

323643

Fostering a Culture of Continuous Learning

Steve Bennett

TAYLOR design

Learning Objectives

- Identify potential strategies to foster a learning culture
- Leadership buy-in and support is imperative
- Implement continuous and engaging learning opportunities that keeps everyone coming back for more
- Adjust your learning strategies based on feedback

Description

No matter how many individuals your company employs, the business environment we live in continues to accelerate at a rapid pace, making it critical to ensure that everyone has the tools and knowledge to help your firm compete and succeed. Whether it's changes to your design software, building code changes, or new tools being introduced to your project workflows, we as leaders need to be able to bring the entire company along with us on the journey. Find out the secret ingredients that Taylor Design is using on the team-learning front, and how we employ several methods to reach everyone within the firm to make learning fun, relevant, and actionable to current tasks—while making the learning content accessible to future employees.

Speaker

Mr. Bennett is the Corporate BIM Manager at Taylor Design. He is responsible for directing the training of technology users within his group, contributing to practice-related research and development, and providing recommendations for the implementation of new technologies. With more than 20 years of hands-on industry experience, he has expert knowledge of BIM and CAD, and works with teams daily in the use, support, and application of Autodesk Revit, AutoCAD, 3ds Max and Navisworks for design. He is also an FAA-licensed Remote Pilot Airman and has successfully introduced drone technology into project-specific workflows for design projects. Mr. Bennett is an Autodesk Certified Professional for AutoCAD and Revit, an Autodesk Certified Expert for AutoCAD Architecture, and is an Administrator for the Autodesk User Group International (AUGI) discussion forums.



Making the Most of Continuous Learning

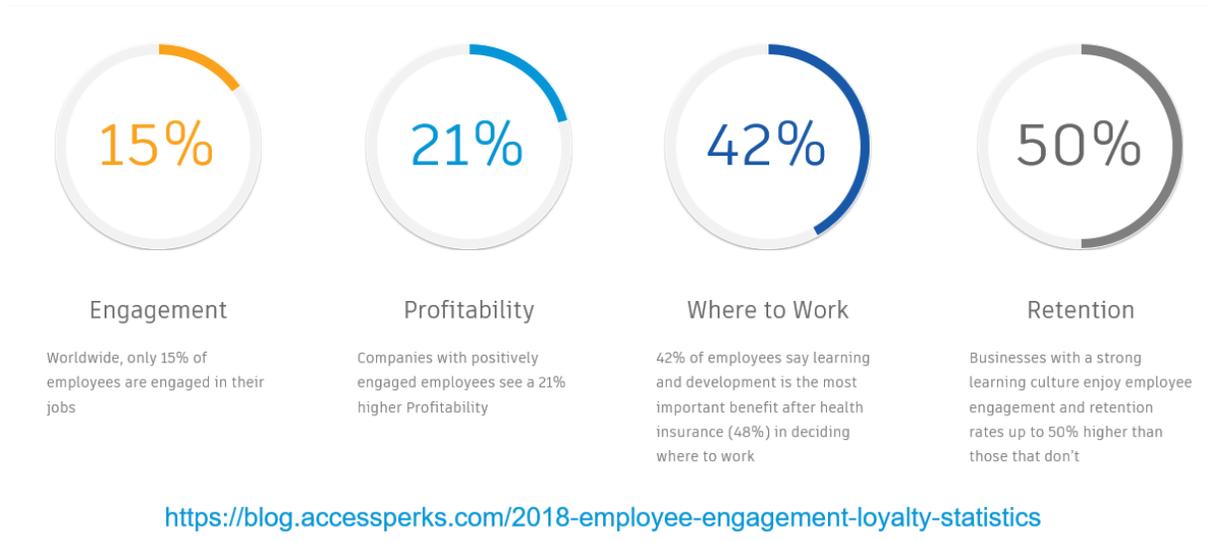
Our professional environment continues to change, grow and advance. The tools we use, our interactions with our environment and our application of this knowledge continues to advance. This leaves us with a challenge to remain competent regarding these things. That best way to address that challenge is to continuously learn. Whatever the form of learning, one should always strive to learn something new as they progress in their professional career. Whether that is a week at Autodesk University, using digital learning platforms, reading a book or some other form of advancing your internal knowledge base. One of the keys to ensuring that you take positive, forward and incremental steps to advance your knowledge is to ensure you learn continuously. We will explore some of what this involves along with ways that you can help encourage this at your own company.

The Corporate Dilemma

I think we've all seen it at some point in our careers. You ask your boss if you can get some training – a book, a course, etc. only to be turned down saying everything works just fine right now. The conversation managers might be having amongst other managers is: "What if we train them and they leave?" or "What if we don't train them and they stay?". Either scenario implies a problem they are worried about. They might be afraid to invest in their employees only to have them leave or if they don't train them and they stay at the position only to stagnate. Either way its not the best of situations.

I'd like to propose an alternate situation: What if we train employees to advance their skills and they stay? Everyone in the company wins: the employees become better, faster, smarter as does the company. I think you will also find that the younger generations expect to have some sort of continuous learning structure in place and if there isn't, they will leave without it.

What if,
We train them...
and they stay???



As a result, you'll see many leading companies, such as Taylor Design, ensuring there are multiple options for employees to engage in continuous learning of one sort or another. There are multiple reasons why this makes sense: it will positively impact your profitability, increase employee retention and appeal to new hires considering where to work next. If this leads you to ask yourself, "Why doesn't my company have a continuous learning culture that encourages me to better myself?" Then the following sections should give you a great head start.

Identify Potential Strategies to Foster a Learning Culture

Everyone learns differently, some are visual, others auditory, reading/writing appeals to many and of course kinesthetic where action moves one to learn best. Since we have different ways people learn, we need to provide them with different ways to interact with the information we want them to consume.

Force-fed & Mandatory

We've all been there – that one training event that management said we needed to be at when there were a million other things you wanted or needed to do. Sometimes there are advantages to these types of events, however this is usually my last resort option when delivering training. Based on my experience, attendees will only retain 50% or less of what is presented. It's also usually given to everyone, even if they won't need the information immediately. One advantage is that you can ensure everyone learns the same thing at the



same time. Its also great for building teamwork, especially if you can get people to break into groups to solve a problem and present the solution back to the main group.

Casual & Spontaneous

Initially, this might sound great. Providing access to online learning content with no pressure on employees to learn. Guess what, I've seen firsthand this won't work. There needs to be encouragement from leadership showing the value in learning and they need to encourage employees to incorporate learning into their regular work routines if it will ever begin to sound remotely interesting to them. If you do go this route, consider promoting topics of interest on a weekly basis and requesting feedback about what they thought of the topic.



Performance Based & Goal-Oriented

This method is often the most effective at getting people to engage with your learning platform. It gets even better when they add this to their annual employee development goals, as there can be a monetary reward for learning new information. If they do this, its best to ensure they tie not only learning something new but applying it to their workflow. Learning things and then doing what you learned is often the best way to ensure you remember what you learned.



Continuous Improvement

Continuous, incremental improvements can really add up to something substantial over time. Take your annual goals for the year and break them down into small, easily achievable tasks. Instead of having one big hairy audacious goal, setting mini ones makes it seem more easily achieved and allows you to be able to course correct if you do happen to get behind due to some unforeseen occurrence.



Often, a combination of these 4 types of learning is needed at a company. Being flexible in the options presented to employees for them to learn is essential to effectively reach everyone working there. Most important though is encouragement from the leadership of the company – more on that in the next section.

Leadership Buy-in and Support is Imperative

The big key to ensuring your company has a successful continuous learning culture is that the leadership of your company needs to believe this is a key to the company's (and employees) success and actively supports and promotes it. I've found this to be the case at several companies I've worked for where some supported it and others did not.

The companies that did not value continuous learning were more concerned with employees logging as many billable hours as possible during the day (which of course is important) and felt if people were passionate enough about their work, they would simply learn outside of their day job. Or even worse, they felt that one should simply learn all they needed to in college to be effective at their day job and shouldn't need to learn anything further once gainfully employed. Both are dangerous mindsets to have leading a company as it can stunt employee's professional growth, making them stagnate with what they do and turn away potential new hires.

The companies that do value continuous learning were more concerned with ensuring employees have the best information at their fingertips in different formats that enable them to absorb it in a way best for the employee. They often went to great lengths to ensure employees were well trained. Yes, this meant an investment, however they understood the value this brought to everyone, commonly referred to as Return on Investment (ROI).



Return on Investment

If your company's leadership is hesitant to support continuous learning initiatives, you should consider presenting a compelling ROI to leadership so they can get a better understanding of how the initiative can positively affect the company. To make things simple, we will use a very simple formula to convey how much things could be improved. You might want to get more detailed in your analysis as it will show you understand the true impact to your specific organization.

Immediate ROI

Education and training minimizes mistakes.

A project completed with minimal mistakes is a project that finishes

ON TIME and ON BUDGET

If you have an employee that normally charges time to a project at \$100 an hour and they commit to spending 1 hour to learning a more efficient workflow that saves them 2 hours on the project, they've just saved \$100! Now multiple this by all other projects they use this on and the savings just keep rolling in. This would be referred to as an Immediate ROI, something that instantly impacts the project performance for the better.

The other type of ROI to look at is a long-term ROI. Having a continuous learning culture has been credited with helping employees feel more engaged with their work, projects, teams and the company which they work for. This also commonly equates to lower employee turnover – recruiting, hiring and re-training new employees is a huge expense. If your HR department doesn't have a number for this, ask them for a best guess (it's in their best interest to have a handle on this cost). Things that should factor into this number are any recruitment bonuses paid, time spent by staff interviewing and considering candidates, any new materials needed for the new hire, time spent by current employees to mentor the new hire in your companies ways along with any other things that are unique to your companies hiring process. Whatever that cost is, HR can look at reducing the amount spent if less employees leave over time.



It really comes down to truly valuing an intangible asset. Often accounting will consider physical assets when determining values of items for annual considerations. The skills and knowledge that employees have are intangible assets since they can't be touched yet affect the outcome of a project. If we value people enough to hire them in the first place, this should motivate us to want to enable them to be even more valuable. If employees at your company can learn a new and improved workflow, saving money on projects across the company, this could become your competitive advantage over other companies.



Hopefully, presenting this information in a positive light backed by solid numbers will help change the tune with leadership at your company if it isn't currently behind a continuous learning culture. Once you do get the green light to move forward, you'll want a plan in place to ensure you start firing on all cylinders as soon as possible. If your company already embraces a learning culture, use the next section to see if there are any areas that you might not currently utilize and look to add them to your mix of tools for employees to learn.

Implement Continuous and Engaging Learning Opportunities That Keeps Everyone Coming Back for More

Let's face it, if an employee doesn't enjoy the instruction they are presented with, they won't keep coming back for more of it! Since it's been said that variety is the spice of life, the same can be said of how you present learning opportunities to employees. At Taylor Design, we employ this approach with a variety of types of learning such as:

- 1 on 1 mentoring
- Lunch and Learns
- Hands-on workshops
- Peer focused groups
- Just in time learning
- Group Learning
- Online On-Demand
- Hackathons
- Revit/Dynamo Rallies
- Guitar Lessons (held in conjunction with a recent Thirsty Thursday)

Some types are formal sessions (group learning, hands-on workshops), others fun and informal (lunch and learns, guitar lessons). The point is to have them, make them happen on a regular basis and make them meaningful.



Goal Setting

Another way to encourage employees to engage with your companies learning strategies is to ensure employees set **SMART** goals that incorporate some form of learning and actionable result from learning.

- **Specific** goals keep it from becoming vague and difficult to complete
- **Measurable** goals have a clear result from setting one, such as being able to pass Autodesk Revit Certified Professional after completing fundamental Revit training
- **Achievable** goals should be realistically completed in a year or less
- **Realistic** goals should not be trying to change your entire world but aim for multiple points that add up to a larger value
- **Timely** goals should reflect the need for something that adds value to a current project or workflow

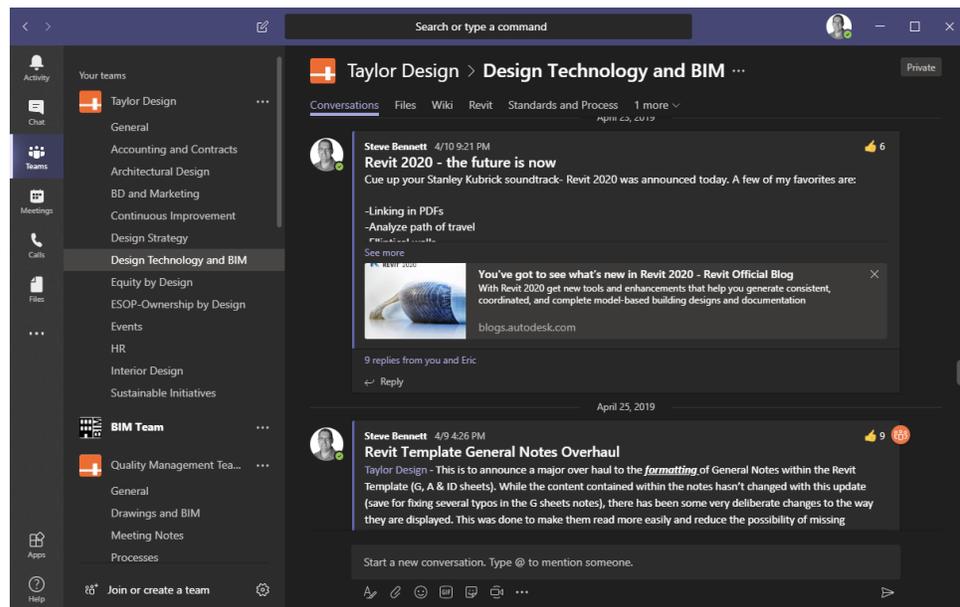
Company Culture

This can greatly play a role into how active (or inactive) employees are in learning new things. Believe it or not, having a continuous learning culture is only part of the puzzle of having engaged and enthusiastic employees. Having team building events can help establish a bond that might not otherwise come to exist if people are just punching in/out daily.

Employees that continuously learn are more likely to be engaged with the company's goals

If your company is an ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan), use this to your advantage! Since everyone is technically an employee-owner, each person should be resolved to ensure they are performing at their best. Ensuring they are trained on the best workflows should be a natural connection and encourage people to want to learn new ways to do things.

Transparency in gaining and sharing knowledge is another key. At Taylor Design, we utilize Microsoft Teams for several things. One of which is knowledge sharing and requesting answers to problems faced. By asking your questions out in the open, others can benefit from the answers given to the problem and it can be referenced in the future should someone face a similar issue. By sharing solutions with everyone, you can head off potential problems that might otherwise stump people and reduce time spent searching for an answer repeatedly. Lastly, it preserves the knowledge in a common, open environment instead of sitting in someone's email inbox.

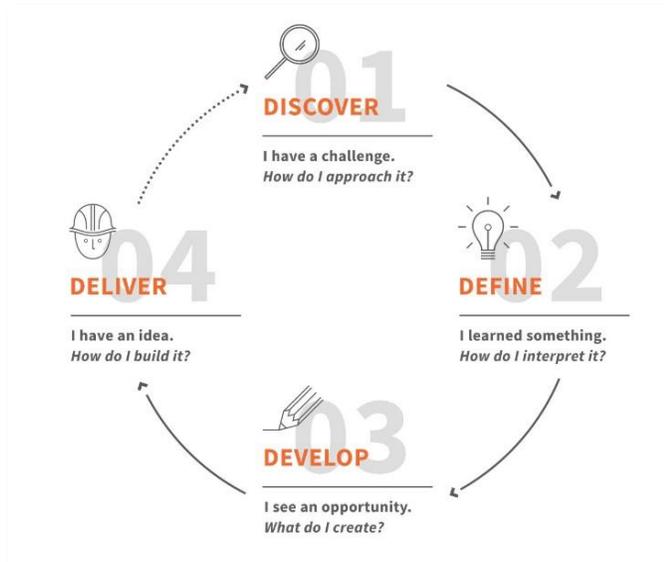


Create a Learning Path

I consider a learning path something that combines several knowledge sources into a coherent progression of understanding for a workflow or tool. It could be PDF documents, internal training or online pre-recorded training. It would also include collecting before and after metrics for a learner to see how they are progressing on the subject and whether they retained anything after completing the training outlined.

Learning paths should achieve several things for your learner. One is it will encapsulate a series of potentially different learning methods into a streamlined series of learning points. Getting before and after metrics should be a part of any learning path to ensure the person is actively engaging and benefitting from what was covered. A second thing a learning path should do is to help elevate their skillset, in a specific area or introduce them and make them competent in an entirely new area. You might have a learning path for a new hire to orient themselves to your firm's preferred standards, how to incorporate a new workflow/tool and so on.

When developing a new learning topic or learning path, I encourage you to follow a path similar to the one in this image where you start by discovering the challenge, define its context, develop it to provide value and finally deliver the idea to those that need it most. Using this structure will enable you to consistently deliver value time after time.



You can see that it takes several different things to make continuous learning appealing to employees at your company. Variety through different types of learning methods, tying it into annual goal setting, making it part of the larger company culture and building learning paths all work together to make learning a cohesive part of your workplace. However, not everything will work out the way you plan the first time you present it. How can you adapt to this potential challenge?

Adjust Your Learning Strategies Based on Feedback

Part of keeping people happy is listening to them, understanding what they are saying and applying these things to the learning strategies at your company. Talking with people to understand topics they are interested in or workflows that take them more time than they think it should, are a couple areas you can explore to see if there might be a need for a new topic to present. Ask people if there is a certain method in which they learn best and try to incorporate that into your next session. Conducting LEAN +/-Deltas (documenting what went great versus what needs improvement) at the end of live sessions can also go a long way towards improving the next session, provided you incorporate those suggestions the next time around.



An example of this that Taylor Design adopted was encouraging those with a passion for a specific topic to make a presentation about it. Something wonderful unfolded during this presentation: everyone started contributing to it to make it a huge success. Everyone became involved and part of the topic at hand.

It can also help to change your presentation style. If direct lectures aren't working, try another method. Hands-on training, roundtable discussions, 1-on-1 mentoring are all different ways to get people engaged and working together to learn something. It can also help to deliver training in shorter length segments. Perhaps instead of an hour-long lunch and learn, you can break the subject down into 5-10-minute sessions, placed into a learning path with a goal tied in at the end of the path? Either way, you want to ensure barriers are dropped and allow people to make things happen.

Bringing it all Together

Ensuring people have a well-rounded, diverse and relevant learning culture at your company isn't impossible – its easily achievable with the right planning and buy-in from the leadership of your company. Make sure you have different avenues for people to engage in learning. Keep things fresh by changing things around for your next presentation. Just don't forget to have some fun along the way!