the quickest, most time effective and direct way to enhance performance.

The high value of intentional learning

Intentional learners create value by developing more quickly than the passive or dependent. It is possible to seek and select intentional learners, and yet it seems such proactive recruitment of genuinely self-managing deliberately developing people is rare.

An intentional learner is likely to use naturally, intrinsically occurring workplace experiences as the primary source of development. Any use of expensive organised events is in turn more likely to meet a known need than attended from a 'sounds like the right course for you' decision.

Intentional learners don't wait for a structured event to meet their clearly defined needs, they will exploit their real work experiences and opportunities to immediately and directly develop specific capabilities.

The pace of workplace change makes a lot of past treasured capabilities obsolete or of far less value than in past times. Intentional learning keeps high performers up with and ahead of current demands, needing far less direction, this for them is a largely self-managed process.

The greater the clarity of the need, the more agile an intentional learner can be in taking the decisions that most directly accelerate performance. If no better than a vague idea is held around the issues driving a developmental effort then even the best intentioned efforts will be inefficient, time consuming and wasteful of time and energy.

Not all intentional learning is informal, or entirely self-driven. Structure can multiply the value of intentional learning – for instance within a coaching or mentoring context; reading or video viewing, or an organised networking event. A finely tuned intentional learner will not need such explicitly development experiences to gain significant value, others less intentionally-focused or aware will gain most from an overtly developmental experience.

What prompts intentional learning?

The most impressive learners are driven by for instance, desire; curiosity; high personal standards; career advancement and reward. Intentional learning can, in an employed environment, be significantly helped by the guidance of an authentically interested line manager, a meaningful development review and planning process or a succession plan that gives direction and clarity around the meeting of specific and agreed individual development needs.

As the current, 'more from less' workplace finds little or no time for encouraging intentional reflection on performance, present or future, an organisation, unit or individual that dares to be different, that thinks before action is more likely to engage in unusual, intentional, efficient and targeted learning.

The first words of Nancy Kline's remarkable and accessible book 'Time to Think' 2020 are: 'Everything we do depends for its quality on the thinking we do first'.

Too often activity is expected and rewarded over productivity. Deliberate thinking and reflection is seen as 'not real work', in contrast to sitting in hours of pointless meetings, or endless phone calls that could take a third of the time invested.

Intentional learning requires conscious, deliberate and immersive thinking. Learning deliberately is no guarantee of instant success (see the 'iterative' element of this six part series), nor is it often a linear process. The intentional learner is persistent, goal-centred and resilient, and knows that deliberate reflection is the fuel of enhanced performance.

Intentional learning has greatest value when required for particularly complex, urgent, significant or unfamiliar tasks or activities, when efficiency of progression is essential, and wrong turns or delays have serious consequences.

A last, very practical thought...turn on your light

This started with not working or learning blindly, it is a theme worth reinforcing. Intentional learning is like navigating an unfamiliar room at night with the light switched on, allowing swift and safe movement. Turn that light off and everything changes. Intentional learning is the light that guides performance and achievement.

Reference made to Nancy Kline's 'Time to Think'.

[Nancy Kline - Time to Think](#)