

Advancing Retail Through Sustainable Learning: Knowledge, Engagement, & Reinforcement



**“Tell me and I forget,
teach me and I may remember,
involve me and I learn.”**

—Chinese proverb

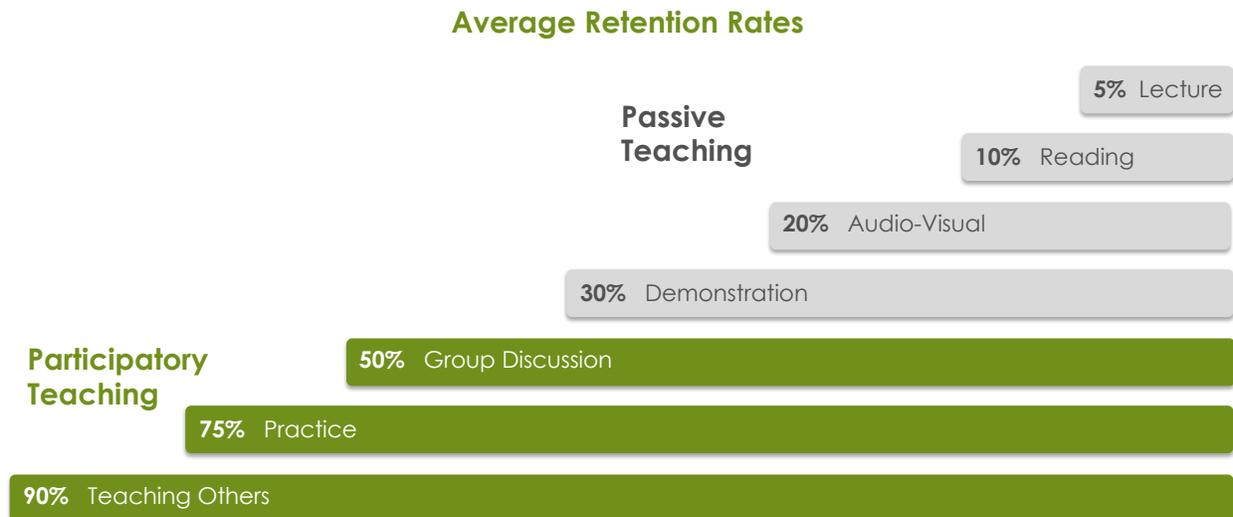
The concept of training has long been a maligned term in corporate America; it conjures up images of employees reluctantly pulled away from their day jobs and sequestered in a windowless conference room only to return exhausted and overwhelmed. In the meantime, emails and (more) to-dos piled up while they were away, so the training materials find a home in a desk drawer or on a shelf never to be touched again. For decades that has been a standard operating procedure, hence “training” got a bad reputation. It appeared the time invested in the training didn’t move the needle the way management and leadership wanted. In more recent years, the corporate world began capitalizing on new technology and pivoted to tactics such as online learning, microlearning, and gamification—yet these investments still often resulted in lukewarm results.

Unfortunately, over the years, we’ve come to consider ‘training’ as synonymous with ‘proficiency’ and nothing is farther from the truth. Proficiency happens through exposure to new information or skills, followed by consistent reinforcement, so the learner practices and becomes adept in using it. In this point of view, we’re going to talk about the fundamental issues—and implications—associated with traditional training methods and outline Parker Avery’s approach to creating an environment that supports the ultimate goal of **meaningful and sustainable learning**.

Understanding How Adults Learn

First, keep this phrase top of mind: *training does not equal learning*. After investing millions of dollars and thousands of hours in customizing a new technology, or redesigning an organization or reengineering business processes, a slight 12 to 20 hours are typically dedicated to the education of the employees. Adult learners are hands-on creatures; listening to the most energetic facilitator or watching someone else do the new task does little to help an adult learn, let alone become proficient at the new skill, but that clashes with our instant-gratification society. We assume that as adults, we should figure it out and move on.

However, adults simply do not retain information after attending a training session without a well-crafted support plan in place. The entire concept of training must be re-framed—because someone attends a few three-hour training sessions for a new system does not equate to proficiency in using the new system. Instead, what if the training session was poised as the ‘opening act’ for a new learner? It is their first exposure to the information, but it cannot stop there.



Adapted from National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine.

Many people know of the ‘learning pyramid,’ which emphasizes the need for adults to engage in hands-on practice as well as teach others the new skill. To embed new knowledge in your organization, you need in-house experts who can guide and support

others. It's critical you own the expertise, because the road to proficiency is a long one, but it can be accelerated.

Several years ago, in his book *“Outliers,”* Malcolm Gladwell suggested it takes approximately 10,000 hours to become an expert at just about anything. This timeframe is a depressing thought for today's fast-paced business environment: when you consider that one full-time equivalent (FTE) works approximately 1900 hours a year, Gladwell essentially says *it takes five years for an employee to become skilled* on a new business process or system. The good news is, while a catchy sound-bite, the 10,000-hour rule is decidedly flawed. However, it still takes more time than most think for team members to get up to speed. Much of this is due to how our memory and memory recall works.

Let's take a moment to understand human recall because it informs how best to shape a training program:

Encoding



We encode or *understand* information through several ways: acoustically (hearing), visually (seeing), semantically (interpreting), or tactilely (feeling, touching, or through emotion).

Storing



We determine where to store information: whether to slot it into short-term or long-term memory. But there's a catch—every bit of new information makes a stop in our short-term memory before we decide if it needs to move to long-term memory.

Consider this: most adults can retain a list of 7 items for no longer than 20 seconds.

Retrieving



If information is stored in short-term memory, it can usually be retrieved within the 20-second timeframe.

The sooner and more often information is recalled, the more chance it has to venture into the long-term memory—and there is a better chance at recovering it later.

Likewise the sooner and more often a skill is performed, the faster the road to competency becomes.

Understanding how the human brain handles most information is critical in developing sustainable programs that foster true learning and result in long-term knowledge retention, skill maturity, and ultimately—expertise. In the next section, we will look at some key ways to do this.

Accelerating the Learning Curve

Memory retrieval improves when **more senses are engaged** in learning new information; hence, remember the learning pyramid discussed earlier. The more involved a person is and the more often new skills are practiced, the ability, competence, or knowledge grows faster and deeper.

The Parker Avery Group focuses on building *learning plans* rather than training plans for our clients. There are three components to our approach, and they encompass pre, during, and post-learning. We call these components our '*learning retention imperatives*' to help adult-learners gain competency faster: **share** knowledge early (pre), **engage** the end-users' managers (during), and **reinforce** the experience after the fact (post). Let's take a deeper dive into what each of these means.

Share Knowledge Early. Start early and engage often; a new business process or system implementation is usually several months in the making. The organization's members know the change is coming, but typically don't know what to expect. This 'unknown' induces cognitive and emotional stress for employees, which slows down their ability to learn and retain information when the time finally comes because they are too caught up with unknown changes. *Do not wait* until the 11th hour to expose end-users to the 'grand reveal.'

Create a strategic communication and training roadmap to excite and engage the audience early; think of it as a media kit. Build a compelling message and find multiple mediums and platforms to broadcast how employees will benefit from the initiative. Develop and communicate a credible learning program for the impacted employees and their leaders, so they know what to expect and when it's coming. Consider workshops or seminars you can offer to prepare them for the new environment.

If the organization needs improved soft skills, offer change readiness workshops and team-building exercises. Conflict and tension are bound to happen, so consider a session focused on managing conflict or a negotiation.

Engage Management. Top-down, middle-out, and bottom-up is our mantra for leading change, *but the middle is where the magic happens*. Sponsorship from senior leadership is key for a new training initiative, but middle-managers are critical to successful training and change programs. As Harvard Business Review (among others) discovered:

“Mid-level managers weren’t merely managing incremental change; they were leading it by working levers of power up, across and down in their organizations.”

Consider ways to involve all levels of the organization during training, but especially trainees’ immediate supervisors. Ensure the supervisor attends the event, or better yet ask them to introduce the session(s) or participate in delivering the content.

As much as possible, try to include every level of the organization and hold management accountable for attendance and participation. Employees need to witness all levels rolling their sleeves up and making time to grow their skills.

Effective Learning

...includes hearing, seeing, and practicing new information as learners are exposed to it:



TELL

Explain the concept and the ‘why’ behind it



SHOW

Demonstrate how the concept is used in the real world



DO

Practice the concept (exercise, workshop, role-play)



REVIEW

Debrief the experience (what worked, why it worked)

Approximately every 45 minutes, participants need to practice or experience the information to which they were just exposed. Tools such as ‘micro-tests’ are particularly effective. While sometimes perceived as annoying to adults, there is merit to small, frequent blasts of memory recall. It helps learners shift new information into their long-term memory and identifies what material is sticking and what’s not.

According to the Derek Bok Center for Learning at Harvard University,

“Modern research in psychology suggests that frequent, small tests are one of the best ways to learn. By encouraging students to regularly recall information they have recently learned, you are helping them to retain that information in long-term memory, which they can draw upon at a later stage of the learning experience.”

Reinforce the Experience. This is where the investment in learning is maximized: consistent reinforcement and practice of new information and skills helps continue to shift the information from short-term to long-term memories. Training (or learning) plans should incorporate post-training activities and feedback mechanisms to uncover knowledge gaps and identify complementary and additional training opportunities. Because adults use a multitude of different ways to obtain, absorb, and retain information, consider the following medium:

- Online videos that dive into more details of each new competency
- Printable, brief user guides for quick and easy reference
- Pamphlet circulated that explains the ‘making of’ the new initiative
- Podcasts to reinforce key components
- Interactive ‘trivia hours’ where learners team up and test their skills
- Weekly online micro-tests to gauge how well knowledge and proficiency is improving
- Quarterly or annual events to introduce new and refresh past information

In our experience, one of the best methods to ensure long-lasting proficiency is to develop a train-the-trainer (TtT) certification program, which builds in-house expertise. In any of these techniques, it is often useful to find inspiration from pop-culture such as reality TV or TV series, game shows, board games, and online games. However, a balance must be struck between incorporating the ‘fun’ with keeping the overall tone and content mature and professional. Adult learners need to be engaged, but they will quickly lose interest if the theme or tone is perceived as silly or nonessential. Above all, remember that when people repeatedly learn and recall information over a prolonged time frame, they are more likely to retain the information.

Final Word

It's time to retire the word 'training' in a professional business setting. Adults are not trained—they are exposed to new information and skills on a continual basis. In today's uber-connected, fast-paced environment, information needs to fight hard to win space in our memories. We all want results quickly, but these results must be sustainable and built on for the long term. Our recommended retention imperatives will help accelerate your team's learning and growth by providing the critical help new information needs to shift from short- to long-term memory—and gain true proficiency. This is the real essence of learning—and with enough time, practice, and reinforcement, learning turns into competence.

The Parker Avery Group

The Parker Avery Group is a boutique strategy and management consulting firm that is a trusted advisor to leading retail brands. We combine practical industry experience with proven consulting methodology to deliver measurable results. We specialize in merchandising, supply chain and the omnichannel business model, integrating customer insights and the digital retail experience with strategy and operational improvements. Parker Avery helps clients develop enhanced business strategies, design improved processes and execute global business models.

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