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# Unintentional forgetting and unlearning

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This knowledge pill offers a comprehensive overview of unintentional forgetting and unlearning among knowledge-intensive business services enterprises (KIBS) small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

## Understanding of unintentional forgetting and unlearning



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- **Unintentional forgetting** «inability to recall previously learned knowledge or information from memory.
  - In addition to cognitive factors, geographically dispersed business units within an organization can contribute to this.
- **Unlearning** « deliberate process of discarding existing knowledge for updated or more relevant ones.
  - It requires individuals or organizations to overcome previous assumptions, habits, and misconceptions that may no longer be appropriate or applicable.
- As both lead to reduced knowledge, unintentional forgetting has negative consequences while unlearning can enable adaptation.

Unintentional forgetting refers to the inability of a person to recall previously learned information or knowledge from memory. This can occur due to several factors, including age-related cognitive decline, brain injury, or interference from other memories. In the context of business, unintentional forgetting can arise from the physical separation of geographically dispersed business units within an enterprise over time.

On the contrary, unlearning involves a conscious effort to discard or release existing knowledge or beliefs in favor of updated or more relevant information. It requires individuals or organizations to overcome previous assumptions, habits, or misconceptions that may no longer be valid or useful.

While both unintentional forgetting and unlearning may lead to a decrease in knowledge or information, unlearning can be seen as a positive action that allows for adaptation to new circumstances and challenges. Unintentional forgetting, on the other hand, can have negative consequences such as missed opportunities, decreased productivity, or even errors.

## Consequences of unintentional forgetting

Consequences of unintentional forgetting:

- Increased risk of errors and mistakes;
- Reduced competitiveness;
- Loss of institutional memory;
- Decreased employee morale and job satisfaction.



Source: Image by Augusto Ordóñez from Pixabay



Unintentional forgetting can have several negative consequences for individuals and organizations. These include an increased risk of errors and mistakes, which can have detrimental effects on both the organization and its clients. Furthermore, it can result in a loss of critical knowledge and skills, which can decrease competitiveness in the market.

Unintentional forgetting can also lead to a loss of institutional memory, making it challenging to build on past successes and make informed decisions. As a result, employees may become frustrated and stressed as they constantly need to relearn and adapt to changing circumstances, leading to decreased morale and job satisfaction.

## Benefits of unlearning



Source: Image by mohamed\_hassan from Pixabay



Unlearning can offer several benefits, including:

- ❖ Improved Innovation;
- ❖ Enhanced Flexibility;
- ❖ Increased Efficiency;
- ❖ Better Decision-making;
- ❖ Improved organizational culture.

Unlearning can bring several benefits to individuals and organizations. It creates space for new and updated knowledge, allowing individuals to stay ahead of the curve and generate innovative ideas for new products or services. Moreover, unlearning enhances flexibility, enabling individuals to be more adaptable to changes in the market and to adopt new ways of doing things.

Unlearning can also lead to increased efficiency by streamlining processes and operations, identifying and discarding outdated practices or systems, and creating more efficient workflows that save time and resources. Additionally, unlearning can promote better decision-making by letting go of outdated assumptions and biases, approaching problems with fresh perspectives and making better choices.

Moreover, unlearning can improve organizational culture by promoting a culture of continuous learning and improvement. It encourages employees to be open to new ideas and perspectives, which can lead to a more dynamic and innovative work environment. Overall, unlearning can offer several benefits that contribute to personal and professional growth, increased efficiency, and improved organizational culture.

## Personal factors that influence employees unlearning



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- Enablers
  - ✓ Willingness to face novelties
  - ✓ Tolerance for uncomfortable feeling
  - ✓ Being brave and willing to take risks
- Barriers
  - Fixed beliefs
  - Anxiety
  - Emotional traits
  - Age
  - Fear of hierarchy

When it comes to unlearning, there are several personal factors that can influence an employee's ability to let go of established knowledge or beliefs. These factors can either serve as enablers or barriers to the process.

Enablers of unlearning include having a willingness to face and embrace new and unfamiliar situations. Employees who possess this trait are more likely to adapt to changes and are open to exploring alternative ideas and concepts. Additionally, being able to tolerate uncomfortable feelings such as vulnerability, uncertainty, and even humiliation, is also an important enabler of unlearning. Employees who are comfortable with feeling uncomfortable are more likely to challenge themselves and take on new challenges. Finally, being brave enough to take personal risks is also an important enabler of unlearning. Employees who are willing to step out of their comfort zone and take calculated risks are more likely to learn and grow from new experiences.

However, there are several barriers that can hinder an employee's ability to unlearn effectively. One of the most significant barriers is holding onto fixed beliefs or established mindsets. Employees who are unwilling to let go of their preconceived notions or who believe that their way of doing things is the only right way will find it

challenging to unlearn effectively. Additionally, experiencing anxiety can be a significant barrier to unlearning. Employees who are anxious about change or who feel overwhelmed by the prospect of learning new things may struggle to unlearn effectively.

Emotional traits such as reacting negatively to imposed changes and fearing the unknown can also hinder an employee's ability to unlearn. Employees who have a strong emotional reaction to change may find it challenging to embrace new ideas or approaches. Age and a fear of hierarchy can also be significant barriers to unlearning.

## External factors for influence employees unlearning



Source: Image by Austin Distel from unsplash



- Enablers
  - ✓ Leadership behaviour;
  - ✓ Team reflexivity;
  - ✓ Supportive environment;
  - ✓ Crisis or turbulent environments.
- Barriers
  - Managers' attachment to old routines;
  - Managers with vested interests in the current situation;
  - Policies that no longer contribute to organizational progress;
  - Organizational memory.

To facilitate employees' unlearning, there are certain factors that can either enable or impede the process. The enablers are leadership behavior, team reflexivity, a supportive environment, and crisis or turbulent environments.

Leadership behavior plays a vital role in creating an appropriate unlearning context. Leaders who are open to new ideas, aware of environmental changes, and motivated to make changes can act as "change leaders" and help their teams adapt to new ways of thinking and working.

Team reflexivity is also crucial in facilitating unlearning. When team members constantly self-reflect, they can share information within the group and revise current routines and beliefs to align with new knowledge or changes in the external environment.

A supportive environment is one where there is openness, creativity, and vulnerability, which can foster an atmosphere conducive to unlearning. Employees need to feel safe and encouraged to question the status quo and experiment with new approaches.

Crisis or turbulent environments can also facilitate unlearning by creating a sense of urgency and forcing employees to adapt to new circumstances quickly.

On the other hand, certain barriers can hinder the unlearning process. These include attachment of managers to old routines in which they gained authority, senior

managers with vested interests in the current situation, existing organizational policies, structures, procedures, practices, and processes that no longer contribute to organizational progress, and organizational memory, which can make it challenging to let go of past practices and beliefs.



## Recommendations I

- Strategies to address unintentional forgetting and promote unlearning:
  - ❖ Implement knowledge management systems
  - ❖ Provide ongoing training and development
  - ❖ Create a positive work environment
  - ❖ Encourage a culture of learning



To address unintentional forgetting and promote intentional unlearning, there are several strategies that organizations can adopt. These strategies are essential for KIBS SMEs:

**Implement knowledge management systems:** Knowledge management systems help organizations capture, store, and distribute knowledge across the enterprise. This includes tacit knowledge that is embedded in employees' experiences and expertise. Implementing a knowledge management system can facilitate the sharing of knowledge and ideas, prevent knowledge loss due to employee turnover, and promote continuous learning.

**Provide ongoing training and development:** Continuous learning is a vital component of a culture of unlearning. Organizations should provide regular training and development opportunities for their employees to keep up with new technologies, industry trends, and emerging best practices. Offering such opportunities can motivate employees to learn and unlearn, and help them to develop new skills and competencies.

**Create a positive work environment:** A positive work environment is one where

employees feel safe to express their ideas, opinions, and concerns. This includes creating an atmosphere that encourages experimentation, risk-taking, and learning from failure. A positive work environment can promote a culture of unlearning and help employees to be more open to new ideas and approaches.

Encourage a culture of learning: Creating a culture of learning involves promoting a mindset that values continuous learning and improvement. This includes encouraging employees to seek out new knowledge, experiment with new ideas, and take risks to improve their performance. A culture of learning can also promote collaboration and knowledge sharing, leading to new and innovative ideas that can help the organization to adapt and grow.

## Recommendations II

- Strategies to address unintentional forgetting and promote unlearning:
  - ❖ Ensure effective communication
  - ❖ Allocate sufficient time and resources for practice and reinforcement
  - ❖ Provide job shadowing and cross-training opportunities
  - ❖ Support the use of technology
  - ❖ Regularly review and update job descriptions and responsibilities

**Ensure effective communication:** Effective communication is vital for promoting unlearning and preventing unintentional forgetting. It is essential to have open channels of communication throughout the organization, including regular feedback, team meetings, and cross-functional communication. Clear and concise communication can ensure that employees understand their roles, responsibilities, and expectations, and can facilitate the exchange of ideas and knowledge.

**Allocate sufficient time and resources for practice and reinforcement:** Allocating sufficient time and resources for practice and reinforcement is crucial for promoting unlearning. It is important to provide employees with the opportunity to practice new skills and behaviors regularly. Reinforcement of new behaviors and skills can also help to ensure that they become ingrained in employees' routines and habits.

**Provide job shadowing and cross-training opportunities:** Job shadowing and cross-training opportunities can facilitate the sharing of knowledge and skills between employees. These opportunities can provide employees with exposure to different areas of the organization, leading to a better understanding of how the organization operates. They can also encourage the exchange of ideas and insights, leading to new and innovative approaches to problem-solving.

Support the use of technology: Technology can be a powerful tool for promoting unlearning and facilitating the sharing of knowledge and ideas. Technology can provide access to information and expertise across the organization, regardless of physical location. It can also help to automate routine tasks, freeing up time for employees to focus on learning and unlearning.

Regularly review and update job descriptions and responsibilities: Regularly reviewing and updating job descriptions and responsibilities can help to ensure that employees are engaged and motivated to learn and unlearn. It can also help to prevent employees from becoming complacent or bored with their work. Regular reviews can also ensure that job descriptions and responsibilities are aligned with the organization's goals and objectives.

## Sources and find out more!

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