

# The Human Factor

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*“The mind is not a vessel that needs filling but wood that needs igniting.” –  
Plutarch, Greek historian*

This is a wonderful time in the evolution of the human experience.

Technological advancements continue to abound and astound. Seemingly everything we could ever want is at our fingertips. More and more, as humans come to depend on digital solutions and artificial intelligence, digital solutions and artificial intelligence become dependable. So, it is natural that when it comes to performance development, more and more companies are looking for e-learning options when weighing the pros and cons of sales training.

The potential benefits are clear, as such options can cut the cost of time and money in half. It is worth exploring learning experiences that leverage the convenience and enjoyment of e-learning solutions. As the training industry does its best to keep up with the technology race, the question of the human factor becomes increasingly relevant. In today’s technologically evolving environment, is the comparatively higher cost of in-classroom, facilitator-led training necessary? And ultimately, is it worth it?

Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist and pioneer in the field of memory and psychology introduced both the forgetting curve (the rate at which information is forgotten) as well as the learning curve (the rate at

which information is learned) in 1885. According to his research, nearly half of what is learned is forgotten within days, depending on the strength of the memory. That said, when considering the billions of dollars invested in training each year, it's worth ensuring that the investment is equally aimed at the strength of the memory intended by that training.

This article addresses three critical components of the learning process: predisposition, the learning event, and application and reinforcement.

Furthermore, this article aims to assess the value and necessity of human interaction during all three components as it pertains to the strength of the memory each are designed to ensure.

#### Component 1: Predisposition

We've learned a lot about learning. Neuroscience and our own human experience have given us enormous insight into what it takes to learn a new skill, method or behavior correctly, so that the learner can effectively implement it into his or her working life, even when the shortcut of falling back into old habits is ever so tempting.

This is especially true in sales training where the sales professional, whether a novice or veteran, comes to the table with a lifetime of already learned and, often, deeply embedded methods and styles of sales skills (i.e., communicating, listening, asking questions, managing resistance, negotiating, etc.).

The greatest obstacle to learning something new is replacing – or unlearning – the familiar and habitual. Therefore, a learner’s attitude about learning going into the process is crucial for success.

An adult learner must feel personally incentivized. In “Writing and the Brain: Neuroscience Shows the Pathways to Learning,” neuroscientist and educator Judy Willis explains, “...that is when the brain predicts pleasure and applies efforts to achieve the desirable goal.”

To this end, the value of a powerful and relevant predisposition cannot be underestimated. Learners need to hear from a human who has walked in their shoes, who can empathize with the discomfort of setting aside old ways and share their experience of the value of learning the new ways. More than anything, learners need an answer to the questions, “Why do I need to learn this?” and even more, “Why would I *want* to learn this?”

Managing learners’ expectations and attitudes about the value of the learning is the first worthwhile investment, and an empathetic human can have considerable influence over the necessary attitude and enthusiasm of learners prior to the learning event.

## Component 2: The Learning Event

In Andrea García Cerdán’s article, “Mirror neurons: The most powerful learning tool,” Cerdán asserts, “humans are social beings programmed to learn from others.”

The human brain is hardwired to learn through observation and mimicry; wired with mirror neurons, it cannot help itself. When the goal is to learn a new set of human behaviors, the best resource we may have is a human model. It is of course possible to have the behavior modeled on a screen, in the form of a video or virtual simulation, however, most learners must be able to continue to ask the questions: “Why?” or “What if?” Some brains simply cannot learn until those fundamental questions are answered – and then answered again, and again, to the learner’s satisfaction. They, of course, must have the opportunity to practice the new behavior, with a pair of human eyes and ears watching to correct, coach and advise. They must have the opportunity to continue asking questions, to express doubt and share the excitement when something clicks.

The same mirror neurons that create our aptitude for observation and mimicry also give empathetic teachers the ability to influence learners’ emotions and attitudes during inevitable moments of frustration and enthusiasm. Emotions are contagious, and they are profoundly relevant to the learning process. Research shows that the limbic system, the emotional part of the brain, can either open or shut down the learning process entirely. Stress and frustration can make it physiologically impossible to learn something new; conversely, the release of dopamine, the “feel good” sensation, motivates the brain, allowing it to create more connections and activate more neural pathways, increasing and enhancing the learning process, leading to longer-term memory.

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In the article, “Learning and Memory: How Do We Remember and Why Do We Often Forget?” published by BrainWorld Magazine, Kenneth Wesson notes, “learning experiences become more memorable when social-emotional memories are part of the learning event, which is why cooperative learning is such a powerful memory-enhance.”

A human teacher is a necessary component of that cooperative, social learning environment.

## Component 3: Application and Reinforcement

If the forgetting curve is correct, and learners have only days before they forget half of what they’ve learned, the learning experience must extend beyond the workshop itself; just as importantly, the application phase must begin immediately. After all, we only have a matter of days! In this way, e-learning apps, digital reminders and every other technological tool we can dream up are equipped for reinforcement and motivating the learner to apply these new skills.

That being said, it is crucial that participants are applying new behaviors in their intended way as they move into the application phase of the learning process.

In Andy Hunt's book, "Pragmatic Thinking and Learning: Refactor Your Wetware," Hunt points out that people at a lower skill level tend to overestimate their own abilities by as much as 50%. This can be a problem when sending someone with newly acquired (and likely, lower) skill set out to practice new skills. If they are unable to perceive their own progress clearly, it can be difficult to actually progress. It is easy to practice something incorrectly, even with the best of intentions, without the help of a coach. Whether that coach is a manager, colleague or the original facilitator, nothing ensures the success of a new endeavor as much as intentional coaching. A learner must continually have another person with whom they can ask questions, express frustrations and share success stories.

## The Human Factor

With all that neuroscience continues to teach us about how we learn, when it comes to sales training, we must also consider what "sales" is.

Sales is a social science and an emotional art; at its heart, it's the process of building relationships with clients and customers while guiding them through the frequently emotional waves of the buying process. A sales professional is like a doctor whose essential job it is to guide a patient from a problem to a solution. More than simply understanding the technicality of the solution, though, the doctor must also have the social and emotional means to understand the patient.

We might call this “the human factor.” We might also call it empathy, trust, confidence, patience, intuition or, simply, the ability to deeply connect with another human being. While there are multiple areas in which we can, and should, celebrate the effectiveness and convenience of e-learning and digital resources, teaching that critical human factor is simply not one of them.

The bottom line is this: If the question is “is training worth the cost?” the answer is, “only if the participants are effectively trained.”



[#emotional intelligence](#)

[#emotions](#)

[#human interaction](#)

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