SHORT BURSTS, NOT SHORTCUTS: THE VALUE OF LEARNING OVER TIME
ABOUT CORPORATE LEARNING
Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning partners with clients to create world-class leadership development solutions for managers at all levels. Our team leverages the management insight, thought leadership, and expertise of Harvard Business School faculty and authors from Harvard Business Review to create tailored leadership development solutions. With more than 20 years of practical experience, our innovative, technology-enabled solutions drive meaningful and lasting business results. Corporate Learning is a market group within Harvard Business Publishing.

ABOUT HARVARD BUSINESS PUBLISHING
Harvard Business Publishing was founded in 1994 as a not-for-profit, wholly owned subsidiary of Harvard University. Its mission is to improve the practice of management and its impact in a changing world. The company achieves its mission through its relationships with customers in three market groups: Higher Education, Corporate Learning, and Harvard Business Review Group. Through these platforms, Harvard Business Publishing is able to influence real-world change by maximizing the reach and impact of its essential offering—ideas.
SHORT BURSTS, NOT SHORTCUTS: THE VALUE OF LEARNING OVER TIME

Leaders are starved for time in this complex business world. Distributing learning in shorter segments over a longer duration can deliver a richer, more lasting learning experience that does more with less.

BY JEFF DeSMET AND MARISA PLOWMAN

Have you ever just sat back and watched a baby learn how to walk?

It’s amazing to see their minds in action as they become more aware of their bodies and what they are capable of doing. There is an innate readiness that must be present in order for them to take that first step. It cannot be rushed or faked, and the process is unique for each baby. However, the one commonality for all babies in learning how to walk is that it takes time. Time to test the waters. Time to fall and get back up. Time to practice over and over again until they can take their steps with total confidence and without fear or reservation.

Simply put, it takes time to learn.

This need to learn over time isn’t exclusive to learning how to walk. It applies to learning through life. Yet somewhere along the way as we grow from babies into adults, we try to rush the process, to take shortcuts to our development. Perhaps it’s the busy lives we lead, the to-do list that never gets fully completed, the many roles we play in our daily lives, or the feeling that we rarely get time to think that gets in the way of taking the time to learn. It’s the everyday demands that can hinder our dedication to learning.
“INNOVATIVE THINKING AND CREATIVITY, MUCH LIKE SWIMMING AND BIKING, ARE SKILLS BEST LEARNED THROUGH PRACTICE, REFLECTION, AND REPEATED APPLICATION.”
DAVID GARVIN, PROFESSOR, HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

For leaders, one of the greatest and often scarcest resources is time. Time to lead the business today while keeping a strategic eye on the future. Time to meet the growing demands of changing customer needs. Time to lead a team and develop future leaders.

What learning and development (L&D) teams are hearing from their businesses is that leaders today have no time, especially for development. Business demands mean leaders need to be focused on their jobs—not pulled away for development. Not only are learning professionals being called upon to develop future leaders, they are also being asked to speed up the development process. So week-long formal learning programs have been condensed into days, and daylong sessions are squeezed into hours. In other words, businesses still want L&D to help leaders learn, but they want it done under impossible constraints, which prevents learning professionals from accomplishing their goals.

Such challenges make it tempting for organizations to give in to the 70-20 of the 70-20-10 model for learning and development and forgo the 10 percent of learning provided through formal experiences such as courses and reading. This approach doesn’t ensure leaders are developing the right capabilities, skills, and mindsets needed to achieve their organizations’ goals. The 10 percent provides the glue for development. It sets the focus for the feedback received in the 20 percent and the on-the-job experiences of the 70 percent of the model. Therefore, learning professionals need to find a way to ensure the 10 percent takes place, regardless of the time challenges they face.

We are all bound by the laws of physics, so we can’t simply create more time for leaders. Still, shifting the design approach can solve this problem. By extending the duration of the 10 percent of learning, and using shorter experiences delivered over a longer time period, we can fit learning into busy schedules. The end result will be a richer, more lasting learning experience that will aid retention and allow for more transference of skills and behaviors in the workplace.

A Distributed Approach Creates Better Learning Opportunities

While it may seem counterintuitive to some, spreading learning out in short bursts over a longer period of time can actually accelerate growth. Distributed learning opens windows of time for essential opportunities for valuable learning experiences, such as:

- Thinking and reflecting on the concepts introduced during formal events, and their relevancy.
- Experimenting with new concepts on the job, and testing their applicability.
- Conversational learning via conversations with peers, bosses, and team members.

Concrete learning experiences are the basis for reflections; these reflections are then distilled into abstract concepts that can be tried out in new or different situations. Through reflections, learning is translated into action. A more distributed learning model—such as brief formal learning events once a week over a period of several months—provides learners with better opportunities for experiential learning between formal events. This type of approach will also help prepare and motivate managers to systematically learn from all of their experiences on the job.

Formal Learning | Informal Learning | On-the-Job Experience

| 10% | 20% | 70% |

It may seem counterintuitive, but extending formal learning over a longer period with short bursts can improve retention.
At Harvard Business Publishing, our approach to learning over time is intended to accelerate growth by supporting how people are innately designed to learn over time. Our design approach is founded on recognizing instinctual nature, reinforced by findings from learning research.

For example, in the *Journal of Memory and Language* (2005) Harry Bahrick and Lynda Hall noted, “the spacing effect is one of the oldest and best-documented phenomena in the history of learning and memory research…. The great majority of these investigations show that performance improves when practice is distributed rather than massed.” The reason for such positive outcomes is that learning over time increases opportunities for repetition and improves retention of the knowledge gained through learning (Hermann Ebbinghaus).

Knowing that time is a leader’s greatest and scarcest resource, time dedicated to learning needs to have a real impact. It needs to stick. It needs to be retained. What often appears with any traditional approach to learning is a “forgetting curve.” The further removed a leader is from the development experience, the less they remember, and the less behavior change is apparent. Spaced learning, however, limits the time a learner spends away from the learning event. It becomes clear over time that as each shorter learning event takes place, forgetting drops dramatically, and the spacing creates better opportunities for the on-the-job practice that really creates retention.

Spacing promotes retention of learning. Plus, a distributed learning structure provides opportunities for more experiential and informal learning opportunities between formal events.

### Typical Learning and Forgetting Curves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DURING LEARNING</th>
<th>REMEMBERING ON THE JOB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Learning Curve" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Forgetting Curve" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the learning events, memory for information is strengthened. As soon as the learning events end, forgetting begins.

### Learning and Forgetting with Spacing on the Job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DURING LEARNING</th>
<th>REMEMBERING ON THE JOB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Learning Curve" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Forgetting Curve" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the learning events, memory for information is strengthened. Spaced learning on the job turns the forgetting curve into a learning-and-forgetting curve, improving memory.

Leaders need to be able to translate their learning quickly into immediate action by practicing and applying what they’ve learned on the job. Yet many traditional learning solutions are designed to introduce the 10 percent of the 70-20-10 model in a face-to-face, training-like event in which leaders are expected to carve large chunks of time out of their day-to-day work lives to attend. Such an approach is not conducive to the retention needed to accelerate a leader’s development.

**Leveraging Technology to Maximize Learning**

What’s exciting today is that technology is giving organizations a means to create learning experiences that extend over time. Whether it’s extending or replacing a traditional classroom experience, learning professionals can space out learning interactions, even with large populations much more easily, driving much higher levels of long-term retention. Technology-enabled learning allows leaders to be more self-directed in their development and focus their learning based on what is most relevant to their current challenges in the moment. When learning is online, it also allows learners to tackle lessons when it works for them, giving them the opportunity to fit learning into their schedules so it doesn’t feel forced or like an intrusion into their busy days. Such an on-demand approach to development considers the readiness of the leader as a driving force behind the leader’s desire to learn.

**Learning Over Time in Practice**

For example, Adam Hickman, manager of leadership, business knowledge, and strategy at Consumers Energy, Michigan’s largest energy provider, has adopted a learning-over-time approach to leadership development for all leaders at his organization. Harvard Business Publishing is currently working with Hickman and his team of trainers to deliver the Consumers Energy “Leading with Impact” program, targeted to transform mid-level managers into more effective leaders over a nine-month period. This approach, which blends both self-directed and instructor-led learning using online components, has shaped Consumers Energy’s long-term strategy and influenced the design of all of its programs. The design ensures the participants have the time necessary to develop the readiness needed to change their behaviors as leaders—through short bursts of learning participants have time to absorb and process their formal learning, time to reflect and internalize their learning as it relates to them, time to receive feedback from others, and time to practice applying their new skills on the job.

“Any type of course is not a session or an event. There’s a long-term effort behind it,” said Hickman. “There’s no epiphany: you go to a course and then you’re an expert. You’re going to need experience, situations, time to let it soak in, do the follow-up... the training gives you the details and set-up; over time you get to mess around with it on an application to piece it together.”

**Doing More with Less**

L&D organizations that are being pressured to go shorter, shorter, and shorter, may find the best answer is to go longer. Our team has seen numerous programs designed to extend the time needed for learning through spacing without taking leaders away from their jobs for significant time periods. The approach not only aids retention, but also creates more space on the job for achieving the learning and behavior change they want to see. So instead of shortening the duration of the learning experience, try shortening the time to results through technology-enabled programs that put space and time between learning, reflection, and practice.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JEFF DeSMET is senior learning architect for Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning. He serves as the group’s lead strategist in the areas of learning architecture, adult learning theory, and pedagogy of Harvard Business Publishing’s portfolio of leadership development programs and continuous learning environments. jdesmet@harvardbusiness.org

MARISA PLOWMAN is a senior learning solutions manager for Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning. She is a solution architect responsible for designing blended leadership development programs aligned to the organizational objectives and strategy of global clients. marisa.plowman@harvardbusiness.org