How to Build and Change Habits in the Workplace
Over the last few years, we have seen more and more large clients that are under significant pressure to change, and quickly. The source of the pressure might be disruption by smaller players. It could be the need to digitise aspects of their operations or their customer experience. The reasons are many and varied. What’s common among them is that the need to change nearly always means a need to change the behaviour of their people.

In *Thank you for Being Late*, Thomas Friedman proposed a reason that goes a long way to explaining this phenomenon\(^1\). He points out that somewhere between 2007 and 2017, the pace of change began to exceed the rate at which we as human beings can adapt to it. In this period a combination of technological factors from the ubiquity of cheap bandwidth to the rise of smartphones and mobile apps, accelerated the rate of change. Now the discomfort and disorientation we are feeling in life and in work is a result of our struggle to keep up with the pace of change.

So why do we find this acceleration so uncomfortable? And why can’t we adapt more quickly? The reason is that we are starved for opportunities to reflect. Our ability to change is dependent on our ability to reflect. As John Dewey said, “We don’t learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience.” And when our rare and precious attention is lost to lengthy working days filled with endless meetings, and what remains of it is distracted by devices, apps, social media, and the latest series on Netflix, we find there is no time left for deep reflection on our experience. And if we can’t reflect on our experience, how can we change it?

This isn’t only an individual need. It’s an organisational imperative. For large organisations to change, they need their people to adopt new perspectives, and new ways of working. But this isn’t as simple as distributing new job descriptions. For people to truly change, their behaviour must be influenced by powerful ideas and deeply felt emotions. And that requires the space and time to reflect, and the opportunity and support to apply new learnings.

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**“For people to truly change, their behaviour must be influenced by powerful ideas and deeply felt emotions”**
Introduction: Creating habits through learning

Through a decade of analysis, Towards Maturity has explored how learning innovation done well delivers real impact that matters to organisations. We consistently find that highly successful organisations embrace learning as a means to deliver profit, growth, transformation and productivity. High performing learning organisations know how to build new capabilities quickly and ‘unbuild’ old behaviours that are no longer relevant. There are many approaches you can take to become a high performing learning organisation; this study seeks to explore one route in particular—creating habits.

The ability to change behaviour through habit creation is crucial to becoming a top performing organisation, particularly as learners have the skills to efficiently learn and unlearn knowledge. People professionals have a unique opportunity to go beyond the tangible, shaping not just the content that is being taught, but how the knowledge is integrated into the behaviour of the learners.

Habits are routinized actions that embed new behaviours into the business. Although they appear to contradict the concept of an agile learning culture, the ability to rapidly create new habits and change behaviour on an ongoing basis means that an organisation is flexible enough to adapt to change. By creating a habit, or rather a reflexive action within individuals, L&D professionals have the capability to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of learning as a whole within their organisation.

Drawing on data from over 700 L&D practitioners, 10,000+ learners and our case study with West Midlands Police, we have uncovered 2 key fundamental attributes required to change behaviour and produce habits in the workplace: application and reflection. Top performing organisations are:

- 3X more likely to successfully apply learning (vs average)
- 3X more likely to encourage reflection (vs average)

When considering how this study fits into existing research, Kolb’s learning cycle comes to mind. His work into experiential learning explores how habits are created through a cycle of learning, application and reflection. This is of no surprise since, according to Dr Mike Ebersold, “unless you keep recalling [a] manoeuvre, it will not become a reflex”⁴. This secondary research provides invaluable insight into the importance of application and reflection within habit creation, although it provides little in the way of guidance for how these attributes can be achieved.

This study seeks to challenge your understanding of learning by exploring how to create behavioural change through habits. Through a small change, L&D can make a big difference.

Here are two key questions we will look to answer in this study:

1. Why should I be interested in creating and changing habits within my organisation?
2. What elements go into habit creation and how can I achieve them?

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Which key dimension of the Transformation Curve is covered in this report?

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4 Peter Brown interview of Michael Ebersold, December 31st (2011), Wabasha, MN
Creation of habits: The role of application

Key Take-aways

1. Prioritise application of learning. New behaviours can only become embedded in learners through application and constant practice.

2. Embed support, in a variety of forms, throughout your organisation as this underpins the very success of application.

Whilst great learning interventions build the foundations for behaviour change, a focus on application ensures that new ideas and knowledge are put into practice. It would be impossible to create a habit without application since a habit is constructed through a cycle of repetitive action and reflection. But how can one successfully achieve application? To most organisations, this is a challenge in itself.

18% of organisations were successful in improving the application of learning at work. We explored the tactics that correlated to their accomplishment and identified 3 common characteristics that influenced success:

- Extend Classroom
- Apply
- Performance Support
- Role of Manager

“Organisations who report successful learning application are 14% more likely to prioritise coaching and mentoring within their work culture”
1. Extending classroom
Classroom training is still the go-to medium for 55% of our training interventions. Those successful at application know how to work with trainers to actively extend learning beyond the classroom. Those that apply blended learning tactics are 3X more likely to achieve application and furthermore, organisations that are integrating technology within their educational programmes are 28% more likely to agree that staff apply what they have learnt.

2. Performance support
For successful organisations, formal learning does not just stop at the end of a training course. Those successful at encouraging application also ensure continuous support is provided to make it easier for learners to find guidance and build confidence in applying the knowledge they have been taught. Organisations provide support not just through people, but by embedding different points of support within their learning structures. Technology helps to make support easier to access, which is why organisations who have achieved application are 3X more likely to use tags and metadata to guide learners to information at the point of need. Although not explicit, this structural support ensures learners can find any help they need with ease.

3. Role of manager
Managers have an important role to play in the creation of habits. When we ask workers – how do you learn what you need to do your job? 81% say support from their managers, and 70% of learners said that “support from my mentor/coach/buddy”, is essential or very useful. This figure appears to be increasing year on year.

The way that managers are supported and encouraged to apply learning will influence the support they provide to their staff. It’s therefore unsurprising that there is a strong correlation between those who have achieved application and organisations that support the development of managers and leaders through learning technologies. The vital role of the manager is further underpinned by the fact that organisations who report successful learning application are 14% more likely to prioritise coaching and mentoring within their work culture. That is why there is also a strong correlation with organisations who successfully apply and organisations that equip managers with resources to help their team make the most out of learning.

Supporting Application Beyond the Classroom

To extend the classroom, it helps to stop thinking of instructor-led training as an event, and rather to think in terms of a learning journey:

1. Provide a Goldilocks period for prep work in advance: not too long, not too short.
   
   One to two weeks usually suffices to give busy participants time to engage in preparatory exercises.

2. During the prep stage invite input with appreciative inquiry.

3. Use inputs received during the prep stage in the classroom.

   Show participants that they’ve been heard by using their inputs during classroom training as springboards for further discussion.

4. Set up reflective exercises periodically after classroom training.

   Set aside time and provide support for learners to reflect on the classroom experience immediately after, then a few weeks after the classroom experience.

5. Collect and share data throughout the process.

   Look for opportunities to poll or survey learners, or even to analyse their contributions for trends.

by Cognician
The activity of reflection is based on the recollection and review of past experiences, enhanced by the consideration of future changes. Stopping and thinking has become more popular through the growth in mindfulness activities. Although stopping and reflecting has been proven to be critical to learning, only 14% of organisations are successful in actively encouraging it. Reflection is an activity that is largely overlooked and under-valued by L&D professionals as a tool to aid with learning. Interestingly, learners are more open to reflection than people professionals, with 7% more learners actively making time to reflect on what they have learnt than L&D leaders.

This chapter explores what successful organisations are doing differently to those that want to encourage reflection but do not succeed. We will discuss 3 attributes that clearly differentiate those that achieve reflection and those that do not:

1. Embrace reflection and embed it within your learning strategy - it will help new behaviours and knowledge stick!
2. Value the role of reflection in learning - only once you fully appreciate and understand its impact, will you make the most of it.

Key Take-aways

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"Only 14% of organisations are successful in actively encouraging reflection."
Creation of habits: The role of reflection

1. Use science and research

L&D professionals who successfully encourage reflection use scientific thought when developing their L&D strategy. Of particular relevance is their awareness and application of learning theory. With an awareness of the science of learning theory, organisations tend to have a deeper understanding of the value reflection can add to their learning culture. Thus, organisations who “encourage reflection” are twice as likely to be aware and apply evidence to their strategy.

An example of this is the role of micro-learning and spaced learning. This is a learning technique developed and influenced by research; since research uncovered the effectiveness of shorter learning sessions spread over a longer period of time. That is why 56% of organisations who achieve reflection encourage and value micro-learning, compared to 24% who do not achieve reflection.

2. Structured thinking

Reflection is an active process that requires both structure and space from leadership and organisational systems. In order to successfully achieve reflection within your organisation, there needs to be clear direction that embeds reflection within the learning process. Successful organisations often have clear goals set out before the learning takes place and they provide time for and facilitate reflection during the working day.

3. Encouragement

Our data shows that encouragement, through both tools and individuals, is linked to learners practicing reflection. The active process of reflection can be guided by L&D professionals who encourage the use of online tools to reflect, whilst also providing access and support during the process.

Organisations who successfully reflect are 6X more likely to support contextualised learning and 3X more likely to improve support for personal professional development than those that do not reflect. This suggests that organisations which provide general support and encouragement across the business are better at encouraging and achieving reflection within their organisation. This then impacts the organisations ability to create and change habits.

Science snapshot

Examples of learning theory proven to improve results:

1. Reflection
   In Learning by Thinking, Stefano and her colleagues describe how the process of reflection, or “the intentional attempt to synthesize, abstract, and articulate the key lessons taught by experience,” can lead to significant performance improvement.

2. Self-expression
   In a short paper entitled, The Benefits of Writing, Peterson and Mar make reference to numerous studies that show how writing about stressful or uncertain experiences can produce a range of physiological and psychological benefits.

3. Application
   In Experience & Education, John Dewey explores the qualities of educational experiences, which are conducive to the development of habits.

4. Spaced practice
   In Learning that Lasts through AGES, Kiefer et al, bring together multiple references to support the practice of spacing learning experiences over time to accelerate learning gains, and make learning more durable.

5. The neuroscience behind reflection
   In The Art of Changing the Brain, James Zull explores the mechanisms of reflection, and how they change the brain. He writes, “The art of directing and supporting reflection is part of the art of changing the brain.”

by Cognician
Technology: Aiding with the success of application and reflection

Key Take-aways

Utilize technology to its full capacity - it is a tool that, when used properly, can increases the opportunity to create habits.

Ensure that data is analysed to create usable insight. Do not waste it!

Technology provides all L&D professionals with a greater opportunity to develop habits within their organisation. It enables learners to keep connected with staff long after training has been completed.

What technologies are organisations, who are successfully creating habits, using the most?

Organisations that successfully create and change habits are clearly using the below technologies more than the average organisation. Technologies such as learning communities and internal learning portals appear to be the most influential in creating behaviour change because they create a sense of support and direction.

As we have already established, support and guidance are central to successfully applying learning and encouraging reflection in the workplace. Since application and reflection are responsible for creating and changing habits it appears that organisations who utilize technologies that specifically support and guide, are more successful in creating a behaviour change.

The hidden data

Technology doesn’t just shape how learners learn, apply and reflect, it also produces a wealth of data that, when analysed, could be used to create invaluable insight.

Data provides an opportunity to track, measure and understand the progress of habit formation. For organisations that routinely collect and analyse data on learning, whether that is the extent to which people have understood or applied it, they are more likely to achieve application and reflection – both of which underpin the formation of habits within organisations.

You cannot manage what you don’t measure, this is especially true for habit formation.

Support and guidance are central to successfully applying learning and encouraging reflection in the workplace.

The Cognician Coaching Guide

A Cognician coaching guide (COG) is a script of coaching questions, reinforced by an array of features that contribute to reflection and application:

1. Question prompts enable structured guidance for reflection and a means to encourage and capture written responses.

2. Insight prompts offer a means to crystallise and articulate forward models for behaviour, as well as a means to make public commitments to change.

3. Follow-through prompts allow learners to set reminders to nudge them to follow through on the commitment to change.

4. Sidebars offer case studies and stories that provide rich context for target behaviours, and what coaches sometimes call alternative narratives.

5. Gamification elements, including badges and leader boards, create incentives to participate in change programmes – but the “game” must be meaningful to the learner.

by Cognician

The Cognician Coaching Guide
West Midlands police force serves a population of almost 2.8 million. With a shrinking force dealing with increasing demand, a real change needed to happen if the officers were to remain effective in their roles.

In 2017, the Force Contact Department launched an online platform that allowed members of the public to report incidents online, in an attempt to reduce pressure from their emergency 101 number that received 2,000 emergency calls every day. The goal was to double the number of reports submitted online from 2% to 4%. However, there were 2 key challenges preventing the successful uptake of this platform:

1. Front line officers were not aware of the online platform
2. There was a lack of digital confidence amongst police staff

**The Solution:**

Facing a number of issues, the force partnered up with Accenture and Cognician, a digital coaching platform, to create a 30-day challenge to build confidence, share knowledge and establish new and lasting habits.

**Steps to success:**

- Officers and staff members helped shape the solution up front, ensuring that they would be engaged and participate in the learning. Workshops provided insights into what daily activities would be needed to achieve the goals and how they needed to be framed to engage the audience.
- Officers received, reflected on and completed daily challenges through mobile devices or desktop. The platform used gaming elements and interactivity with other participants to create a sense of competition which ensured engagement was maintained.
- Officers were encouraged to repeat activities with slight variation, using structured and regular repetition in different contexts to ensure that officers reflected on their experiences and learnt from them.
- Through a shared platform, learners reflected on their experiences of the days challenge and could view and respond to other officers’ insights. Reflecting became an active process whereby managers encouraged, and spared time at the end of the shift, for their teams to reflect on their experiences in order to improve in the future.
- Technology did not just allow for support through the creation of a learner community but gave learners guidance in what they should reflect on through the use of games and targets. There was a clear structure to the learning that was made apparent as officers collected different badges for completing challenges on a daily basis.

Managers enthusiastically participated in the learning process as they reminded officers in their daily meetings about the days challenge and where they were on the leader board.

The new approach to learning created both an individual and organisational change as it increased the agility and flexibility of the West Midland's police; ensuring they could adapt to their challenges.

Read more on this case study at towardsmaturity.org/changing-police-habits

Alice O’Neill, Change Practitioner, West Midlands Police

“...The creation of new habits, through application and reflection, was undeniable within West Midlands police. The number of incidents reported online has doubled and reached the 4% target, the public are spending more time on the website as they are valuing the advice given online and the digital capabilities have increased.”
It is clear that the ability to change behaviour through the creation of habits is beneficial to any organisation that is aspiring to be a top performing organisation. But successful learning habits do not just come into fruition without a plan. The process of habit creation is an active one that requires direct engagement with L&D professionals if it is to be successful. Habits are constructed over time through a cycle of learning, applying and reflecting.

Here we have developed on from existing research and established how organisations can successfully apply and reflect in order to create habits through:

**Application:**
- Extending Learning
- Performance support
- Role of manager

**Reflection:**
- Using science and research
- Time to think
- Encouragement

Almost ironically you need to take a moment to reflect and consider what has been said in this report:

Why does this matter to me? Why does this matter to my organisation?

By making a few small changes to your L&D strategy, people professionals have the ability to shape behaviour within their organisation. This change will deliver real impact in your organisation by aiding in: successful transformation, organisational growth, increased productivity and profitability.
Tips for building habits

- Extend the classroom
- Equip managers to support
- Create and change habits
- Harness technology
- Construct a process for application
- Apply science
- Establish reflection as essential
- Devise tools to support performance
- Provide encouragement
- Give permission and time to think

“Creating habits is not necessarily the solution to all of your L&D problems, but it certainly helps create an engaged workforce that can easily adapt to change.”
Have you ever been lucky enough to have a conversation with a great mentor or coach, which fundamentally changed your thinking and shifted your behaviour? How do you think your organisation would change if everyone could have a conversation like that? Cognician makes it possible for everyone to have life-changing conversations. We provide digital coaching to assess the workforce of today, and drive reskilling and behaviour change in the workforce of the future. In short, we change hearts and minds, at speed and at scale.

Find out more about how we can help your organisation at: www.cognician.com

Towards Maturity is a team of expert analysts offering 15 years of independent research and specialist advice to the L&D market. We help companies become high-performing learning organisations by applying trusted evidence to analyse, activate and accelerate change. We are proud to lead a vibrant community of practice, supporting leaders and people professionals to make smart learning decisions that deliver real impact.

Since 2003, Towards Maturity has championed independent research, uncovering insights that have advanced the world of learning and development. We have built one of the the largest global L&D data pools across 60 countries and all industry sectors, continuously finding and sharing what's working in learning. More than 6,900 leaders and people professionals and 45,000 learners have contributed to our L&D strategic and learner intelligence portfolios.

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Wherever your starting point, we can help you transform your L&D strategy and accelerate your impact. Explore our resourceful website, complete the L&D Health Check, talk to one of our expert analysts or join our proactive community called the ‘learning innovation group’. Find out more about how Towards Maturity can support you: towardsmaturity.org/services

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The Towards Maturity L&D Health Check uniquely analyses where you are now and where you want to be. We also benchmark your insights with the top performers around the globe and help you identify the best route to success that will work for you. The Towards Maturity Health Check is considered one of the most comprehensive independent reviews of how organisations are establishing successful learning strategies in the workplace. Find out more about the Towards Maturity Health Check at: towardsmaturity.org/healthcheck

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