# Create Development Streams to Improve Learning Retention

By Diane Law

Rivers and streams are among the most powerful forces on Earth. The currents in rivers are strong enough to pick up and move items as large as cars. Because the water is always in motion, it is continuously carving away at the land over which it flows creating valleys and canyons.

Similarly, personal development can be one of the strongest forces in an organization. And like a river or stream, learning needs to be continuous and contextual to be sustainable and create the desired impact. Corporate learning, however, has not always been thought of that way. As recent as a decade or two ago, learning was primarily event-based. Whether a course was face-to-face or e-learning, there was time set aside for professional development, with the hope that some of what was learned might get applied back in the workplace. Unfortunately, this most often was not the case. Hermann Ebbinghaus developed the forgetting curve back in 1885, which showed learners forget an average of 90 percent of what they have learned within the first month. Why? A lack of relevance and reinforcement.

Frequently, training is not directly relevant to an individual's role. Learners are not building upon what they already know; examples and cases are far removed from their industry; organizational culture and norms aren't taken into account; the timing is not right; or the learner could not translate what they learned back to their job. When they get back to work, it's business as usual and they fall back into old habits.

When back on the job, there also is often a lack of reinforcement. Time is not allocated to reflect on what was learned, opportunities to practice the learning at the workplace are infrequent, colleagues are not aware of any changes, and line managers don't explore with the individual how they can make best use of the new knowledge or capabilities. If anything, there might be a token comment asking how the course went.

Along came blended learning and microlearning to help people remember what they learned. Blended learning helps to reinforce learning, generally by using technology and pre-post refreshers to support face-to-face courses. Microlearning aids relevance by providing short, just-in-time resources that people use at the moment of need.

## Streaming learning

Blended learning has moved development by leaps and bounds. But it can still be quite event-based. At certain intervals, an individual is required to read, watch, or reflect. This can certainly help embed the lessons, but does it actually change people's mindsets of the way they do their work?

Sustainable learning is more like a stream of water than a series of isolated events. We must be continually learning and applying what we learn. Learning is much more than just receiving new information and gaining knowledge from other people. It's also about the path of continuous growth. This is backed by recent studies in neuroscience. Neuroplasticity refers to the continuous ability of the brain to reorganize neural pathways based on new experiences. New thoughts or skills carve out new pathways. Repetition and practice strengthen these pathways. With repeated and direct attention towards a desired change, we all have the ability to rewire our brains.

## Developing streams

As learning professionals, we can help change mindsets about development and help reinforce habits of continuous learning. We need to ensure that informal learning integrates with more formal learning and that people realize that they need an opportunity to reinforce new skills every day to form new habits and improved ways of working.

Enter the concept of development streams. A development stream is different from the more familiar model of a development pathway. Typically, a pathway is a preordained learning track that a particular subset of people in an organization follows. A development path is one-size-fits-all. A development stream is more individual and dynamic. To encourage a continuous learning approach each stream must

• have a clear outcome articulated around behavior change and its impact

• get peers and managers involved

• be incorporated into learners' work every day

• provide opportunity for to reflect and receive feedback

• focus beyond knowledge retention to lasting behavior change.

L&D professionals can significantly facilitate this process by encouraging the mindset for continuous learning. Think about your organization's culture. What already exists for L&D that you can piggyback on? Set up a framework so individuals and managers find it easy. Development streams include ideas, courses, microlearning, pointers to subject matter experts, examples of how to incorporate skills into learners' existing jobs, discussion points for managers, exercises learners can experiment with, and so on. For example, if someone wanted to become a first-line manager, what are all the possible things they could do to get knowledge and practical experience in that area. They could observe, mentor someone, or discuss with peers going through the same career stage.

Habits are best formed when we connect to an existing habit or daily routine. If someone wanted to spend five minutes a day planning how they could incorporate a specific emerging skill into their workday, they need to think

about what habits they already have in place that they can connect this new habit to. For example, can they tie five minutes into their morning routine of coming into the office, turning on their computer, and making a cup of coffee? When they return to their desk with their coffee, the first thing they do (before checking emails) can become thinking and writing down how they are going to reinforce their learning that day—whether that's through asking their manager for feedback, trying a new skill in a meeting, or teaching someone else about it.

As a river flows, smaller bodies of water called tributaries add to the volume and speed of the water. So, too, with development streams. Having a structure, resources, and framework can simplify the process so learners can build new learning habits into their day-to-day life. And this can increase momentum or a ripple effect. Someone who has incorporated one aspect of everyday learning into their routine notices the difference and finds themselves motivated to do more.